



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Ceisteanna - Questions . . . . .	1020
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions . . . . .	1020
Mechanically Propelled Vehicles . . . . .	1020
Public Transport . . . . .	1022
Bus Services . . . . .	1025
Rail Services Provision . . . . .	1027
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions . . . . .	1029
Driver Licences . . . . .	1029
Road Projects Status . . . . .	1032
Road Safety . . . . .	1034
Park and Ride Facilities . . . . .	1037
Transport Policy . . . . .	1039
Sports Capital Programme Applications . . . . .	1041
Rail Services Provision . . . . .	1044
Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil . . . . .	1046
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters . . . . .	1046
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions . . . . .	1046
Ceisteanna ar Reachtáiocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation . . . . .	1054
Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed) . . . . .	1059
Cabinet Committee Meetings . . . . .	1059
Cabinet Committee Meetings . . . . .	1064
Cabinet Committee Meetings . . . . .	1068
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate . . . . .	1071
Early Childhood Care and Education Funding . . . . .	1071
Disability Services Provision . . . . .	1073
Disability Support Services . . . . .	1076
Homeless Accommodation Provision . . . . .	1078

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 22 Bealtaine 2019*

*Wednesday, 22 May 2019*

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

*Paidir.  
Prayer.*

---

## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Mechanically Propelled Vehicles

38. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of efforts to legislatively provide for the use of e-scooters here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22270/19]

**Deputy Robert Troy:** E-scooters represent an exciting new form of mobility that are low cost, low on emissions and accessible but under existing law, these vehicles are illegal on Irish roads. I ask the Minister to provide an update to the House on the Department's efforts to legislatively provide for the use of e-scooters in Ireland.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I thank the Deputy for raising this subject.

The Road Traffic Act 1961 defines a mechanically-propelled vehicle, MPV, as a vehicle intended or adapted for propulsion by mechanical means, including a bicycle or tricycle with an attachment for propelling it by mechanical power, whether or not the attachment is being used. It also includes a vehicle the means of propulsion of which is electrical, or partly electrical and partly mechanical.

E-scooters and powered skateboards fall into this category and are therefore considered to be mechanically propelled vehicles. Any users of such vehicles in a public place, as defined in the Road Traffic Act 1961, must have insurance, road tax and a driving licence, with penalties

under road traffic laws including fixed charge notices, penalty points, fines and possible seizure of the vehicle for not being in compliance with these requirements. As it is currently not possible to tax or insure e-scooters or electric skateboards, they are not considered suitable for use in a public place.

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

I am aware that the Deputy's party is eager to introduce a Bill relating to e-scooters and I welcome this. I gather the Bill may even be published today and I will certainly consider it in the light of what I have just said and in the context of the findings of the RSA. It is extremely constructive that Fianna Fáil will add to this debate, which is complicated and will inform what is coming down the line.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The use of e-scooters is rising rapidly because they are efficient, mobile and low-cost vehicles. People are responding favourably to them. Recently Mr. Conor Pope wrote an article on e-scooters in *The Irish Times* and reported that a 3 km journey from the Phoenix Park to College Green during rush hour took ten minutes. In that context, it is no wonder that people are using them. As well as being very efficient in terms of time, they are also hugely energy efficient.

Unfortunately, however, the Department is once again reacting to a trend. The Minister has not indicated today when the RSA will conclude its investigations into this matter. This should not take a long time because e-scooters are being used and regulated in many other international cities. We are not asking the Minister to reinvent the wheel. We are just asking him to introduce similar regulation to ensure that e-scooters can be used in a safe manner in this country.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I can understand the Deputy's impatience. However, this is a matter of road safety and it is important that we get it right. It is also very important that we get the views of the RSA. While I am not watching the authority line by line and day by day, I gather that it is collating information on how e-scooters operate elsewhere. It is somewhat revealing that various countries have reacted in different ways to e-scooters. I do not accept the Deputy's accusation that the Department's response has been slow because the explosion in the use of e-scooters has been pretty sudden. Various countries have reacted in different ways to the emergence of these vehicles, which has been akin to a flood. I am not taking any position on them until I have heard all of the arguments. I would point out to Deputy Troy that action has been taken in many countries. Barcelona has actually banned e-scooters, while Paris and Berlin have imposed restrictions because of safety concerns, as well as difficulties due to the interaction of e-scooters with other forms of traffic, including motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians. It is not quite as simple as it may appear on the surface in terms of regulating their use. The primary concern behind the survey and examination that is going on is safety. Belgium classifies e-scooters with pedestrians or bicycles depending on speed while Denmark has four classifications, depending on speed. France has different rules and in Sweden, the legislation treats them

the same as bicycles. There have been different reactions in different places and we hope to be able to learn from those. We also hope to learn from the Bill to be introduced by Fianna Fáil and to act accordingly. My position is that we should wait and see what the research shows before making a decision.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The Minister is open to persuasion. He is effectively saying that he does not have a view.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** That is correct.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** That is hardly surprising. He does not have a view on too many things. With regard to the report into the use of these scooters which he has commissioned the RSA to conduct, has the Minister set a timeline for when the authority must report back to him? How quickly can we then expect action from the Minister and his Government colleagues? In November last year the Minister's Government colleague, Deputy Rock, said that he was publishing a Bill. I understand that no such Bill was ever published. We have to acknowledge, as the Minister has, that the use of these scooters has exploded in the past 12 months. We need to respond accordingly. People are using them. They are effective and efficient and they help with congestion and with the environment. We should react positively to this development, while ensuring the safety of all road users. Will the Minister set down a timeframe as to when he will formulate his opinion? We will be bringing our legislation, which we will publish later today, before the Dáil for further discussion.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I will not set an exact date but I regard this as a matter of great importance because of the extraordinary surge in the number of these vehicles we see on our pavements, footpaths and roads. It is not something that can be tolerated for very long. Enforcement is not up to me, but I see the difficulties with having unregulated vehicles on our roads. We will have to make a decision as soon as possible. I emphasise the safety issue.

The convenience is of value to certain people, but research will show whether these vehicles are in line with our policy of getting people out of cars and onto buses, public transport, and bikes. We do not know whether these people are coming off public transport and crowding the roads. We do not know from where they are coming or what the effect of this development will be on overall policy. That will be a major factor in our decision. We will make a decision on this issue very quickly. We will consider Deputy Troy's Bill and what the report says, but safety is paramount with regard to this issue. Safety is what matters most. Other considerations are also important but we must accept that safety is what matters. We do not want to see the sort of incidents that have been seen elsewhere, that is, accidents caused by these vehicles.

## **Public Transport**

39. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of progress of the public transport stakeholders' forum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22052/19]

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I am asking this question on behalf of Deputy Munster. I ask the Minister the status of progress of the public transport stakeholders' forum and if he will make a statement on the matter. In 2016 and 2017, the public transport sector experienced a series of industrial actions by transport workers. These matters were eventually resolved without any

input from the Minister. Will he explain whether this forum has been abandoned? He made a commitment to establish it. When will he follow through on this commitment?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am allowing the Deputy to ask the question but there was no request made by Deputy Munster.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** There was.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The only request made related to Deputy Pearse Doherty's question. We will take the question anyway.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As the Deputy is aware, on 21 May last year I hosted a round-table dialogue on public transport policy. That discussion was organised in the context of a wider body of work under way in my Department with regard to a review of public transport policy. This work reflects the commitment given in A Programme for a Partnership Government to review public transport policy to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy. The dialogue event held in Dublin's Mansion House brought together a wide range of representatives of consumer and passenger interests, public transport operators, unions, business groups, environmental interests, research institutes and the academic community, regulators, members of the Oireachtas joint committee, and policymakers. The event allowed for an open and inclusive exchange of views among interested stakeholders and commentators, facilitated an open discussion about public transport policy, and let everyone put forward their views.

In this area of public policy there are of course some divergent views but, importantly, there is also a lot of agreement. We all agree on the importance of public transport for society and the economy. We all recognise the role of public transport in helping meet our climate action challenge. We all want to see our public transport services and networks improved in the coming years. Discussions at last year's event looked at the potential challenges and competing priorities likely to arise in the future across all aspects of public transport provision, including economic, social and environmental considerations, and this has helped inform the policy review work that my Department has been undertaking. That work has represented a significant commitment of resources to undertake the comprehensive research and analysis this important policy area demands.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that this work is nearing completion and I will launch a public consultation this summer by publishing a comprehensive suite of documents looking at ten of the most important areas of public transport policy and seeking the views of all stakeholders. I look forward to the next phase of this work and to engaging with the public and the Oireachtas as we look to shape the future direction of public transport policy.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I thank the Minister. I am glad to see that a report is coming forward because the Minister did not mention anything about industrial issues. It should certainly be within the remit of this committee to look at such issues. There have been significant developments in public transport recently. Plans have been made for BusConnects and MetroLink, a further 10% of Bus Éireann routes are up for grabs and set for privatisation, and violence and antisocial behaviour on public transport has escalated. All of these issues have added to the problems. With the expansion of bus services, Bus Éireann has made massive improvements in terms of delivery and it is now a very viable company. Public relations and industrial issues should be part of this agenda. From what the Minister has said in the past, I gather that this is

not his intention, but it is very important if we are to avoid ending up where we were before, which is in a situation where there is a complete breakdown in which the Minister will not interfere.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I do not know whether the Deputy is aware of the Labour Court or the Workplace Relations Commission. These are bodies which were set up to deal with industrial relations and which have been very effective in industrial disputes in the past, particularly in the transport sector. In the cases of industrial difficulties we had a couple of years ago, these bodies managed to bring the parties together and to reach a satisfactory conclusion. I welcome the fact that many of those involved in those industrial relations disputes came together in the stakeholders' forum we held last year. We had a meeting in the Mansion House and everybody accepted that it was constructive. It covered a wide variety of subjects and, as a result, a wide range of issues are being researched by a working group of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. These issues include active travel, congestion, finances and funding, Project Ireland 2040, public transport accessibility, public transport in rural Ireland, the regulation of public transport, statistics and trends, transitioning the public service obligation, PSO, fleet to alternatives fuels and technologies, and transport emissions and climate change. There are papers on these ten issues. These are all issues on which those involved in industrial relations, by which I mean the trade unions and employers, are very well placed to have an input. I welcome the fact that they did so on that day. That forum will inform the public policy we are developing.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask Members and the Minister to observe the clock, please. I hate interfering.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** One of the big issues for many people is privatisation. We have been opposed to any attempts to privatise further any of the bus services. Bus Éireann is doing very well at the moment. The numbers using its services have increased massively, and it is now returning a profit for the first time in recent years. I agree with the Minister with respect to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, which we utilise. However, at times things come to a point of being at loggerheads. The Minister should not abdicate his responsibility by leaving it up to the WRC to negotiate between the bodies. That is not good enough. Sometimes intervention or certainly recommendations or even talks behind the scenes are very important. Public transport now is a major issue. We have climate change. We have all the issues relating to carbon emissions to live up to. This is a very important area.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I do not disagree with much of what the Deputy has said. I agree that climate change is an important topic. He and others are welcome to make an input to public consultations as they arise, but also if we have a further stakeholders' forum. That is a useful subject.

I do not accept what the Deputy said about privatisation. Nothing has been sold. Since I came to office, this has come not just from the Sinn Féin benches but from others on the Opposition benches that there is some kind of privatisation agenda. That is not the case. Some operating routes have gone to commercial interests not owned by the State, but that is for competitive reasons. They have limited contracts and they are also something I defend. No privatisation is going on. Not a single asset of the State has been sold off as a result of this.

I am delighted that the Deputy has acknowledged that the State transport companies are doing much better. I am delighted with that. It is partly related to the economy and the popula-

tion growing. It is also related to them becoming a great deal more efficient. The PSO we are providing is also helping them.

Privatisation is not part of the agenda. I have to repeat this every time I stand up in this House. There will be competitive interests in that market, but there is no intention to sell off the State silver in any way. That is not the object of the exercise. The object is to have an efficient consumer-led group of transport companies giving a great service to the State, and long may it last, but it is not in any way to privatise them or sell them off.

## Bus Services

**40. Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the BusConnects redesign; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22271/19]

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I ask for a comprehensive report on the status of BusConnects in respect of the redesign and the infrastructure changes that are necessary.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for providing the opportunity to talk about BusConnects. The Deputy is aware of the fundamental importance of PSO bus services in addressing congestion and contributing to tackling our climate action challenge. The PSO bus network is the backbone of the public transport system. Last year, over two thirds of the approximately 266 million passenger journeys on State-supported services and networks took place on the bus network. Of those 266 million passenger journeys, approximately 141 million journeys took place on the bus network in Dublin.

I am sure the Deputy agrees that we need to ensure delivery of an improved bus network that works best for passengers and citizens, for the environment and for our economic growth. That is the purpose of BusConnects. It needs to expand bus services, improve journey times and deliver a better passenger experience. It is being rolled out in Dublin first and will also feature in the other major cities in line with their transport strategies once developed.

BusConnects comprises a number of different elements, of which the two most commented upon have been the network redesign and the development of new bus priority measures. Last July, the National Transport Authority, NTA, published proposals for a revised network of bus services across the Dublin region. There was a large response to that consultation period, and more than 30,000 submissions were received. Among those 30,000 submissions, we all know concerns were expressed about certain aspects and suggestions on how other aspects might be improved. We have also seen a certain level of misinformation in certain quarters about the proposals as published and their potential impacts, which is regrettable. This was a public consultation exercise and the purpose of it was to engage with the public and seek their views on how things might be improved.

Following the conclusion of the public consultation period at the end of last September, the NTA commenced reviewing and assessing all of those 30,000 submissions. That review is now largely complete and a revised proposal for the bus network is under development by the NTA. It believes this revised network will incorporate measures which will take account of the vast majority of issues raised last year and suggestions put forward by the public. The NTA expects to publish the revised network for a further round of public consultation in September, and it will publish a report of last year's consultation process and the issues raised during it.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The Minister is right about the level of submissions, which was as a result of the anxiety and fear on the part of the people who use the buses. I welcome that at long last the redesign will be published in September. After that redesign, what level of public consultation will be undertaken? For how long will it be open? Will submissions be able to amend the design further?

On the most recent proposals on the loss of gardens to provide the infrastructure changes needed, I understand the consultation is still ongoing for one element. When that is completed, how long will it take the NTA to respond to the concerns that will undoubtedly be raised? I have been out with some of our local election candidates in recent weeks. There is major concern in the affected areas. When can those residents expect to have a reply from the NTA on their comprehensive submissions?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for his general support for BusConnects. Fianna Fáil has warmly welcomed the principle of it as something that is necessary. The party has also applauded quality bus corridors, which formed the second part of the Deputy's question, and I think we can unite behind that.

There have certainly been hiccups and high-profile difficulties in the route changes proposed, and plans and drafts, which upset many people in parts of Dublin. We expect changes to be proposed in the new draft plan. We expect that draft plan to be open to a very thorough

public consultation. I do not know how long it will last but I do not think  
11 o'clock it will be as long as the last one. We want it to be open to people to make

representations that lead to further changes. This is very important for many people. I understand the difficulties some people, particularly elderly people, have when they see changes coming that they do not fully understand. I think it will be clearer next time. It will be open to further changes. It will probably be shorter than the previous one, but it will give ample opportunity for further changes to be made.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Fianna Fáil welcomes the principle of increased investment in public transport, which has suffered from severe underinvestment in recent years. How can we have confidence that the Government can roll out that necessary investment and the necessary changes to the benefit of the service users when the Minister cannot even tell us the exact timeframe in which the consultation will take place?

I ask specifically about the infrastructural changes. When will the NTA respond to the concerned people along these routes? Will these concerns be taken on board? When will we look at elements of changes that could be implemented now to reduce journey times now and not some time five or six years down the road? I am talking about off-street ticketing, which is very beneficial in many other European cities.

It very much benefits Luas users and would greatly increase efficiency. The work on one corridor, in particular, from Lucan to the city centre, could be done with minimal disruption to residents along the route. Only 15 houses would be affected if a park-and-ride facility were constructed in Lucan. It would greatly reduce congestion in the city centre. None of the measures that can now be implemented seems to have been addressed at all. We do not know when the concerns of the residents who will be affected by the quality bus corridors will be addressed. Will these concerns be taken on board?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I share the Deputy's concerns for the residents; every Member does.

There are genuine concerns for those who are going to lose part of their gardens. They have justifiable grievances. Unfortunately, one cannot make radical changes in transport without sometimes causing difficulties for a few people. That is the reality, which we deeply regret. As the Deputy will be aware, the residents will be offered compensation packages and the NTA will make it as easy as possible for them to adapt to the changes.

Approximately 390 individual properties are affected by the six corridors to which the Deputy referred. The number of properties ranges from 166 affected on the greater city centre corridor to two on the Ringsend-city centre route. The impacts on properties vary but can include loss of on-street parking and some front garden space. All the property owners have received a letter explaining the proposal, an----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Please outline the timeline.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** -----overview map of their road showing the potential impact on their property, and an offer to meet on a one-to-one basis. Details of public information sessions were announced at the launch and advertised in national and local newspapers. Information is also available on the BusConnects website.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Maidir le ceist Uimh. 41, tá an Teachta as láthair ag an am seo.

*Question No. 41 replied to with Written Answers.*

### Rail Services Provision

42. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of plans to increase rail capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22272/19]

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Could the Minister update the House on his plans to increase rail capacity? When can we expect additional carriages and trains to be ordered and delivered?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for his question and his interest in this issue.

We are all aware that the number of people choosing to make rail part of their daily commute has increased in recent years. Last year, there were 48 million passenger journeys on the heavy rail network, an increase of approximately 5.5% as compared to the number in 2017. To provide some context to that growth, as recently as 2015 the passenger number was approximately 39 million per annum. This increased demand across the network is a sign of continued economic growth and is welcome. It brings challenges, however. As the Deputy will be aware, there are pressures on the rail network to match current demand with available capacity, particularly in the greater Dublin area.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, and Iarnród Éireann are addressing this issue of additional capacity through a mixture of short, medium and longer-term responses. The backdrop to those responses is the substantial funding for public transport that is being provided by Government under our Project Ireland 2040 programme.

In the short term, increased PSO funding has allowed for an expansion of services, for example, through the Phoenix Park tunnel, the introduction of ten-minute DARTs and new

off-peak services on the Maynooth, Kildare and northern lines. While there is probably some potential for additional measures on the busier commuter lines in respect of off-peak capacity, the fleet is currently fully deployed at peak times.

We have also significantly increased funding for the maintenance and renewal of the network, meaning that it is now funded at so-called steady-state level, as measured annually. It means that Iarnród Éireann is able to better plan for issues such as track relaying, ballast cleaning and signalling renewal, and that means an improved passenger experience and potential journey time improvements on key sections of the network.

In the medium term, the challenge is to source additional rolling stock as efficiently and effectively as possible, and ensuring value for money for the taxpayer in that regard. Accordingly, the NTA and Irish Rail have been exploring two options: the purchase or lease of second-hand fleet and the purchase of additional carriages for the existing Intercity rail commuter fleet.

Regarding second-hand fleet, the NTA recently advertised for expressions of interest and is considering the responses received. There is an added complication associated with that option given the different rail gauge we use in Ireland. A decision on which of the two medium-term options will be pursued will be made shortly.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** What I am talking about is capacity on the trains. If the Minister talks to any of his colleagues, on any side of the House, he will learn that the services are bursting at the seams. My specific question relates to when the additional rail carriages will be in use. Despite what was said in January 2018 by the Taoiseach, when he promised 30 or 40 refurbished carriages, it never happened. As recently as April this year, the Taoiseach stated additional carriages were being renovated and that others were on order. That is factually incorrect. No carriages are being renovated and none has been ordered. I submitted a parliamentary question on this and received the reply from the NTA. When can we expect additional rail carriages? When will the order be placed and when will the new carriages be delivered? I want a time and date.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The time and date are matters for the NTA. The Deputy knows that as well as I do. I can outline for him, however, what the policy is and the timeframe generally. If, however, he thinks I am going to give a time and date and dictate to the NTA today, he should realise I will not do that.

In the longer term, and as part of the DART expansion programme generally, there is a need to significantly increase the size of the rail fleet. The Deputy is correct in that regard but what he does not acknowledge is that our need for new carriages and more trains and capacity is a measure of the great success we have and of the growing economy. Even he did not anticipate some months ago that the transport companies would be doing so well.

Work on developing tender documentation and train specifications for the proposed bi-mode fleet of rail vehicles is progressing. I refer to diesel-electric trains. It is expected that the formal fleet acquisition tender process will be initiated in the next few weeks and that the fleet manufacturing contract will be awarded in quarter 2 of next year. As the Deputy can appreciate, however, there is a certain time lag between ordering new fleet, having that new fleet built specially for Iarnród Éireann and it entering into service.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** There is a time lag and we are aware that public transport, including rail, has been bursting at the seams in recent years. Despite the Taoiseach having promised in

January 2018 that additional refurbished carriages were on their way and that new rail carriages would be ordered, they have not arrived. Despite my having raised this issue with the Minister in the past and him having said the order was imminent, the carriages have not arrived. In fact, we are still awaiting commencement in respect of the pre-qualifying criteria. Even if we get everything in order and the orders are placed by quarter 2 of 2020, it will take three to four years before there is a delivery. Despite the fact that the Minister is responsible for public transport, he is saying today to any commuter travelling on an overcrowded train to Dublin from Mullingar, Kildare, Wicklow or anywhere else in the commuter belt, any senior citizen who cannot get a seat on a train, and anybody who cannot get a seat on a train when travelling to attend a medical appointment, that no new rail carriages will be delivered until the end of 2023, at best, or 2024. He is trying to blame the NTA for the lack of his guidance in this regard.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As I said, the fleet manufacturing contract will be awarded in the second quarter of next year. The Deputy fully realises there is obviously a time lag between ordering and delivery and he could not expect anything else. In the longer term, we are also committed to funding a new national train control centre and I expect to shortly seek Government approval for that project in line with the requirements of the public spending code. There are also significant other investments. I can assure the Deputy the issue of value for money is equally important. Ultimately, we need to increase the size of the rail fleet, expand the capacity of the network and continually look to improve services. I am making funding available to achieve exactly that. The Deputy knows, and I have said to him many times before, an additional 300 carriages will be added to the fleet in the longer term, all of which will be bi-mode. A formal procurement notice should issue on this by the end of the year, with a contract to be signed next year.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It will not be until 2024.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Delivery will probably be during 2023, not 2024.

## Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

### Driver Licences

43. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress with regard to allowing asylum seekers to apply for driver licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21995/19]

**Deputy Robert Troy:** This is an issue I have raised with the Minister previously through both oral and written questions. To be fair, the Minister has given an undertaking to look into the possibility of extending the rights of asylum seekers to apply for a driving licence. Will he take this opportunity to update the House in regard to what his Department is doing to extend that right?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** When the Deputy prefacing his remarks to me with “To be fair”, I get very worried because I am not used to it.

As the Deputy is aware, historically, Ireland has not issued driving licences to asylum seekers. The Supreme Court ruling last year stating that asylum seekers may work while awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications has no direct relevance to driver licensing law. That judgment was in respect of a right to work only and does not confer an entitlement to a driving licence in order to obtain certain types of employment. The two issues are legally quite distinct and the court ruling does not change the position.

I have, as the Deputy knows, asked my officials to re-examine the question of whether we should issue driving licences to asylum seekers, as I know some EU member states do. The matters at issue in the case of driver licences for asylum seekers are matters of both EU and national driver licensing law. I understand, based on legal advice, that it would be possible to issue asylum seekers with driving licences, and I will be happy to consider that, once other matters are resolved.

Verification for the purposes of obtaining a driving licence is an important issue. This may prove difficult for asylum seekers but it is a requirement that all applicants have to meet. It would not be appropriate to require some applicants to meet higher standards of ID verification than other driving licence applicants. The other matters, as I have previously stated to the Deputy, relate to the integrity of the driver licensing system and, in that regard, I have written to my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality. I have not yet received an update for the Deputy since my previous reply to him in April. As I informed the Deputy at that time, my understanding is that the Minister for Justice and Equality is currently seeking background material from the European Migration Network as to the interpretation and implementation of Article 12 of Directive 2006/26/EC.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I always give credit where credit is due. Unfortunately, apart from acknowledging that the Minister would look into it, we are no further on - not an inch further on. The Minister could have read out the exact same reply that he gave me eight months ago. That is extremely disappointing. While the decision of the Supreme Court in May 2017, which afforded the opportunity to asylum seekers to avail of work, was welcomed, we are preventing many asylum seekers from doing just that. There are two centres in my locality and I will give an example from one of them, Mount Temple Spa, which is located off the old Dublin to Galway Road, two miles from the main road. The National Transport Authority removed a bus stop from that location some years ago and although I wrote to ask that it be reinstated, it was not. There are only two bus services a day from a very remote location into the town of Moate. Of the 80 people resident at the centre, almost half are eligible to work and they are willing to work, but they have been prevented from working by the inaction of both the Minister and his Cabinet colleague. This service is available in many other European countries and in every province in Canada. Why can we not roll it out here in Ireland?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Ireland has taken the view, up to now, that asylum seekers are not "normally resident" here. Germany takes the view that they are. What the Deputy is asking me to do is to change that view. I am sympathetic to what he says and I am particularly sympathetic to the fact many of these asylum seekers have skills that are necessary and they want to stay here, and getting a driving licence would obviously assist them in their desire to stay here.

We are looking for two things. One, obviously, is a different interpretation of "normally resident", and there is another problem, which I am addressing in order to get a conclusion which the Deputy would like, namely, identity verification. A key difficulty in issuing a driving licence to asylum seekers is identity verification. Ireland has determined that the appropriate

level of identity verification is the standard authentication framework environment, level 2, or SAFE 2. Asylum seekers come to the jurisdiction with a variety of documentation, or potentially no documentation.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Time, please.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Verification may be, practically speaking, impossible in some cases.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I remind Members to watch the clock.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am sorry, it is quite a complicated issue.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It may be. I do not want to interfere. I am reasonable. I ask Members to watch the clock, that is all.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** It is quite complex. I apologise.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister does not have to. He will have another minute.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The Minister is sympathetic yet he is still not willing to act in a speedy manner. That is the bottom line. I raised this question eight months ago and we are no further on today. I acknowledge it is complex but I have cited examples, not just in other European countries. In the United States and every one of the ten provinces of Canada, asylum seekers are able to avail of a driving licence. I am not asking us to reinvent the wheel; I am asking us to be imaginative and flexible in terms of affording these citizens a right to work and to contribute to the Irish economy, which they want to do. In very many instances, and I have given the example of Mount Temple Spa and the Athlone Accommodation Centre in my constituency where, given their location, they are prohibited from working due to the lack of public transport. Give these people a chance. They want to work and to contribute to society. The only people preventing them are the Irish Government.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I would like this to come to a conclusion as well. The Deputy has led the charge on this, which should be acknowledged. I accept it has not been as speedy as we would have wished. Part of that is because it is complex and it involves EU regulations and several Departments. It is regarded as a redefinition of standards which we have already set.

I replied to the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, in February of this year, seeking his views on the issues. He responded to our correspondence on 12 March, stating that officials were seeking background material from the European Migration Network as to the interpretation and implementation of Article 12. A final response is awaited. I think we are fairly close to a conclusion of that particular argument. There is also the issue of verification, to which I have already referred.

I was just saying, before the Leas-Cheann Comhairle quite rightly pulled me up for time, that the verification of ID to SAFE 2 level may be, practically speaking, difficult in some cases for asylum seekers. It would make sense to issue licences only to asylum seekers whose ID could be verified to SAFE 2 standard. It is important that the same standards apply here as apply to everybody else. However, I would like to be able to resolve this, complex as it is, in the direction in which Deputy Troy is aiming.

## Road Projects Status

**44. Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress being made to finalise preferred routes with respect to the TEN-T priority routes improvement project in County Donegal; and when the preferred routes design option will come before the local authority for approval. [21721/19]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Permission has been given to Deputy Ellis to take Deputy Pearse Doherty's question.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I would like to ask the Minister for an update on the progress on finalising the preferred routes with respect to the TEN-T priority routes improvement projects in Donegal. When will the preferred route design option come before the local authority for approval?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I would like to explain that as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding of the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, the planning, design and construction stages of individual national road projects are matters for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the national development plan, NDP, has been developed by the Government to underpin the successful implementation of the new national planning framework, NPF. This provides the strategic and financial framework for TII's national roads programme for the period from 2018 to 2027. In the ten years covered by the plan, more than €11 billion will be invested in the overall road network.

In County Donegal, the TEN-T comprehensive road network runs from the Leitrim county boundary on the outskirts of Bundoran in the south of the county to the Northern Ireland Border with Derry in the north east of the county at Bridgend on the outskirts of Derry city. It involves sections of the N13, N14 and N15.

In 2016 Donegal County Council commissioned a corridor needs study on the TEN-T comprehensive network within Donegal. The study identified projects in Donegal that are necessary to improve the TEN-T comprehensive network to the required standard in compliance with the TEN-T regulations. The outcome of the study identified a priority list of schemes.

The project consists of improvements and realignment of three sections of the national road network. These are the N15 and N13 Ballybofey to Stranorlar bypass; the N56, N13, and N14 Letterkenny bypass and the Letterkenny to Manorcunningham dual carriageway; and the N14 Manorcunningham to Lifford realignment scheme, including the N14 and N15 link to the A5 western transport corridor in Northern Ireland. As I have previously outlined, in the context of Project Ireland 2040, these projects are identified as strategic investment priorities in the NPF and the NDP.

Feasibility studies for the priority schemes commenced in 2017 and the route selection process is ongoing. Public consultations on identified route options for all these priority schemes were held in April and May 2018 in Letterkenny, Lifford and Ballybofey. The short-listed route corridors have been evaluated and assessed and the emerging preferred route has now been identified for each of the schemes.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

The emerging preferred routes were presented at the public consultations, which took place in February 2019. Following these consultations, further confirmation and refinement will establish the preferred route corridor for each scheme, which I understand will be presented to the public in the third quarter of 2019. In advance of this the design team intends to give a presentation on the preferred route to the elected members. Donegal County Council is the sponsoring agency. When the preferred route corridors are established the next phase will be to move to planning and design and subsequently to the appropriate approvals procedures in accordance with the public spending code and Government approval.

I will now refer to the benefits of the scheme. These schemes are of critical importance to this isolated north-west Border region. They are important in meeting the challenges and opportunities of Brexit, enabling regional growth and in the context of developing a city region encompassing Derry, Letterkenny and Strabane. The project will significantly improve access to essential services like primary healthcare in Dublin, Derry and Galway, as well as access to the principal international gateways in Knock, Shannon, Foynes and Dublin, as well as Belfast, Derry and Larne in Northern Ireland. The project is key in delivering the national policy objectives of developing strong and connected rural communities and economies.

With regard to funding, TII has allocated € 2.5 million to Donegal County Council this year to progress planning work on these projects.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I ask this question in place of my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, whose constituents have asked him to raise their concerns about the proposed TEN-T roads project with the Minister. As the Minister said, the TEN-T network is a proposed scheme of improvements on three national primary routes in Donegal, namely, the N15 and N13; the N56, N13 and N14 Letterkenny bypass and Letterkenny to Manorcunningham dual carriageway; and the N14 Manorcunningham to Lifford realignment scheme, including the link to the A5 western transport corridor. While no-one in Donegal is opposed in principle to having these vital upgrades carried out, there are real concerns over the possible effects on the local communities of certain sections of the preferred route options which have emerged.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I take the point Deputy Ellis has made, of which the Government is well aware. These schemes are of critical importance to this isolated north-west Border region. It is important in meeting the challenges and opportunities of Brexit, enabling regional growth and in the context of developing a city region encompassing Derry, Letterkenny and Strabane. The project will significantly improve access to essential services like primary healthcare in Dublin, Derry and Galway, as well as access to the principal international gateways in Knock, Shannon, Foynes, Dublin and, through Northern Ireland, to Belfast, Derry and Larne. The project is key in delivering the national policy objective of developing strong and connected rural communities and economies. There may be reservations, as there are about all routes. However, Deputies Ellis and Pearse Doherty will appreciate the overall benefits here .

TII has allocated €2.5 million to Donegal County Council this year to progress planning work on these projects. Donegal County Council, as the Deputy will know, is the sponsoring agency. When the preferred route corridors are established, the next stage will be to move to planning and design and subsequently to the appropriate approval procedures in accordance with the public spending code.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** Traders in Ballybofey and Stranorlar fear the absence of a road link to the corridor will decimate trade in the towns. Similarly, homeowners and farmers have expressed anger at the prospect of having their homes razed to the ground or farmlands bisected to make way for a few kilometres of tarmac. Despite their willingness to facilitate and explore alternatives, they have described the public consultation phase as a mere box-ticking exercise. TII intends to bring the proposal to the council in the coming months. Can the Minister advise when this will happen and what assurances can be given to the people of Donegal that their voices will be listened to as part of this process? When the project design came before elected members of Donegal County Council last month, councillors were justifiably angry at being advised that the adoption of the preferred routes was an executive function. We have heard that far too often. They were effectively told that the decision to pass the plans was not for them but for senior officials. Surely, this constitutes a *fait accompli*. Given the concerns of the communities I have referenced and with local elections around the corner, can the Minister give a commitment that councillors who take their seats in the new council will have a say and will be able to bring the genuine concerns of their constituents to the attention of both the local authority and TII?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I understand the concerns of Deputies Ellis and Doherty for the communities. They have every opportunity to make their views known, and I presume that the new council will not be reticent in expressing its opinion. I will outline for the Deputy the expected construction timetable for all three schemes to which he refers. A project identified as a priority in the TEN-T study should take approximately three years to progress to construction, commencement and completion. However there is no timeframe for completing the schemes at present as they need to obtain both business case approval and planning consent. They are subject to the availability of funding in the future. To deliver a major national road scheme from concept to construction and completion can take an average of between eight and 13 years. I can break this down for the Deputy if he wants.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will not have time.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I will give the Deputy an estimate of costs. The estimated cost to the Exchequer for planning in the period from 2018 to 2022 is €6 million. The estimated working cost of the project is €400 million, broken down into three lots of €115 million, €99 million and €186 million.

*Question No. 45 replied to with Written Answers.*

## Road Safety

46. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to reduce speeding and aggressive driving on roads and streets here and to legislate for home zones or slow zones in residential estates and built-up areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21728/19]

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** As the Minister knows, the Global Alliance of NGOs for Road Safety identifies inappropriate speed as a factor in virtually all crashes. Some 1.25 million people tragically die on roads throughout the world every year. Many people think that there has recently been an upsurge in aggressive behaviour and speeding by many drivers. We need to take action to combat it. We have had the debate on Jake's law, which would require

speed limits of 20 km/h and 30 km/h in home zones and slow zones, but local authorities have been very slow to implement them. The Minister has spoken about graduated speed limits. Is he planning legislation or action in this regard?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to roads. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects on national roads are matters for TII under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 in conjunction with the relevant local authority. Regional and local roads are a matter for each respective local authority. The enforcement of road traffic legislation is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

Following the 2013 review of speed limits and subsequent 2015 guidelines for managing speed limits, provision has been made for greater use of lower speed limits in urban areas. This includes the greater use of the 30 km/h speed limit and the use of 30 km/h slow zones. These slow zones should be introduced to increase safety for the most vulnerable road users on roads such as those which have direct frontage housing or are immediately adjacent to play areas. Signs for slow zones, amongst other things, indicates the presence of other types of road users. Further material relating to these is available in the traffic signs manual, TSM, and an accompanying advice note.

In addition, my Department introduced a new design standard for urban roads a number of years ago - the design manual for urban roads and streets, which provides for improved urban design to support traffic calming and safer interaction between road users.

Road authorities have been requested to give serious consideration to the lowering of the speed limit from 50 km/h to 30 km/h within residential estates. Where a speed limit of 30 km/h is being implemented, local authorities and community groups should consider the implementation of slow zones. This is being rolled out across the country in conjunction with lower speed limits. In addition, since 2015, special speed limits of 30 km/h have been applied in more than 6,400 housing estates. My Department has been funding this programme of works since 2015.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

On national roads, as well as major new schemes which contribute greatly to safety, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, operates a programme of minor works, including safety improvement works. The safety section of TII carries out assessments of the network which identifies accident clusters, including assessments under the European road safety directive. Works identified under these programmes are identified to the local authorities and may attract funding once a feasibility report is submitted to the safety section of TII.

Many of these programmes and initiatives are flagged in the road safety strategy 2013 to 2020. There are other relevant actions in that strategy which target the behaviour of drivers. Implementing those actions involves a variety of organisations, including the RSA and An Garda Síochána.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister is responsible for speed limits. When the current speed limits were introduced in 2004, one of his predecessors, the late Seamus Brennan, raised the question of whether we should have opted for an upper limit of 110 km/h rather than 120 km/h. Is it now time to re-examine sections 5 to 9, inclusive, of the 2004 Act with which the Minister is familiar?

According to statistics on the Garda Síochána website, 13,364 drivers were detected for speeding in January this year and 11,284 in February. This is a dramatic increase of more than 8,000 for January and almost 8,000 for February compared to 2018. There seems to be a trend of an increasing number of drivers being detected for speeding. I asked the Minister other questions about this approximately a month ago and he told me that a pedestrian who is hit by a car travelling at 50 km/h has a 50% chance of survival but, at 60 km/h, that drops to 10%. This is something the Minister should have high on his list of priorities. He promised us legislation on this and has not delivered.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I want to make it clear that I will give an opportunity for Deputies to contribute but they must allow the person who tabled the question two opportunities to speak first.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** That is fair enough.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I have made a commitment on speeding that is no way being diluted. The Deputy will be aware of the fact that I am intent on introducing a Bill on graduated speeding as soon as possible. I am taking it to the Cabinet committee on infrastructure and it will come out of there by September or October, I hope. We will then introduce speeding legislation. Graduated speeding fines are necessary.

The Deputy will be as aware as anybody that speeding is a serious problem, which is the cause of a large number of road deaths and I am intent on tackling it. The figures the Deputy outlined are telling and he will not find me wanting on this issue. Everybody always finds Ministers wanting on the time it takes to introduce anything. I am fully committed to introducing graduated speeding limits.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** There have been 58 fatalities in the year to date on our roads, including nine pedestrians and four cyclists. That is an increase of three on the same period last year and we had a few bad months at the start of the year. Is it now necessary for the RSA to run ongoing, strong, pervasive campaigns to tell us all to slow down a little?

There is also a movement in Europe. The carmaker, Volvo, is talking about introducing limiters. Many drivers are lucky to have advanced driving systems on cars which were launched recently and those systems should be present in the entire car fleet. We should look at that.

The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment was talking about the climate action plan yesterday. There are fewer carbon emissions if one drives more slowly. This is something the Minister needs to act on for many reasons.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am allowing a short, relevant, 30-second question from Deputy Ellis.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** More than a month ago, 50 km/h signs were erected on Hazelcroft Road and Cloonlara Road in Finglas south. It is an entrance to a housing estate, a large and built-up area with many children. Dublin City Council erected those signs. I made complaints but I was told that the council has not adopted the 30 km/h speed limit. I find it appalling that the speed limit is 50 km/h entering a built-up estate. The Minister should raise that with the council because it is not good enough and those signs are still there in a built-up estate.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** It is a fair question but it is a matter for Dublin City Council. I could

22 May 2019

send the council a missive and ask why this has happened if the Deputy wants me to. I do not know what the response will be but the council will probably say it is a matter for itself. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Deputy Broughan will find graduated penalties satisfactory and it is a part of the agenda he has been pursuing with eloquence and determination over a long period. I have not been quick enough for him but I am following a path of which he would approve and will continue to do so.

Local authorities have also over the past few years been reviewing speed limits on rural roads in accordance with the 2015 speed limit guidelines. This is a major exercise but it should improve consistency in the application of speed limits across the country, which, in turn, should contribute to improved road safety.

Regarding regional and local roads, my Department funds an annual programme of safety improvement works for eligible local authorities. This programme encompasses a variety of works in both urban and rural areas.

There is nothing to which I am more committed as a Minister than safety on the roads. We cannot do everything at once but there is an urgency to it.

## Park and Ride Facilities

**47. Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when park and ride facilities will be rolled out in Galway; the status of the work programme for the implementation of the Galway transport strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22095/19]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Cén uair a bheidh córas pairceáil agus taisteal le feiceáil ar shráideanna na Gaillimhe, thoir agus thiar? When will park and ride be rolled out in Galway and what is the status of the work programme for the implementation of the Galway transport policy given the serious challenges facing us in climate change and the traffic chaos on the streets of Galway?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As the Deputy refers to, a transport strategy for Galway city was prepared by the NTA, in partnership with Galway City Council and Galway County Council, in 2016. Development of the strategy was informed by a wide-ranging public consultation with interested stakeholders and the public.

The strategy sets out an overall framework for the development of transport infrastructure and services in Galway city and its environs over a 20-year period.

I very much welcome the type of evidence-based approach in transport planning in the major cities and, in particular, the co-operation between the NTA and the relevant local authorities in developing these strategies.

The Galway transport strategy supports opportunities that will reduce congestion and car dependency through increased capacity of reliable and sustainable public transport and the promotion and facilitation of cycling and walking, which, in turn, promotes the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

The strategy considered that bus-based public transport represents the most appropriate system for Galway over the period of the strategy. It concluded that a high-quality bus-based public transport service will cater for the forecasted passenger demand and will provide significant flexibility in network options and the ability to integrate with other modes.

Project Ireland 2040 provides an indicative allocation of €200 million to support the development of a BusConnects programme in Galway. This will deliver a rationalised network of five high-performing cross-city routes. All routes will serve major city centre attractions as well as linking all major destinations across the city. Galway BusConnects will comprise next generation bus lanes, enhanced services, cashless fares and account-based ticketing. A network of park and ride sites, serviced by the more efficient bus network, will also be put in place.

A work programme to guide the implementation of the Galway transport strategy is currently under development by the local authority. I am informed by the NTA that it had been hoped to publish this programme last month; however, the programme is still under development and will now be published later in the year.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

I am as anxious as the Deputy that implementation of the Galway transport strategy begins in earnest but I recognise the need to ensure that implementation is conducted in a planned and co-ordinated manner. I am advised by the NTA that the implementation of the proposed infrastructure development required by the strategy will be approximately five years.

In advance of that, Galway can benefit from the increased funding I am making available to support improved PSO bus services and fleets, as well as the increases I have secured to improve cycling and walking infrastructure.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** In spite of the Minister's best efforts and the reply he read out, I am far from happy. There is a traffic crisis in Galway. Less than two weeks ago, the House declared a climate emergency. I specifically asked when park and ride facilities would be rolled out in Galway. I asked that in the context of the council unanimously including park and ride facilities in the city development plan in 2005 when I was mayor. We are now in 2019. When will they be rolled out? On the status of the implementation plan, is the Minister stating that there is not yet an implementation plan? I may have misinterpreted his comments.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As I stated, I am as anxious as the Deputy that implementation of the Galway transport strategy begin in earnest, but I recognise the need to ensure that implementation is conducted in a planned and co-ordinated manner. I am advised by the NTA that the implementation of the proposed infrastructure development required by the strategy will take approximately five years. Of course, in advance of that Galway can benefit from the increased funding I am making available to support improved PSO bus services and fleets, as well as the increases I have secured to improve cycling and walking infrastructure. There has been a delay in finalising the plan, as the Deputy is aware. In cities outside Dublin, the NTA must work with and rely on councils to a far greater extent than in Dublin, where it has stronger statutory powers, which are sometimes criticised by Dublin councillors. Infrastructure required for Galway BusConnects can be delivered within five years, subject to planning.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am unsure whether there is wilful blindness or wilful incompetence. I do not wish to be negative. The city is thriving on one level, but it is choked with traffic. We included in the city development plan in 2005 that park and ride was necessary. We

led as elected members and the people of Galway led us. Last year, I collected 22,500 signatures in favour of light rail, which is an argument for another day. I mention it because during the course of that nine-week campaign, people queued up to ask us, please, to do something for the traffic in Galway in a sustainable manner and in light of our climate change commitments. One of the simplest and most obvious parts of the solution is to put park and ride facilities in place. I ask the Minister to leave aside his script for a moment and say whether, if he were in my position, he would be happy that, in 2019, it will take another five years to put in place something for which we submitted a plan in 2005 having proactively recognised the problem?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I fully understand the frustration at the growing traffic problems and the difficulties experienced by passengers in Galway-----

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** It is a problem nationwide.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** -----and various other areas nationwide where the population is growing and there is prosperity. Galway is no exception in that regard. The Galway transport strategy recognises that the provision of park and ride sites on multiple approaches to the city is important. It made a commitment in that regard. It is proposed to base park and ride facilities on the city-wide high frequency public transport network, thereby maximising the range of destinations that can be reached. Potential corridors for park and ride have been identified as part of the bus network development, and these facilities will be developed within the existing road corridor and boundary where possible. Where that is not possible, greenfield sites will be explored. Any site investigations will take potential environmental impacts into account.

## Transport Policy

**48. Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his policy priorities for the transport sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22062/19]

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It would be very helpful for the Minister to clarify his role in respect of transport policy and the facets of that policy into which he has an input. What are his transport policy priorities?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** There is quite a lot of information to provide in two minutes, but I will do my best.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will cut the Minister off after two minutes. It is a long answer, but all Members are aware that two minutes are allocated for replies.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** My Department's priorities for the transport sector within the capital envelope available to it are to maintain the existing extensive transport networks to ensure quality levels of service, accessibility and connectivity to transport users, and to develop infrastructure and service provision as envisaged under Project Ireland 2040 with a view to meeting the needs of the 2040 population by tackling urban congestion and improving connectivity to the regions, key international ports and airports. In the roads area, my highest priority is the safety of all road users. I am committed to continuing my Department's work, in conjunction with my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, in improving safety on our roads, above all through the continuing implementation of the Road Safety Strategy 2013-2020.

In terms of investment policy in this area, my priority is the delivery of the significant proj-

ects and programmes committed to in Project Ireland 2040, such as rolling out BusConnects-type programmes in Limerick, Galway, Cork, Dublin and Waterford, including significantly enhanced cycling facilities, in line with transport strategies; improved and enhanced Local Link services in rural Ireland; significantly improved funding for the heavy rail network across the country, which is now at steady state; the delivery of major regional roads projects such as the M20 connecting Cork and Limerick, the N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin project, the M8-N40-N25 Dunkettle interchange in Cork, the N5 Westport to Turlough project, the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge project, and contributing to the delivery of the A5 project; the development of new infrastructural facilities at the ports of Dublin, Cork and Shannon Foynes; the MetroLink; the DART expansion programme; and the accessibility retrofit programme. These projects and programmes will be complemented by other planned investments to improve the sustainability of our transport system, such as the development of a new national train control centre and the roll-out of strategic cycle networks in the major cities.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

The specific priorities in the roads sector continue to be maintenance of the national, regional and local road network in good condition; advancement to construction stage, subject to necessary approvals, of the important national and regional road improvement projects identified in Project Ireland 2040, including those I mentioned; and the appraisal of a range of other projects with a view to prioritising projects for future development.

My priority in respect of delivery of public transport services is to maintain and ensure implementation of governance oversight arrangements for State bodies in the public transport domain and ensure appropriate funding of services that require public financial support. On public transport and active travel policy, my priority is to complete a review of existing policy as committed to under A Programme for a Partnership Government. This review is a significant and substantial resource commitment, and my Department has commenced and substantially completed the research and analysis required to inform the proposed period of public consultation which I expect to launch in the near future. My Department is also preparing proposals for legislation which will enable Ireland to accede to several maritime safety related international conventions.

Brexit has been identified as my Department's highest strategic risk. It, along with other Departments and key agencies, has been preparing for Brexit for three years and continues to do so through extensive contingency planning and stakeholder engagement. The key transport risks and associated priorities that have been identified in a no-deal scenario include our continued aviation connectivity, the ability of our international road haulage sector to travel to the UK and use it as a landbridge to the Continent, the potential impacts on ports and airports as a result of the significant increase in the control requirements of the Departments of Health and Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Revenue Commissioners to carry out checks on imports once the UK becomes a third country, and continuity of cross-Border public transport services.

In the aviation sector, the policy priorities are contingency planning for UK withdrawal from the single aviation market, in particular for a no-deal Brexit scenario; the capacity of State airports, including the Dublin Airport north runway and capital investment programme, as well as long-term future capacity needs; and the restructuring of the Irish Aviation Authority and Commission for Aviation Regulation. I hope to publish a Bill on this matter before the end of 2019.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I note that equitable fares are not included in the Minister's policy priorities. Does he have any role in ensuring that there are equitable fare structures on public transport throughout the country? Does that fall within his policy remit?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy will be aware that the NTA sets fares.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The Minister's reply is most useful. We now have a definitive confirmation that the Minister has no policy role in ensuring equity in fares on behalf of the nation. I do not know what we elect Ministers for. Does the Minister have a policy to ensure that all agencies prioritise low carbon footprint public transport - rail and bus - within the money available? Our rail fleet is far more carbon-friendly and has a much smaller carbon footprint than buses. What are his policies in regard to ensuring that our public transport, including bus and rail, has a much lower carbon footprint? Is his policy to prioritise rail over bus because of its lower carbon footprint?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy will be aware that Government policy is, and has been for some time, not only to have a clean environment policy but also to ensure that public transport is used. As he is aware, there is a significant emphasis on buses as means of public transport in cities. He will also be aware that we will purchase diesel-electric buses after July and no more diesel-only buses will be purchased. It is imperative in public and private transport that everything is subject to climate change examination. That is my policy in that regard.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** What about rail?

### **Sports Capital Programme Applications**

49. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the point at which the large-scale sport infrastructure fund will be announced; and if an indicative list of preferential projects has been agreed to date between his Department and the major sporting authorities as to which should receive funding. [22097/19]

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** Before I address my question, I wish to acknowledge the passing last night of Michael Lynch from County Meath, a former Member of this House and the Seanad. Michael was a proud representative of the people of Meath and a great friend to me. On behalf of the people of County Meath and the Fianna Fáil Party, I extend my sympathies to his family. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam. At what point will the large-scale sport infrastructure fund be announced? Has an indicative list of preferential projects been agreed to date between the Department and the major sporting authorities as to which should receive funding?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin):** I too extend my sympathy to the family.

The large-scale sport infrastructure fund provides €100 million over the coming years. The scheme is designed to provide a transparent and robust system for funding sports capital projects where the Government contribution exceeds the amount which is available under the sports capital programme.

The new scheme opened for applications on 19 November 2018 and the closing date for receipt of applications was 17 April 2019. The fund is initially focusing on the requirements and development plans of national governing bodies of sport and local authorities, all of which

received letters inviting them to make applications. New swimming pool projects and the refurbishment of existing swimming pools are also eligible for funding under the new scheme.

Full details of the scheme are available on the Department's website. Among the issues which will be considered when assessing applications are the priority given to the projects by the relevant local authority or national governing body of sport, whether the projects are multifunctional in nature and cater for a number of different sports, and whether the proposed projects are located in a disadvantaged area or cater for people with disabilities.

A total of 72 applications have been received and departmental officials are undertaking an initial assessment of them. Details of all applications submitted have been published on the Department's website. The total amount sought is €172 million.

In view of the detailed information contained in each application, I am advised that it will take a number of months to have all of them assessed. Accordingly, while there will be no undue delay in completing the assessment process, I expect that it will be towards the end of this year before allocations are announced. It is to be hoped that, if we are all here by the end of the year, we will be able to announce them at that stage.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It is to be hoped some of us will be anyway.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I have been asking the Minister of State for a long time, and have submitted parliamentary questions to his office as well, about the discussions between the Department and the governing bodies such as the GAA, the IRFU, the FAI and so forth. They are the bodies that will have preferred grounds they wish to see developed. The names of the grounds have been leaked to the media from day one. The IRFU has leaked that it is the RDS for Leinster Rugby and the FAI has leaked that it is Dalymount Park, although the Minister, Deputy Ross, appears to have poured cold water on that in recent months because of its finances. The names of a number of grounds have been leaked by Cumann Lúthchleas Gael and there has been a changing of the goalposts. One of those grounds is Páirc Tailteann in Navan in my constituency, which the Minister of State has visited. Unfortunately, I was not informed when the Fine Gael ministerial showboat rocked up that day.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** That is a regular occurrence.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I would have loved to have been there to welcome it and to offer a detailed presentation as a proud GAA man. I am seeking information on the negotiations on this ground with Cumann Lúthchleas Gael. It is a 20,000 seat proposal and the Minister of State knows it is a strategic ground for the north east. I would be obliged if the Minister of State would give a candid response to my question.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I was reluctant to speak about sports capital grants at all when I saw that it was the Deputy who was asking the question given that he condemned the most recent announcement of sports capital grants.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I condemned the gimmick of the Minister of State electioneering with it.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The clubs throughout the country that received the grant aid were very happy to get it.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It was electioneering.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The debate has been civil all day.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I would love it to be civil again. When we work so hard to put funding in place in the Department and to get it out to the front line, it is very disheartening to hear members of the Opposition condemning us for providing funding for clubs.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** Answer the question.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** We do our best for the clubs throughout the country, and when one hears members of the Opposition criticising our work, it is disheartening. It is totally political and is beneath the Deputy.

It is not leaking if national governing bodies publicly state what their priorities are in their development plans. It is those bodies telling their members and the public what sporting infrastructure they believe is strategically important to them. The national governing bodies deserve an apology for the Deputy's rant about them leaking. They are not leaking. They are talking publicly about the projects which they consider to be strategically important to their organisations and they are entitled to do that. In the sports capital division in the Department the Minister, Deputy Ross, and I and our officials are working closely with the national governing bodies to assist them in whatever way we can. The large-scale sporting infrastructure fund will provide the facilities that showcase the high-performance athletes who will inspire the next generation of athletes and encourage sporting participation. There is nothing wrong with that and we are proud to assist with it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State used extra time and we are trying to let every Member participate.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** Every sports club in Ireland and the national sporting organisations deserve an apology for the flippant manner in which the Minister and the Minister of State treat them, as if they are giving candy to them. That is who deserves an apology. They are the decent community leaders in this country. The Minister of State need not lecture me.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** Which clubs would the Deputy take the money from?

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** He is not talking to the Healy-Raes now. He should sit down.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** Which clubs in County Meath would the Deputy take the money from?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will move on.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** The Minister of State had his time and he is trying to waste my time as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please stop. I must ensure there is order in the House, and there has been order for the past hour and 25 minutes.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** What a bizarre rant.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You will have an opportunity to speak.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** This is a strategic piece of infrastructure. That is heightened by the fact that the local authority supports it and is planning to have Navan central railway station

behind the back of the stand. If the Minister, Deputy Ross, ever honours the promise he gave me three years ago to visit Navan and examine that piece of infrastructure, I could get both him and the Minister of State to visit Navan and help the people there and in Meath. A highly detailed cost-benefit analysis for this ground has been carried out in view of the fact that there has been controversy with other major grounds throughout the country. I would welcome both the Minister and the Minister of State to Navan to examine this and, one hopes, support the proposal. Navan and County Meath deserve it.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** As the Deputy knows, I was glad to be in Páirc Tailteann last summer during the hot weather and I might be there again in the Super 8 during the summer, all going well.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** Please God.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I wish Meath GAA every success-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please be relevant.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** If it wins the Leinster senior football championship, we might not be in the same round. I am happy to engage with any national governing body, county board and anybody at any level in sport about their infrastructure needs and capital requirements. We are doing that. We are trying to bring money to as many people as possible at every level of sport. We have committed to doubling our investment in sport between 2018 and 2027, and we got off to a very good start in the most recent budget with a huge increase in the sports budget for current and capital spending. We should be allowed to do that work without politicisation of the process and without being criticised for getting money to the front line and assisting the volunteers without whom sport in Ireland would be much poorer, as would our communities and society.

In fairness, Deputy Cassells is an avid GAA man, as I and many Members are, but he should not be criticising us for rolling out this fund, which is very important for so many people.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We must move on. We will have time for the next question if Deputy Troy forfeits his introduction.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I will.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister will have to be speedy in replying. There will be one question after the reply.

### Rail Services Provision

50. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the MetroLink project with particular regard to the cost of the revised route. [21998/19]

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, have statutory responsibilities to develop and deliver MetroLink. In March, the NTA and TII launched a public consultation on the preferred route and that consultation period ended yesterday. This was developed following the NTA's and TII's reflection on the many responses to the earlier consultation they had held last year on

the then emerging preferred route, a public consultation which gave rise to much public commentary, particularly regarding a number of specific areas across the city. The NTA's and TII's consideration of this second consultation period on the preferred route will inform the ongoing development of the preliminary design for the project and allow it move on to the next stage.

An important part of that next stage is the development of what is known as a detailed business case. The issue of cost estimation will form a key part of the development of the business case. In developing that business case, the TII is working with leading international experts in the field of cost estimation for mega-projects such as MetroLink. This work will form part of

the business case for the project. The business case developed by the TII will  
*12 o'clock* be reviewed by the NTA prior to submission to my Department for consider-

ation in line with the requirements of the public spending code. My Department will ensure robust and rigorous analysis and challenge of the business case. Its consideration of the business case will inform the memorandum I will then bring to the Government for its approval. Subject to the approval of the Government, TII will proceed to the planning process and apply to An Bord Pleanála for a railway order. This application is expected to happen during the second quarter of 2020.

Let me be clear. The development of the business case and the costs underpinning the actual construction of a project like this are subject to ongoing refinement throughout these preparatory stages. Conditions might be imposed during planning that result in cost adjustments, for example, and ultimately costs will be further developed during the procurement process. Further Government decision points will be required in this project's life cycle. At each of those points careful consideration will be given to the ongoing value for money and benefit of the project.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

MetroLink is a mega-project. It is one which we all have views on. I want to reassure the Deputy that, as Minister, I have two key priorities here: delivering an improved public transport system to serve the needs of the public now and into the future; and ensuring efficient and effective expenditure of taxpayers' money. The issue of overall cost is a major factor in any transformative project like this one and it is important that we allow due deliberation as required under the public spending code.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Will the Minister outline the decision-making process that preceded the decision to effectively shelve the southern portion of MetroLink? How much will the new route cost per kilometre compared with the old route? Does the Minister believe it to be the case, and does he agree with the Taoiseach, that the new, revised and shorter metro route will probably be €2 billion more than what was originally anticipated?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The NTA took the decision. The authority made a recommendation on this decision that was certainly approved of by the Department and me. Deputy Troy asked about the issue of the costs. I have already said in my reply that there has to be a business case put forward. It would be foolish of me to anticipate the result of that business case.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Chuir An Teachta Cassells in iúl dúinn go bhfuair an t-iar-Theachta Dála agus an t-iar-Sheanadóir, Michael Lynch, bás. Bhí sé anseo sa bláthain 1982, arís sa bláthain 1987 agus i ndiaidh sin sa Seanad. D'oibrigh mé féin leis agus thug sé seirbhís dhilis dá chontae, Contae na Mí. Ar lámh dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal dílis.

## Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Eugene Murphy - to discuss Pobal funding for Mountbellew Community Childcare Centre, County Galway; (2) Deputies Brian Stanley and Carol Nolan - to discuss the funding crisis in RehabCare; (3) Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan - to discuss the services available to children with special needs in Dublin Central; (4) Deputy Thomas Byrne - to discuss disability services for a child (details supplied) in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital; and (5) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the lack of emergency accommodation in Galway city.

The matters raised by Deputies Eugene Murphy, Maureen O'Sullivan, Thomas Byrne and Éamon Ó Cuív have been selected for discussion.

## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I wish to be associated with you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, in terms of the sad passing of the former Deputy, Micheál Lynch, with whom I served for a brief period in the House. He was an outstanding Deputy and a great cultural man and musician. I know the people of Oldcastle and his family will be grieving today at the loss of such a wonderful and warm person.

There has been understandable concern and anger in respect of the broadband announcement by Government, especially in respect of the escalating costs of up to €3 billion to the taxpayer and, crucially, the capacity of the remaining sole bidder to deliver the project. We have seen shifting sands in respect of the composition of the consortium and the financial guarantees from various entities to underpin the project. I put it to the Taoiseach that the Government is not being fully transparent in respect of these financial guarantees and the relationship between Granahan McCourt Capital, GMC, and the various entities, including Tetrad and McCourt Global.

There has been a drip-feed of information from Government on this as a result of tenacious work by journalists and politicians. Last week, Deputy Cowen was told that there were three investors in the project, namely, GMC, Tetrad and McCourt Global. Yesterday, Deputy Dooley was told that both Tetrad Corporation and McCourt Global reiterated their support of the final tender. Then, last night, further written replies came in saying it was only Tetrad and GMC. Deputy Dooley was also told that Tetrad provided a commitment letter in respect of the equity only required for the project. In other words, it will contractualise a legal underpinning of €175 million from the lead bidder. This is a far cry from the figure of €2.4 billion, a figure the Tao-

iseach gave the impression to the House some time ago that it would be putting in. There is no legal lien on that, from what we can see. There has been a lack of clarity on all of these issues and there are no legal guarantees in respect of that. Last night, a written reply came in saying there were now only two investors.

I put it to the Taoiseach that in hindsight the meeting held on 16 July 2018 in New York between the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, and David McCourt and Frank McCourt was actually quite significant. It was one month before the deadline for guarantees of financial underpinning and the consortium had to be submitted. The deadline was 15 August. Four serious issues were discussed in respect of the project. There was a need for a permanent Irish-based leadership position. The importance of the 15 August 2018 deadline was relevant, as was the need for the necessary financing to be in place at the time. The minutes state that the deadline would be met and that the need for any changes in the make-up of the consortium should be avoided or, if necessary, kept to a minimum. It was stated that the importance of this issue was understood by the consortium. The consortium had been advised by Arthur Cox that as long as its lead bidder remained unchanged then such changes should not necessitate any delay. We now know of course that there was a change in the leader bidder from Enet to GMC. There was a change in the lead bidder and the consortium. There was a change in those financially underpinning the project too. There has been an impression since that McCourt Global has been in this from the very beginning. McCourt Global is saying it was not involved in this in any shape or form.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Frank McCourt was at that meeting. The former Minister, Deputy Naughten, had to resign. He has been less than forthcoming. He has gone silent. He is not available to comment on this. I put it to the Taoiseach that it is important for him to talk to the former Minister and get him to give a comprehensive and transparent statement in terms of all of these meetings.

The Taoiseach might confirm for me whether Peter Smyth, during his inquiries, spoke to Frank McCourt. Where will ultimate liability fall if the plan fails? If Granahan McCourt Dublin (Ireland) Limited folded, would it fall on Tetra Corporation to provide the equity for National Broadband Ireland?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not think there is anything new in the fact that the composition of the consortium changed over time. That is all information we have all been aware of for many months.

I was not at that dinner. No member of the current Government was at that dinner. The former Minister, Deputy Naughten, was but I cannot answer questions on his behalf. In any event I am confident that all of this was covered in the independent report on this matter carried out by Peter Smyth some months ago. That is published and in the public domain.

As for the financial guarantees, National Broadband Ireland will make available €220 million in equity and working capital upfront. This will be legally required by the contract, which is being finalised. There is no upfront contribution from the taxpayer. The taxpayer only contributes after the fibre is deployed and homes are passed and subsequently connected. The total cost of the project is between €5 and €6 billion, including VAT and contingencies, with roughly half coming from the State in the form of the Exchequer subsidy and the other half from the

investor and commercial revenues.

The Deputy asked about the upfront contribution. A total of €175 million comes from Tetrad Corporation and the rest from Granahan McCourt Dublin (Ireland) Limited. The funding commitments will be contracted in advance of the contract award and any committed funding that has not been drawn down by National Broadband Ireland at financial close will require a guarantee in a form that is acceptable to the Department. This is standard practice for large-scale procurements.

McCourt Global LLC is one of two companies on which the bidder relied to demonstrate its capacity to meet financial and economic criteria at pre-qualification stage. The other company was Tetrad Corporation. Both companies provided the necessary letters of support at that point in the process. They were each assessed in respect of the financial and economic capacity and both passed. There is no issue with any bidder relying on the resources of other companies and requirements were set out for this in advance, in the project information and memorandum and the pre-qualification questionnaire, which were given to all bidders in 2016 and were published. This is a standard procurement procedure to ensure that appropriate financial capacity and guarantees are in place. All other bidders to the process would have sought to do the same. At final tender both Tetrad Corporation and McCourt Global LLC reiterated their support but Tetrad Corporation also provided an equity support letter in respect of the funds outlined in the bidder's funding plan. This means Tetrad has committed to the full equity amount. Decisions on the sources of funding, such as the decision to go with equity from Tetrad rather than McCourt Global, are matters for the bidder and the company.

A parliamentary question last week identified McCourt Global as the ultimate investor but I understand the Department has now corrected the record and has clarified any confusion in respect of the role of McCourt Global. The role of the company, as I outlined to the Dáil last week, is one of two entities relied on for pre-qualification. It provided a letter of support. At final tender, the equity commitments were provided by Tetrad. I am sure the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment will be happy to clarify any further issues or answer any further questions in this regard.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** This is all very unsatisfactory. All of this has all been dragged from the Taoiseach over the past number of weeks and he has been less than transparent on it. He cannot go on being as detached as he is. A former Minister who was responsible for this project and this tender met the preferred bidder on a number of occasions.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** He was abandoned.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** We were led to believe they were all innocent dinners or personal lunches, but they were not. The Taoiseach needs to come off it. He cannot stand up here as Taoiseach of this country and say that no one in the current Government is involved. For God's sake, Deputy Naughten was a former Minister in the Taoiseach's Government, and the Taoiseach still depends on him for support. Frank McCourt of McCourt Global was at that dinner, and he was not there talking about the weather. He was talking about this project and that was minuted. The official from the Department who was there was from the climate action section, not the section responsible for conducting the tender. That, again, was wrong and inappropriate, which I said at the time. The Taoiseach did not say it. He pretended he saw no evil until all the other dinners emerged, and Deputy Naughten then fell on his sword. The former Minister has an obligation to talk to the House and tell us everything that took place in relation to this.

22 May 2019

The Taoiseach is saying that the Department has corrected the record, but it was only late last night when the parliamentary questions came in that we learned Granahan McCourt Capital, GMC, and Tetrad are now the investors responsible for the project.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** That was in parliamentary questions yesterday.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Minister's Department told *The Sunday Times* two weeks ago in two series of articles that McCourt Global was the financial underpinner of this project, but McCourt Global has now disappeared. The Government is confusing the picture deliberately at this stage. What is the Taoiseach hiding in respect of the relationships between GMC, Tetrad, and McCourt Global? He said, and he may correct me on this, that Tetrad is putting up €175 million. Does that mean that GMC is putting no equity in, despite being the sole bidder? I may have picked the Taoiseach up wrong, but I thought he gave a figure of €175 million and said Tetrad was providing that. Does that mean GMC is only providing the working capital and is not putting any equity into the project? Can the Taoiseach confirm that?

**The Taoiseach:** What I said was that National Broadband Ireland will make €220 million in working capital available upfront. This will be legally required by the contract, which is being finalised. No upfront contributions will be made by the taxpayer, and the taxpayer will only pay as the fibre is deployed and homes, farms, and businesses are connected. That €220 million is made up of €175 million from Tetrad-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** There you go.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and the rest from Granahan McCourt Capital.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Tetrad.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** GMC is putting in no money, so is Tetrad putting in the equity? This is a massive revelation.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy might not want the answer, but the Taoiseach is speaking.

**The Taoiseach:** To answer the rest of the Deputy's question, the fact that Deputy Naughten attended those dinners is old news. It has been in the public domain for many months and we knew it last year. The Deputy resigned from Government over six months ago and we used the interim period to make sure this bid was sound and that it was the right one to go forward with. An independent report was conducted by Mr. Peter Smyth, as the independent auditor dealing with all these matters.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Is Tetrad the new preferred bidder? We have been misled all along the way.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy needs to calm down.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach is not finished yet.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is now saying for the first time since this was announced that Tetrad is putting in the equity, not GMC.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach is to speak without interruption. There is only one question and one supplementary question allowed, and I cannot be responsible for

anything else.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy really needs to calm down. The Government has been very transparent on this matter.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Rubbish.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Martin is once again weaving one of his many conspiracy theories.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach called it a conspiracy theory when I spoke to him the night before Deputy Naughten resigned, but the Deputy resigned 24 hours later.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call on Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Over the past number of weeks, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has championed the concept of co-living as a solution to the rental crisis. He has gone so far as to say that people should be excited by his co-living plan. One example of this exciting plan is being developed in Dún Laoghaire by Bartra Capital Property Group, and involves 208 studio dwellings that are around the same size as a parking space. It is proposed that on one floor 42 people would share one kitchen and for this exciting proposal, as the Minister puts it, rent would be in excess of €1,300 per month for what amounts to tenement living.

I am not sure about the Taoiseach, but I do not find that proposal exciting in the slightest. Given the public reaction to the Minister's new project, people in the real world do not find it exciting either; in fact, they have been angered by it. The Minister is so out of touch that he cannot seem to grasp that co-living is not an answer to the housing or rental crises. It is an insult to those seeking a safe and secure roof over their heads. Threshold has described these proposed developments as "21st century bedsits with a glossy makeover", and further said that they should not be viewed as a viable solution to the housing shortage. I agree with that assessment, because co-living has no place in our dysfunctional rental market. It is certainly not a solution.

It is, however, the clearest evidence of the biggest obstacle to tackling the housing crisis and that is the Taoiseach's Government. The most serious issue here is that the Minister thinks this is a good idea. Not only does he support and champion it, he doubles down on his message, and is saying to young people, in effect, that a box room with a fold-up bed and a kitchen shared by 42 people for €1,300 a month is as good as it gets. It is absolutely off the wall and it seems the reality of the Government's plan is bed and breakfasts and hotels for homeless children, two and three generations of families under one roof, ridiculous runaway rents, council housing waiting lists that will never be cleared, and the dream of one day owning their own home being totally shattered for many young people. This is as good as it gets on the Taoiseach's watch. Co-living and a perpetual rental crisis are all the Minister has to offer tens of thousands of people affected by the housing crisis. That is his record, his promise and his mantra. How does the Taoiseach defend this?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy McDonald and myself may disagree on many aspects of housing policy, but I think everyone in this House agrees on one thing. At the core to the solution, though not the only solution, is additional supply and new homes and apartments for people who need them. Last year, 18,000 new homes were built in Ireland, up from 15,000 the year before and 9,000 the year before that. We are not building enough yet but we are definitely going in the right direction, and we see that in the fact that house prices are moderating and even

falling in Dublin. This year we anticipate that between 20,000 and 25,000 new homes will be built, approximately. Those include houses and apartments of all types for different people such as social housing for people who have been waiting far too long on the housing lists, private homes for people to buy - because most people in Ireland still want to buy their own homes and I believe in homeownership - and homes to rent because many people need to rent for one reason or another. Of those 25,000 new homes, perhaps 1%, or four or five developments, will be co-living. It is important to put it into proportion. They are not going to replace traditional housing and apartments but it is another option for some people, particularly single people who do not want a house share. These developments are part of a housing mix in cities such as Copenhagen, Berlin, Vienna, which are held up as examples to follow by Sinn Féin and others. They generally consist of en suite studio apartments with a kitchenette, and common areas such as a gym, laundry, or movie room.

The controversy at the moment appears to relate to one particular development in Dún Laoghaire being put forward by Bartra Capital Property Group. This development has not had planning permission granted yet. The Deputy suggested in her question that it is proposed that 42 people would share one kitchen, but that would not be in line with the Government's co-living guidelines. I anticipate that An Bord Pleanála, when it makes a decision on a planning application, would either refuse or significantly modify any planning permission that is not in line with Government guidelines.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am simply reiterating the words of the Taoiseach's own Minister, who regards this co-living concept as "exciting". As a Minister he has championed it and recommends it as an exciting prospect. I think he is targeting this bizarre message at young professionals in particular. This is just a glamorised form of tenement living, with a boxroom no larger than the size of a parking space, a fold-down bed and shared common areas and kitchen facilities for €1,300 per month. If this is what the Minister regards as exciting and something to be embraced by the young people of Ireland, then we do not have to deliberate very much to understand what the problem is in terms of resolving the housing and rental crises. The Government and the Minister are so out of touch that they regard an insult such as this proposition as an exciting offer for young people. The Taoiseach has, no doubt, been around the country like the rest of us talking to people and canvassing for political support. He can be in no doubt that there is no support for this proposition. He can be in no doubt that there is a widespread consensus that his plans for tackling the housing crisis have manifestly failed.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach and his Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, have been found out. This cock-and-bull story around co-living simply amplifies the scale of their failure.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Why did the Deputy not object to the guidelines when they were introduced 14 months ago?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is no provision for Ministers to take Leaders' Questions.

**The Taoiseach:** What the Deputy is doing is what she so often does, which is fallacy, engaging in misrepresentation and being totally disingenuous. When the Minister made his comments he was referring to the concept of co-living and the guidelines, which were not opposed

by Sinn Féin. What the Deputy is trying to do now is dishonest and disingenuous, by taking those comments and applying them to a particular development in Dún Laoghaire that does not even have planning permission yet. This is a party that has no solutions for housing. All they can do is launch personal attacks on others.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** So says the Taoiseach, having just launched a personal attack.

**The Taoiseach:** They have no answers for anyone with a housing need.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** The direct provision system has been an outrage of State-sanctioned human rights abuses against men, women and children. It ensures that vulnerable people who are trapped in the system suffer again and again. It is a system of State coercion, disenfranchisement and enforced poverty, run by private companies for huge profit which could not care less about the people they are supposed to be looking after. The plight of these people, trapped for up to a decade, acts as a deterrent to people from coming here - maybe it is intentional. On top of this, the Government's pitiful response to the housing crisis has led to many people who have been granted asylum having to stay in direct provision, because there is no place for them to go.

The fact that the Government has failed to deal with the housing crisis means direct provision will not be closed any time soon. In light of that, I ask the Taoiseach to address two issues. Our office spoke to Nick Henderson, CEO of the Irish Refugee Council, this morning. The council sees no vulnerability assessments being done, as were envisaged by Article 22 of the directive. Two other groups confirmed this view in their submission to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality this morning. Assessments of primary healthcare needs are being done by the Safetynet group and these are clearly required but they are not vulnerability assessments as envisaged by the directive. A much more comprehensive and wide-ranging assessment is envisaged by the directive and required by law. A victim of torture will require intensive counselling and support but we do not even carry out an assessment capable of identifying what a person's problems might have been. Some people have seen family members shot in front of them, or drown beside them in the ocean. Article 22 requires vulnerability assessments but, despite the fact that the Government transposed the directive into domestic law 12 months ago, they are still not happening. We are in breach of EU law. When will a fit-for-purpose system to carry out these vulnerability assessments, in accordance with the wide-ranging and generous spirit envisaged by Article 22 of the directive, be in place?

**The Taoiseach:** I am afraid I will have to check up on that and come back to the Deputy with an answer about vulnerability assessments and EU law. I am not fully briefed on this but I will check it out and get back to the Deputy with a reply in the next couple of days, as best I can.

Government acknowledges that there are many people who have been living in direct provision for far too long. A lot of that relates to the fact that we have a very slow system for deciding whether someone is allowed to stay in the country or not when they claim asylum. That is to do with our own processes but it is also to do with the large number of judicial reviews. We believe, however, that as the International Protection Act 2015 is implemented, decisions will be made more speedily and people will find out much more quickly whether they can stay or should return to the country whence they came.

Direct provision is not compulsory and there are many asylum seekers who do not live in

direct provision but with friends or family members who have already come to Ireland. After a few months, asylum seekers have the right to work so some can actually provide for their own accommodation. It is not a requirement that a person checks in or out, which some people believe to be the case, and a person is free to leave at any time. Many people have done so, to live with friends and relations who have come from their home country or in their own accommodation, having found work. Direct provision is offered to asylum seekers and they are provided with accommodation, heat, lighting, food and spending money but we are trying to raise the standards. That is being led by the guidelines that were put together by Mr. Justice Bryan McMahon, which we are following in order to raise standards and so that people in direct provision get decent accommodation.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** This morning, Mr. Justice McMahon said many of his recommendations were still to be implemented, despite the Government boast last year that 98% of them had been implemented. That is not true. The Taoiseach said people were not compelled to be there but I know plenty of these people and they would not be in there if they had an alternative. Because of the housing shortages, however, there are very few alternatives. Many children still do not feel safe in direct provision, women do not feel safe, members of the LGBT fraternity do not feel safe there and many people are still being stripped of their dignity. In April in the Mosney direct provision centre, a mother of three was hospitalised after an attempt on her life. The incident shows clearly that the direct provision system is sometimes incompatible with basic human dignity and respect for human rights. The residents of Mosney staged a protest on 25 April, which they described as a cry for help. The owner of Mosney was caught on camera trying to break up the protest and in the video one can clearly hear him telling the protestors “this will have an impact on you”. It was a direct threat. The residents in direct provision are too afraid to complain about conditions for fear of marginalisation, rejection of their application or relocation by the management. Phelim McCloskey’s threat, caught on camera, is evidence of this but this time the situation was too much for residents to take. These people are being brutalised by the system. The Government needs to investigate the management practices in Mosney and other direct provision centres. Inspections by the Reception and Integration Agency, RIA, are woefully inadequate. Will the Taoiseach investigate these management practices?

**The Taoiseach:** I have met Mr. Justice McMahon on many occasions and I have had the privilege of attending some of the citizenship ceremonies with him. He did a very good piece of work in setting out what the standards should be for direct provision accommodation. We are implementing those standards but they are not fully implemented yet and we acknowledge that. The Department of Justice and Equality, the Refugee Integration Agency and the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service, INIS, would welcome complaints by any resident in direct provision at Mosney or any other centre and any complaint would certainly not affect a person’s application, either adversely or favourably. However, we do have an underlying problem of a large number of people coming from countries that are considered to be relatively safe, such as Albania, for example, or countries like Georgia, countries that are applying to join the European Union. We have a large number of people as well for whom their applications are taking a very long time to process, in many cases because of recurring judicial reviews. We need to do something to speed up the process so that those who are genuine refugees get quick answers and are allowed to stay here and get the protection they deserve and those who are not get to the quick answer that they need to return to where they came from.

**Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation**

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is over a year since the CervicalCheck scandal was made public following the case that Vicky Phelan took to the High Court. Two significant commitments were given by the Government at the time - to set up a CervicalCheck tribunal and to introduce a patient safety Bill that would provide for mandatory open disclosure. The general scheme of the tribunal Bill was published this month, but when can the Dáil expect the Bill proper to be finalised, completed and debated in the Dáil? Is it the intention of the Government that it would be completed and passed before the summer recess? In terms of the patient safety Bill, heads were approved last July. Will the Taoiseach confirm whether the Bill will be before the Dáil ahead of the summer recess?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy. On the legislation to establish the tribunal as recommended by Mr. Justice Meenan, I have asked the Attorney General and the Minister for Health to prioritise that legislation over all other health legislation. The heads have been published and we anticipate that we will have that Bill in the House before the summer recess and, with the co-operation of this House and the other House, enacted before the summer recess. Since that Bill is being given priority over all other health legislation, it is likely that the patient safety legislation will then come in during the next session in the autumn.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The programme for Government commits to providing adequate resources to reduce hospital waiting lists. This week, a woman needing hospital treatment received a letter telling her that she had been put on a waiting list of in excess of 175 weeks for an appointment at the Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar. That is more than three years. This woman is ill and potentially suffering from a serious blood disorder, yet she is being left with no notion of when or if she will be called for an appointment. She will face this uncertainty for anything up to three years. She is not alone, as more than 500,000 people are facing the same uncertainty on waiting lists. It is nothing short of outrageous. It should be said that Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar, is the same hospital that only last month had to issue a full capacity protocol due to dangerous levels of overcrowding. Now, this woman, who is just one of many, is being told that she may have to wait for up to three years for her appointment.

Does the Taoiseach accept that the Government has failed to deal with waiting lists at hospitals-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, Deputy, please.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----a crisis in which more than 500,000 people have been left waiting?

**The Taoiseach:** I am afraid I cannot comment on the individual case, but if what the Deputy says is correct - I have no reason to believe it is not - I am obviously sorry to hear that this patient has been asked to wait for so long. Sometimes, it is possible to get a more urgent appointment, particularly if that request comes in from her GP or from another doctor.

We have discussed this issue many times in the past. I have pointed out how, in Northern Ireland, many more people per head of population are waiting much longer, so we know Sinn Féin's record in health, Michelle O'Neill having been the last Minister of Health. We know that Sinn Féin has not delivered on health. Given the much worse situation when it comes to waiting lists in Northern Ireland, no one would possibly believe that Sinn Féin could do a better job.

22 May 2019

However, there are areas where we are making some progress, particularly when it comes to people who are waiting for an operation or a procedure.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Government is sending people to the North for cataract surgery-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** To Belfast.

**The Taoiseach:** The number of people waiting more than three months for an operation or a procedure is down by 10,000 this year compared with last year.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** -----and hip replacements.

**The Taoiseach:** The truth always hurts, a Cheann Comhairle, which is why one always gets shouted down-----

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** It is not the truth. It is false.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but they are going to have to hear the truth. Just comparing the middle of summer 2017, when we started implementing Sláintecare, to now, the number of people waiting more than three months for a cataract surgery is down from 8,000 to 3,500.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Yes, because the Government is sending them to the North.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It has nothing to do with Sláintecare.

**The Taoiseach:** The number of people waiting for GI scopes has gone from 28,000 down to 14,000-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Thanks be to God the Government took Fianna Fáil's proposal.

**The Taoiseach:** The number of people waiting for a hip or knee replacement-----

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Government is sending them to the North as well.

**The Taoiseach:** -----is down from 3,500 to 1,600, while the numbers waiting for tonsils to be removed and for an angiogram are down from 2,500 to 700, and from nearly 2,000 to 800, respectively. In all those cases, the number of people waiting for more than 12 weeks is down by half.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The National Treatment Purchase Fund.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I join with the leader of the Fianna Fáil Party in expressing my sympathy and that of my party to the family of the late Micheál Lynch on his sad passing.

Just two weeks ago, it seemed possible that RehabCare would have to withdraw services from more than 3,000 people who depend upon them. It was a stressful time for those service users and their families. In this election week, the Government thankfully has found €2 million to fund the gap for Rehab this year. We know that most of that money - €1.5 million, I understand - is simply to cover insurance costs.

There are many other community and voluntary organisations delivering important health and social care services to people with disabilities. Like the Rehab Group, they are all under severe pressure. While what the Government has done for Rehab is welcome, is it not time that

we provided an indemnity for the myriad of section 38 organisations that provide vital health and social services and are under enormous pressure to find affordable insurance?

**The Taoiseach:** I actually neglected to join Deputy Micheál Martin in expressing my condolences to the family of Micheál Lynch, who has passed away. He is a former Member of this House and very much a respected one.

The issues around the deficit that Rehab was facing were resolved yesterday following engagement with the HSE, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. Deputy Howlin raises a very valid issue, which is the cost of insurance for section 39 organisations - those that are not part of the public sector but are almost entirely funded by the public sector. We will have to give consideration to whether an indemnity should be extended to them but one should bear in mind that when one does that, it exposes the taxpayer to potentially massive claims-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** We are paying wodges of money now anyway.

**The Taoiseach:** -----for which the taxpayer may have no responsibility. That would have to be thought through and we would have to calculate what the potential cost and liability would be, but I take the Deputy's point and I think it is something that we need to consider.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I noted the Taoiseach's response on the issue raised by Deputy McDonald, which I raised last week, concerning the Bartra Capital Property Group's plan for 200 boxes with fold-out beds in Dún Laoghaire. Today is the last day for submissions. Given the Taoiseach's response, I suggest that the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government make a submission to An Bord Pleanála saying that this development would be completely out of order and is an abuse of the strategic housing development, SHD, process. That is a direct appeal.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Taoiseach is going to do that.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The unscrupulousness of property speculators in Dún Laoghaire seems to know no bounds. The latest ruse, which I would also ask the Minister to examine, sees property agents in the Cualanor and Honeypark developments, which were in NAMA before being sold to vulture funds and so on, using a very obscure calculation of people's income in order to rule out housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants. Even when the council has said that, in respect of two cases that I have received, the incomes of the HAP tenants, who are working, are sufficient to be able to rent these properties, the property agents are doing another obscure calculation in order to make an excuse for telling the tenants that they cannot rent the properties to them. The real reason is because they are in receipt of HAP. As a matter of urgency, will the Minister examine this issue as well?

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** I thank the Deputy for the question. In my ministerial role, I appoint the chairperson of An Bord Pleanála. For the first time ever in the history of the State, earlier this year I appointed an independent planning regulator, Mr. Niall Cussen, to oversee all of our plans under the national planning framework, all of the work being done by local authorities and their planning offices, and An Bord Pleanála. It would not be appropriate for me to make an observation on an individual planning application. That would be an abuse of power.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** This is an abuse of the system.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** As the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, knows, we in the Dublin Bay North constituency also have large studio-type apartment developments being brought to An Bord Pleanála.

I understand that the Taoiseach will next week meet the Stardust relatives and victims committee. I wonder whether the Taoiseach will be in a position to give them the decision of the Attorney General, Mr. Woulfe, in respect of the detailed report that has been prepared by the committee and the solicitor, Mr. Darragh Mackin, with the assistance of Lynn Boylan, MEP. The report was delivered approximately two months ago but it has not really been acknowledged by the Attorney General.

**The Taoiseach:** I am afraid I cannot say. The meeting will happen. I will listen to what they have to say and respond accordingly.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am sure the Taoiseach, like other Deputies, has met colleagues from the media who lost their jobs recently as a result of the massive scaling back of the *The Times*, Ireland edition. There is a real difficulty for our friends in the media who are caught in that position but there is a wider policy issue as well. There is a real concern now that Irish journalism is being corroded and eroded because the fundamental business model cannot support quality journalism, which is central to our democracy. Two years ago, the Oireachtas committee asked the Government, rather than sitting on its hands, to consider practical ways of bringing money back into this profession, which is something that needs to be done. Nothing has happened, however. I am sure the Minister, Deputy Bruton, will tell me that the Government is looking at this matter again. I think there is an urgency now because there are further stories of other institutions that may be in difficulty. We must intervene to protect certain institutions of our State, including the healthy, sceptical and questioning profession of journalism. That profession is under threat at the moment. What does the Government intend to do about it?

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I think there is a genuine issue here. There is no doubt that the revenue sources of traditional media are being undermined significantly as a result of the explosion in online activity. As the Deputy is aware, I am bringing forward a broadcasting Bill to provide for changes in the way the broadcasting levy is raised. We are examining the potential for deploying the levy in new ways. Of course there are limits on the extent to which state aid can be provided to private media companies. I am concerned about these developments. I will discuss with my officials how best we might address them. We are acting on the committee's proposals in the context of the broadcasting Bill, which I hope to publish soon.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** On behalf of my party, I want to express our condolences on the passing of former Deputy for the Meath constituency and Senator, Michael Lynch, who passed away earlier today.

When I was in County Tipperary recently, I was reminded that a series of marches and protests organised by the March4Tipp campaign last year culminated in the appointment of Alison Harvey as the head of a task force. What agencies, particularly State agencies, have been assigned to the task force to help it to implement the findings of the communities and to ensure the task force develops a sustainable economy, in line with the demands of March4Tipp? While I hope the task force will be successful, that will not happen unless the State gets behind it.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government is fully

behind this important initiative, which we have undertaken with local stakeholders. That is why we have appointed an expert to lead this piece of work. All the different funding streams and agencies that are needed to make this initiative happen and work are available to the task force, which is currently doing this piece of work and reporting to the Minister of State, Deputy English. When we have further updates, we will be able to provide them to the House.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** I join the Taoiseach, my party leader and others in extending sympathy to the family of Michael Lynch. I knew him through my radio work in the past. I have questioned the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health on many occasions about projects in my local area such as the 50-bed accident and emergency unit at Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe, the 50-bed unit for older people at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon and the development at St. Patrick's hospital, Carrick-on-Shannon. There is concern that there seems to be no talk about these developments at present. I cannot prove it, but it appears that nothing is being said about these projects because of the difficulties at the children's hospital. The Ballinasloe project is shovel-ready. All it needs is a Government announcement. As the two Ministers of State from County Galway who are sitting behind the Taoiseach will be aware, there is a lot of chaos in the accident and emergency department at the hospital. It is very hard for the staff to cope. What the patients are going through is unacceptable. I ask the Taoiseach to indicate when the Government might announce the Portiuncula project. It is crucial that we get the go-ahead for it. I am pleading with the Taoiseach today because I have received so many requests to get something done about this matter. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has received similar requests. Can we look forward to the announcement of the date on which this work will commence?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** When will the Galway shovels be brought into use?

**The Taoiseach:** In my time as Minister for Health, I had the opportunity to visit Portiuncula Hospital, which performs very well and sees relatively low numbers of patients on trolleys. The facilities at the hospital are very out of date, however. I would be very keen to see the new block under construction as soon as possible. I cannot give the Deputy a date on it. I am sure the Minister for Health, who is at a joint committee meeting at the moment, will give the Deputy an update as soon as he gets an opportunity to do so. I remind the Deputy that less than 20% of the €10 billion ten-year health envelope for new hospitals, primary care centres, IT equipment etc. will be spent on the children's hospital. More than 80% of it is available to be spent on other projects all over the country.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** I welcome this week's announcement that grants worth €10 million are being provided for sporting equipment. This has been welcomed by many local and regional clubs. Like the Taoiseach and the Ministers and Ministers of State who are with him, I have been contacted by many clubs that have a keen interest in finding out when the main sports capital grants will be announced. These grants have kept many local sports clubs, including those in rural areas, going over recent years. This allocation has probably been one of the best things the Government has done in recent years. When can we expect the main sports capital grants to be announced?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin):** I thank the Deputy for welcoming the grants, which are very important for local clubs, as he knows. This tranche of funding under the 2018 programme was open to applications for equipment only. Approximately 1,500 applications were received from clubs for funding for equipment and other capital developments. It is hoped that decisions in respect of those

applications will be announced in or around September. The announcements that were made last Sunday and Monday relate to applications for equipment only. Clubs that were unsuccessful in their applications for money from the tranche of funding that was announced earlier this week may appeal the findings as well. Officials from the Department will be in touch with unsuccessful clubs this week in that regard.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Bhí an Coimisinéir Teanga i láthair ag Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na nOileán inné. Uair amháin eile, dúirt sé go raibh fíoradh le uasdhátú a dhéanamh ar an reachtaíocht a bhaineann leis na teangacha oifigiúla le cosaint a thabhairt don Ghaeilge. Le fada an lá, tá Bille leasaithe geallta dúinn le leasú a dhéanamh ar an Acht teanga atá ann i láthair na huaire. Cén uair a fhoilseofar an Bille a dhéanfaidh leasú ar an Acht teanga?

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne):** Mar is eol don Teachta, bhí moill ar an mBille sin mar gheall ar an reachtaíocht maidir leis an mBreatimeacht. Tá an dul-chun cinn déanta ar an mBille sin le mí nó sé seachtaine anuas. Táimid dóchasach fós go mbeidh an Bille sin foilsithe roimh an samhradh.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sin deireadh le ceisteanna ar reachtaíocht atá geallta.

On behalf of all Members, I want to be associated with the expressions of sympathy on the death of the former Deputy and Senator, Michael Lynch. It was a great privilege to have known Michael. He was a distinguished Member of this House and the Upper House. He was an absolute gentleman to his fingertips. If I remember correctly, he was a great devotee of Irish culture, particularly Irish music. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

### **Ceisteanna (Atóigáil) - Questions (Resumed)**

#### **Cabinet Committee Meetings**

1. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met. [16722/19]
2. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met; and when it will next meet. [16738/19]
3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [18733/19]
4. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met. [19962/19]
5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met. [20547/19]
6. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D, infrastructure, last met; and when it will next meet. [21731/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

Cabinet committee D works to ensure a co-ordinated approach in the areas of infrastructure investment and delivery, housing and climate action. The Cabinet committee last met on 31 January 2019 and the next meeting has been scheduled for 27 May 2019. There is significant work under way across each of the areas covered by the committee through Departments, agencies and interdepartmental groups such as the climate action high level steering group and the Project Ireland 2040 delivery board. These matters are also regularly considered at meetings of Government and in bilateral meetings with the relevant Ministers.

Significant progress is being made on the implementation of Project Ireland 2040. Through the national planning framework, NPF, it sets out our 20-year vision for Ireland's future, balancing rural and urban development and linking it with the national development plan, NDP, which encompasses €116 billion in capital investment over ten years to meet the infrastructural needs of our growing population.

Earlier this month the Government launched the first annual report for Project Ireland 2040 and it is clear it is delivering better transport links, facilitating better health and environmental outcomes and yielding more housing. For example, for the first time in decades three new hospitals are under construction, with one nearing completion. A total of 11 primary care centres will open this year and 26 more are being developed. By the end of the year, some 410 school projects will have been completed across the country or will have commenced construction, providing 40,000 additional or replacement school places, 200 modern science labs, 48 new or upgraded PE halls and the replacement of 600 prefabs. In addition, work is under way on several projects that have been promised for a long time, including the upgrade of the N4 in Sligo between Castlebaldwin and Collooney and the new north runway at Dublin Airport. The four funds launched under Project Ireland 2040 have a total of €4 billion to invest across the areas of rural and urban regeneration and development, climate action and disruptive technologies innovation. The first round of funding allocations amounting to just over €300 million have been announced and will leverage further private sector investment to deliver on the aims of Project Ireland 2040.

The Land Development Agency, LDA, another cornerstone initiative of Project Ireland 2040, was established on an interim basis in September 2018 and is working to ensure the optimum management of State land with an immediate focus on providing new homes, including social and affordable housing. Housing continues to be a priority for the Government. We have seen strong growth in housing completions and leading indicators such as planning permissions, commencement notices and housing registration indicate a strong pipeline. In the 12 months to the end of March, almost 19,000 new homes were built in Ireland, an increase of 25% year on year. More than 2,600 homes were also brought out of long-term vacancy and back into use, while almost 800 dwellings in unfinished or ghost estates were completed, meaning the total number of new homes available for use increased by more than 22,000 in that time period. This figure does not include student accommodation. There was also strong delivery of publicly funded social housing in 2018. We are all aware of the significant challenge in meeting housing demand and tackling the ongoing issues in the housing market. For this reason, budget 2019 provided an increase of 25% in the housing budget to €2.6 billion, the largest ever budget for housing. Delivering on our EU climate commitments for 2030 and transitioning to a competitive, low carbon, sustainable economy by 2050 are also priorities. We are investing €22 billion in climate action through the NDP, mainly led by State owned enterprises, to ensure that our future growth is regionally balanced and environmentally sustainable. In addition, the

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, is currently finalising an all-of-Government climate action plan and intends to bring this to Government in June. This plan will have a strong focus on implementation, including actions with specific timelines and steps needed to achieve each action, assigning clear lines of responsibility for the delivery of each one. It will build on progress made to date and set out the steps which must be taken for Ireland to meet its climate action obligations.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. In recent months, it has become clear that the system of Cabinet committees has been almost completely sidelined. Even on vital issues such as health and housing, the relevant committees meet infrequently. The Taoiseach has justified this by saying that he prefers to have discussions at Cabinet level. In doing this, he has cut out the entire tier of interdepartmental work that underpins Cabinet committees and has removed expert voices from the discussions. As we have seen from the systematic failure to deliver targets on time or within budget, the move to a more superficial politicians-only focus for discussions is clearly not working. Given the utter failure of the Minister for Health to manage either his short-term budget or long-term projects or the fact that Ireland was not ready for a no-deal Brexit in March, despite repeated claims to the contrary, does the Taoiseach agree that his experiment in downgrading the role of Cabinet committees has not worked and should be reversed?

The last time we discussed the Cabinet committee on infrastructure we were told that capital projects were being tightly managed and that proof of this was the publication of a major projects monitor, with regular updates. When checked yesterday, however, this major capital projects monitor was still doggedly holding to the idea that the national children's hospital would cost €916 million. There was no provision whatsoever made for the national broadband plan, NBP, and there were no examples of the Taoiseach's often referenced projects which are supposedly coming in well under budget. The only adjustments since early last year refer to projects where the pre-2018 spending was higher than predicted. Given the time and money the Government spent marketing the NDP last year and the public money it keeps spending to aid Fine Gael in targeted electoral areas, the public deserves an honest and comprehensive update on the costs and timelines in the NDP. This is particularly relevant in the context of the memorandum from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the NBP, which states that approximately €1.5 billion will be required for broadband and an additional €345 million for the children's hospital, neither of which have been provided for.

At every stage we were promised that this would be the most transparent and best managed plan ever. How is this compatible with the reality of what has been happening?

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Cabinet committee D deals with infrastructure but the runaway costs and fallout over the children's hospital suggest that chaos reigns in the context of infrastructural projects. We have seen many projects cancelled or at the very least, delayed, including one such project in my own constituency, the Drimnagh primary care centre. Has the aforementioned Cabinet committee discussed the possibility of reassessing existing contracts or projects that are near completion to ensure delivery that is on time and within budget in future? This is important, given what we have seen to date.

One specific issue about which many other Deputies and I are concerned is the congestion on the N7. This results in a significant cost, both economic and social, to those who are stuck in their cars day in and day out, sitting in traffic jams between Naas and Newbridge. Have there been discussions about the infrastructure that is required along motorways and national roads

to facilitate the roll-out of electric vehicles? What is the Government intending to spend on this area? Which Department will address this issue? Will it be the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport or the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment?

It is a scandal that in this day and age the Government continues to spend money on school prefabs. It spent €100 million over the past six years on prefabricated classrooms. When is this going to end? When will prefabricated classrooms become a thing of the past?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Infrastructure is necessary for the proper functioning of our society but the Taoiseach and Cabinet committee D have failed in this elementary task. They have failed on housing, the children's hospital, broadband and the provision of schools. As a follow-up to the question I posed yesterday on Dún Laoghaire Educate Together, what does the Taoiseach have to say about the fact that more than €100 million is being spent on prefabricated classrooms? In many cases, students and teachers are in such classrooms for years and years. Specifically with regard to Dún Laoghaire Educate Together, the Taoiseach said that a site would be identified by the end of quarter 3. When that site is identified, will money be made available immediately so that the school community is not waiting, like many others, for a decade or more for the physical buildings to be placed on site in order to get them out of the completely unsuitable and inappropriate prefabs that they and many others have to put up with?

On the question of social housing, I will put a very particular point to the Taoiseach. His objective is to achieve social mix and deliver social housing through 10% of private developments being reserved for such under Part V. In light of this, does he think it is acceptable that developers are building that 10%, the social housing element, of their developments to

*lower specifications than those of the other apartments in the same development?* This is what we discovered happening in a major development in Dún

Laoghaire called Cualanor. The buildings look the very same on the outside but, when one goes inside, one finds that the specifications are dramatically worse. Sound-proofing, the quality of finish, the quality of the kitchens, and the layout of the buildings are to a lower specification. So much for social mix and integration. Does the Taoiseach approve of that? If he does not, what is he going to do about it?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The new all-of-Government climate action plan due out in the next few weeks will, I am sure, morph into the national energy and climate action plan we have to put together for the European Commission. In carrying out the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, certain things became clear. The first is that no climate assessment whatsoever was carried out in the formulation of the existing national development plan, Project Ireland 2040, which was only approved last June. The modelling which has been done since shows that even if all of the most optimistic projections in those plans were to be delivered, they would only result in one third of the level of emissions reductions we need by 2030. There is a gap of something like 100 million tonnes. The leaked version of the document featured in *The Irish Times* in recent days shows marginal change that will not really shift that gap. I do not understand how Government could be considering the continued use of oil and gas-fired boilers in new homes for the next six years. Their use needs to be ended sooner. The objective of increasing the number of refurbishments to 50,000 is welcome, but we do not have the workers to achieve it and, in itself, it would not close the gap we need to close. We need to close a gap of 100 million tonnes cumulatively in the non-emissions trading scheme sector between now and 2030. Will the first draft of the plan show on a per tonne basis, 1 million tonnes or 500,000 tonnes at a time, where exactly those real, realisable and realistic emissions will come from? That is what we need, not just PR but precise projections. Will that level of

detail on where the actual emissions reductions up to 2030 will occur be included when that plan is published?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies. As I have explained to the House in the past, I engage with Ministers and officials in all sorts of different ways, including through Cabinet meetings, which the Attorney General and Secretary General to the Government attend, Cabinet subcommittee meetings, at which a greater number of officials are present, and meetings with Ministers and officials.

With regard to the Project Ireland 2040 website, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, once again to ensure that it is updated. I apologise to Deputy Micheál Martin for the fact that it was not updated as it should have been. We do not need a website, however, to know what is going on. I am happy to fill the House in on what has been achieved in the year or so since Project Ireland 2040 was launched. Projects which were promised by Opposition parties for a very long time when they were in government and projects which have been demanded by Opposition parties that have never served in government are now being delivered. There are three hospitals under construction. The campus for the National Forensic Mental Health Service to replace its facility in Dundrum is almost finished in north County Dublin. The national children's hospital, which was promised for decades, is being built. The first element of that, which is in Blanchardstown in my constituency, is ready to be handed over and will be opened in a few months. The new National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire in Deputy Boyd Barrett's constituency is, at long last, under construction.

Projects that were promised by other governments for years and which have been demanded by people who have never been in government are being delivered by this Government. Eleven primary care centres will be opened this year and 26 more are in development. Quite soon approximately 130 will be operational. In education, as I mentioned, by the end of the year, 410 school projects will be completed or under construction, which will include 200 modern science laboratories and 48 upgraded PE halls. These projects will replace the 600 prefabs which were mentioned earlier in the debate. With regard to transport, works in Enniscorthy and New Ross will be finished by the end of the year and the N4 in Sligo is under construction. We expect the projects at the Dunkettle interchange, Ballyvourney and Macroom, and a few others to go to construction later in the year. The long-promised new runway at Dublin Airport is under construction. The vast majority of these projects are happening on budget, including the schools programme, the roads programme and the Irish Water investment programme.

I was asked about electric vehicles and the need to provide a much better network of charging points throughout the country if we are going to decarbonise our fleet. That needs to be done. We have tasked the ESB with leading on this, using its own resources rather than Exchequer resources. We have also tasked the ESB with increasing the proportion of our electricity generated from renewable sources from 30% to 70% by 2030. This is ambitious but achievable. That is two pretty big asks of the ESB, asking it to deliver the electric vehicle charging points we need and to double our capacity to produce renewable energy over the next ten or 11 years. Those who suggest that the ESB should take on additional tasks need to consider whether it would have the capacity to do more than we are already asking it do to, which is quite a lot.

On social housing standards, I expect any social housing being constructed by the public or private sector to meet current building standards with regard to fire safety, energy standards, soundproofing and everything else. If it does not, there should be consequences.

On climate action more broadly, I have only seen one draft of the document. I am not sure which draft ended up in *The Irish Times*.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It has been well leaked to *The Irish Times*. Perhaps the Taoiseach should read it.

**The Taoiseach:** As I have said, I am not sure which draft ended up in *The Irish Times*.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Of course the Taoiseach knows.

**The Taoiseach:** That is another conspiracy theory.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Come off it. Does the Taoiseach think we are idiots?

**The Taoiseach:** No, I just think the Deputy is a conspiracy theorist.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am not at all.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not think he is an idiot in the slightest.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is throwing the kitchen sink at everything.

**The Taoiseach:** In terms of achieving our objectives for 2030, we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 2% a year. That was done last year, for various reasons. There was a reduction of approximately 7% in CO<sub>2</sub> and of 2% in greenhouse gases more generally. We need to sustain that for the next ten years if we are going to meet our target for 2030. The plan will set out as much detail as possible with regard to how that will be achieved.

### Cabinet Committee Meetings

7. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee F, national security, last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [17458/19]

8. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee F, national security, last met. [17714/19]

9. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee F, national security, last met; and when it will next meet. [21732/19]

10. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee F, national security, last met. [21781/19]

11. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on Cabinet committee F, national security,; and when it last met. [22087/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 to 11, inclusive, together.

The committee last met on 1 April 2019 and was attended by Ministers and senior officials from the Departments of Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Justice and Equality, Health, Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Transport, Tourism and Sport, Housing, Planning and Local Government, and Defence, and officials from An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. The role of Cabinet committee F is “to keep the

State's systems for the analysis of, preparation for, and response to, threats to national security under review and to provide high-level coordination between relevant Departments and agencies on related matters". Cabinet committee G provides political oversight of the programme of policing reform.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The last time my colleague raised a question of this nature, it related to a proposal of the Taoiseach's regarding a strategic threat assessment centre. I do not know whether there has been any progress on that or whether it has been discussed. Was there discussion about the Defence Forces being below strength and the disillusionment and low morale among its members? Is the weakness of the Defence Forces taken into account when looking at national security? Has the committee looked at last week's leaked proposal of the Public Service Pay Commission to reinstate some of the allowances? I do not know if this leak has been confirmed. The proposal will not go far enough, but it may at least start to address part of the issue. I presume the national security committee relies on the Defence Forces, if representatives are in attendance, and on An Garda Síochána to carry out its work. I know those within both organisations would carry out their work diligently in the event of any national emergency, as they do at all other times. When morale is low and when people are leaving the service, however, I presume it is much more difficult to plan for national security.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The brief visit of President Trump next month appears to have been confirmed this morning. I have been very clear in my party's attitude to President Trump and his policies. However, the US is a country with which we have strong relations and connections. It is correct for the Taoiseach to meet him should President Trump wish to visit here. I find it ironic that people who have no trouble meeting and defending a dictator, who has suspended parliament and is starving his opponents, believe we should boycott the American President.

That said, Ireland is a free democracy and people must be given the opportunity to protest if they wish. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that reasonable provision will be made for the right of people to protest against the visit? The Taoiseach should raise with the President the fact that Ireland is supportive of and firmly committed to the European Union and that we do not like the current policy of the US President and Government which seems to be undermining the role and status of the European Union. That was evident in his recent embracing of Hungary's Prime Minister, Mr. Orbán, which was a clear snub to the European Commission and the EU generally. That matter should be raised. Will the Taoiseach ensure that the security arrangements are appropriate to our traditions and that we do not accept any unreasonable requests in this regard?

Separately, during the European Parliament election campaign, it has become clear throughout Europe that the effort to undermine free democracy continues. The very close connection between the Putin Government and the extremes of both right and left is more obvious than ever. While it took a long time, the Government eventually stopped opposing our calls for measures to counteract anti-democratic interference in Irish elections. Will the Taoiseach commit to speeding up this work to ensure we reduce the risk of the types of abuse seen elsewhere? At a minimum, will he demand and, if necessary, legislate for complete transparency in online political advertising for which Deputy Lawless has long campaigned?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I put it to the Taoiseach and Deputy Micheál Martin in all seriousness that President Trump is a threat to our national security and global security. Any sane and sensible person would say that is true. He is brazen in his attempts to sabotage efforts to deal with climate change. He is brazen in his campaign to arm brutal dictatorships like the

Saudi regime. He is brazen in legitimising the illegal annexation of territory which belongs to the Palestinians in Jerusalem and land that belongs to Syria in the Golan Heights. The list of Israel's crimes goes on. Is it not the case that at every level President Trump is a danger to the world? Is it not simply giving licence and legitimacy to his toxic politics which encourages the growth of the far right across the world? Is the Taoiseach not concerned that elements sympathetic to that far right agenda in Ireland and to President Trump will be emboldened by his visit? If the Taoiseach cannot see that, he is not being honest in looking at the impact of President Trump globally.

I protested outside the Russian embassy when the Russians were engaged in bombing the hell out of Chechnya, and I did not see Deputy Micheál Martin there.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I have condemned the Russian President.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** So have I. Please do not have backhanded or dishonest-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** No. The Deputy is wrong.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Similarly, I would be very critical of the measures taken by the regime in Venezuela. That does not mean I think President Trump and the US military are part of any solution-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What does that have to do with it?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----to dealing with the problems that exist in Venezuela. It is up to the Venezuelan people to sort out the crisis in Venezuela and not President Trump and the US military.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I wish to make a point. I was not referring to Deputy Boyd Barrett at all.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy for that clarification.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It was mainly people on the Sinn Féin platform who had a very strong support for Venezuela.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for their questions. I was asked about the establishment of the new national security analysis centre. By the end of quarter 2 of this year we anticipate having the following actions done: the appointment of the director of the national security analysis centre, which position has been advertised; identification and securing of premises; procurement of IT systems; staffing of the centre; and the signing of memorandums of understanding with the partner agencies, which are Garda intelligence, Army intelligence and the National Cyber Security Centre. This is very much a co-ordinating role bringing together the work of Garda intelligence, Army intelligence and the National Cyber Security Centre, but not seeking to undermine or control the work they do.

On the Defence Forces, I understand that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has received the Public Service Pay Commission report. The Minister is considering it and intends to bring it to Cabinet in the next couple of weeks. I understand it proposes increases in certain allowances that are unique to the Defence Forces, which may assist us in retaining more people in our Defence Forces - the Army, the Naval Service and the Air Corps. These will be in addition to pay restoration and pay increases that are already well under way.

The visit of President Trump has been confirmed. Of course free speech, free assembly and the right to protest are essential in any democracy and must be provided for. When we meet in Shannon in early June, it will be an opportunity for us again to discuss some important issues. I can once again explain why Ireland is so much in favour of the European Union and why we are committed to membership of the European Union. I will again try to make the case for a strong European-American partnership in trade, the economy and security. I am sure we will also discuss Brexit. Once again I will try to explain our perspective on Brexit and also our commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change.

On the electoral process and disinformation, we established an interdepartmental group in December 2017 to consider issues arising from recent experiences in other democracies with regard to the use and misuse of social media by external, anonymous or hidden third parties. The group's membership included Departments and organisations responsible for the relevant policy areas. Its first report was published in July 2018 and found that the risks to the electoral process in Ireland are relatively low but cannot be discounted. However, the spread of disinformation online and the risk of cyberattacks on the electoral system pose more substantial risks. This is in line with the European Commission's findings and recent international experience.

The report included a number of recommendations to close gaps and to offer a way forward. The report was brought to Government where it was noted. It was agreed to follow two next steps: the regulation of transparency of online political advertising and the expediting of the establishment of an electoral commission, which is long overdue. The report recommends that these matters be considered in the first instance by way of a consultation involving relevant stakeholders across industry, academia, political parties, the media and civil society.

A public consultation on the regulation of transparency of online political advertising was launched on 21 September, inviting submissions from all interested stakeholders. The submissions received provided the basis for the open policy forum on the issue held in December. The aim of the forum was to identify policy solutions that respect the right to freedom of expression and relevant EU law while promoting the transparency necessary to open political discourse in a democracy that would protect electoral processes from hidden influences and disinformation, and build trust in a democracy. The forum featured participation by a variety of speakers, including from the media and political spheres, online companies and digital platforms, the advertising industry, academics, civil society and the European Commission. The group, taking into account the discussions of the forum and the submissions received from the public consultation, is considering the next steps that need to be taken on the issue.

On EU level initiatives, the European Commission and the European External Action Service prepared a joint action plan on disinformation which was adopted in December. The action plan focuses on issues associated with disinformation activities and creating an integrated approach among EU institutions and member states. As part of its operational measures, the action plan has called for the formation of rapid alert systems anchored in each member state by a national contact point. This was established on 18 March and has three key functions: a clear system for alerts and notifications on disinformation, the ability to share analysis and trends, and the facilitation and exchange of best practice and lessons learned.

## Cabinet Committee Meetings

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee A on the economy last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [18734/19]

13. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if rural issues are allocated to Cabinet committee A on the economy; and when it last met. [20553/19]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the economy will next meet. [21770/19]

15. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee A on the economy last met. [21782/19]

16. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee A on the economy last met. [21850/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 12 to 16, inclusive, together.

Cabinet committee A covers issues relating to the economy. This includes rural issues under the action plan on rural development, covering the period 2017 to 2019.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has commenced work on the next phase of rural development policy from 2020 onwards. It will seek to strengthen rural economies and rural communities, particularly in light of the emerging issues such as Brexit, climate adaptation and new technologies. The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Michael Ring, is keen to ensure the best possible engagement with rural communities in the development of the new policy and has asked his officials to organise a series of consultation events with stakeholders in May and June.

Cabinet committee A covers issues relating to jobs, the labour market, competitiveness, productivity, the digital economy and pensions. Of particular relevance, the committee has overseen the development of Future Jobs Ireland, which was launched in March. It will oversee the implementation of this initiative.

As with all policy areas, rural issues are regularly discussed at full Government meetings, including two weeks ago. It is at these meetings that all formal decisions are made. The most recent meeting of Cabinet committee A took place on 12 November.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Cabinet committee A concerns the economy. In this instance, it is all about Brexit. Has the Taoiseach talked to Prime Minister May in the past week or so about the recent options she has suggested she will put to the parliament in Westminster? What does she hope to achieve from that? What other measures might she be considering that may help Ireland and its economy in the event of Brexit?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach has resumed the policy, last seen in the run-up to the 2016 general election, of commenting regularly on how everything is brilliant in society and how the Government is responsible for everything positive. Whenever anyone raises any concerns, he goes straight into his hyper-partisan model of behaviour, the type of model that has reduced Westminster politics to its current sorry state. In a difficult situation, the Taoiseach only ever played the man and never the ball. We saw this again yesterday with what I would term his frankly pathetic refusal to address Deputy Michael McGrath's point about the implications of dramatic over-expenditure on a range of projects.

It is only a couple of months since Fine Gael's messaging priority was to announce in the Dáil that it would expose every promise by the Opposition and demand full fiscal information. Now, we are in the position in which the Government has adopted a kitchen-sink strategy to campaigning, whereby allocations of billions of euros are being announced and Ministers are refusing at point blank to explain where the money is coming from. The Taoiseach has even gone so far as to involve our European Commissioner in the unprecedented breaking of the tradition of the Commission refusing to make funding announcements during campaigns. There was plenty of time before the campaigns. We have been lobbying hard on behalf of the suckler cow herd and beef farmers.

When will we see the exact list of projects re-profiled due to the major over-expenditure on the children's hospital and the broad fiscal impact of the broadband decision? As the Taoiseach will be aware, the Secretary General of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform listed a range of projects, including schools and primary care units, that would have to be delayed or cancelled if the full cost of broadband had to be paid and if the €345 million for the children's hospital was to be found. Is it still the Taoiseach's position that the Brexit-related hit on the public finances, the additional funding for the hospital and the broadband plan, and the overruns in the health service will all be managed without anybody noticing?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** If this House has any purpose at all - I suspect the public sometimes wonders whether it does - it is to see crises coming down the line and act to prevent them. This month in 2013, at a meeting of the finance committee, I suggested to representatives of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Government that the moves to bring large global property investors into Ireland pursued by the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, would very likely lead to the return of the boom-bust cycle in property and to more property bubbles. The council and the Minister dismissed this as very unlikely at the time. Yesterday, the OECD, which is not a left-wing think tank, confirmed that bringing in those investors has recreated the conditions for the property bubble that we warned about six years ago at that meeting. What does the Taoiseach think about that warning? Does he believe the Government might put up its hands and say it may have made a mistake and that inviting the investors in may not have been the best idea, that the investors may not have assisted in having a sustainable housing sector, and that they may be, as the OECD is suggesting, contributing to the housing crisis and the unaffordability of housing, which is now an economic problem? It is not just a social crisis; it is now an economic problem and an existential threat to our economy in terms of our not being able to house our workers. We do not have anywhere to house the additional workers we need. A large number of people, never mind those rotting on housing lists and those whose incomes are just above the threshold under which they must be to get on a housing list, are totally lost. Their rents are more than the repayments on an extremely high mortgage, and getting a mortgage is completely impossible. As the OECD pointed out, the only way out of this is credit, which would be dangerous. We are in a complete cul-de-sac. The only way that cul-de-sac can be unblocked is if the State intervenes heavily in the housing sector to provide not-for-profit housing that individuals can afford.

**The Taoiseach:** I hope it is now evident to everyone that the economy is performing very well again this year. We know this from the labour force survey figures released by the CSO yesterday. It shows there has been a net increase in employment of 81,000 in the past year. There are now 2.3 million people working, more than ever before. The unemployment rate has fallen below 5%, representing a 14-year low. Long-term unemployment has fallen below 2%, to 1.7%. These figures are much better than we expected. Employment is now growing

at twice the rate it was this time last year. That is an extraordinary economic performance, notwithstanding the risks and headwinds we are sailing into. It shows an economy that is doing well and that is being well managed. There is no better test of a Government's economic competence than employment rates, incomes and living standards. These are all very much going in the right direction.

The improved economic figures will have an impact on the public finances. We are confident that we will, once again, record a budget surplus this year. We will, once again, be able to reduce our national debt this year and we will be able to make the first deposits to the rainy day fund, provided that the economic performance is sustained and that Brexit does not blow us off course. That is an enormous uncertainty, even still.

It is intended that, in the middle of June, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, will make the Summer Economic Statement. That is an annual statement that has been made to the House probably for five or six years. It will set out the revised numbers and projections for growth, revenue and expenditure. It will also set out the surplus.

On my meetings with the UK Prime Minister, Mrs. May, I last spoke to her in Paris last Wednesday. She gave me a rough outline of the announcement she made yesterday in terms of a new plan to secure ratification of the withdrawal agreement. It is likely that I will meet her again in Brussels next Tuesday, when Heads of State and Heads of Government are due to meet again to discuss the outcome of the European elections. I am not sure whether she will attend but, if she is, I will certainly make sure to speak to her once again.

The OECD's economic outlook, published yesterday, highlighted in a section on Ireland the risk of a boom–bust cycle developing if it is associated with a surge in credit growth. We know that the previous boom–bust phenomenon was largely credit driven. People were investing and spending money they did not have or earn. It was money that was borrowed. That is what we need to guard against very much in the period ahead.

At present, there is no evidence of inappropriate or excessive credit growth in Ireland. On the contrary, net mortgage growth to households grew at a modest 1.4% in the year to December 2018 but we do need to guard against the risk of a return to excessive and easy credit. I note that many who predict another crash are the same individuals who call for more credit, borrowing and debt. That should be borne in mind.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am not calling for more credit.

**The Taoiseach:** The macroprudential rules are specifically designed to reduce the likelihood of a boom-bust cycle re-emerging. The report, in particular, warned of the increased vulnerabilities of the Irish commercial property sector, given the increase in foreign investment. The Department of Finance is very much aware of this issue and monitors it closely. Indeed, it was one of the reasons we increased stamp duty in the budget two years ago in order to slow growth in the commercial property sector and to encourage growth in the residential property sector and in civil and public infrastructure, and that has happened. It should also be recognised that there are advantages in accessing foreign as opposed to domestic bank funding, most notably, the reduced risk to our own domestic banking sector. The OECD outlook noted that growth in Ireland is expected to remain robust, notwithstanding several risks, including Brexit and those related to the construction sector, which I mentioned earlier.

**Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

**Early Childhood Care and Education Funding**

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** I appreciate that this matter has been selected and that the Minister, Deputy Zappone, is in the House to deal with it. The community in Mountbellew will also appreciate the fact she has stayed to listen to the case I am going to make and, hopefully, she will have some good news for me.

I want to raise the urgent situation at the Mountbellew community childcare centre in County Galway. The centre has applied for a Pobal grant to fund a much-needed extension. The centre can currently cater for approximately 50 children but there is a significant waiting list to access the centre. Due to this waiting list, 30 additional children are currently using an interim measure of the loan of the national school gym, which, as I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, is not an ideal solution and not easy to manage. The children spend hours in their national school gym, where they have no access to rest areas. Even with this, many children in the community cannot access the centre because it is at maximum capacity.

There are many families whose children are not able to access their local community preschool programme. As we know, attending a preschool in their locality with peers who they will begin national school with is an advantage all our children should be afforded. Children in the area are forced to attend preschool in satellite towns and, even with this, they are only able to access limited days. Parents in this situation have been told their children are not advancing as well as hoped due to their limited attendance.

The centre urgently needs to be afforded this Pobal grant. The matter warrants immediate review. Investing in this centre makes economic sense. We must be able to facilitate parents to work and contribute while our children, the future generation, are nurtured in the best environment possible. This is rural Ireland. This is the generation working full time, bolstering our economy. I have been contacted by so many parents and members of the public from the Mountbellew area regarding this pressing matter. One email from a concerned father really rang a bell with me. He said that, in January of this year, he and his wife queued outside Mountbellew community childcare centre from 5.30 a.m. to try to get their daughter a place for September, only to be told there was no room at the inn and no space. This is because the childcare centre needs this extension urgently.

Mountbellew is fortunate to have a childcare centre of this calibre. All the emails to me from parents have noted the professional nature of staff and the loving, caring and nurturing environment. It speaks volumes that the majority of staff working there have been there for many years and continue to deliver the highest standard of care, with a continuing innovative approach.

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. A key priority for me as Minister is to ensure all children can access early learning and care and school age childcare that is affordable, accessible and of high quality. My Department supports the growing sector through the provision of capital funding where it is most needed. After decades of low levels of investment in early learning and care and school age childcare in Ireland, we are finally making progress. Over the past four budgets, investment has increased by 117%, rising from €260 million in 2015 to €575 million in 2019.

Assisting childcare providers in extending their existing childcare services and establishing new childcare services has been one of the key areas of focus for my Department's capital programmes. Each year my Department reviews the capital programmes as a whole and determines the priorities for early learning and care and school age capital grants. The capital strands have been made available to achieve the strategic priorities for 2019 as determined by the Department, having regard to the funding available, the current state of the sector, learning from previous capital programmes and feedback and input from key stakeholders, including childcare providers and Pobal.

In 2019, I have secured a capital budget of €9.6 million for the sector, which will enable a focus on increasing the number of places available and supporting the transition of services to the forthcoming national childcare scheme. I have allocated €6.1 million of this funding for the 2019 early learning and care and school age childcare capital programmes. This funding will be delivered in three strands. First, €4.23 million will be delivered under strand A, which will offer grants of up to €50,000 to early learning and care providers for the creation of new places for 0 to 3 year olds, where demand for these is clearly evidenced. Second, I have allocated €875,000 to strand B, which will offer individual grants of up to €15,000 to aid community and not-for-profit early learning and care services in addressing fire safety issues. Third, there will be €1 million for strand C, which offers individual grants of up to €20,000 to school age childcare providers for the creation of new school age places where demand for these is clearly demonstrated.

I remain committed to assisting all childcare providers, both community and private, in providing world-class childcare and meeting demand for childcare places. As the Deputy will be aware, the application window for the capital programmes closed on 27 March 2019 and the appraisal process for applications is currently under way in Pobal. As I am sure he can appreciate, in the interest of fairness and equity, I am unable to comment on any service's capital application. However, I assure him that all applications for funding will be appraised in a fair, thorough and impartial manner. In accordance with principles of fairness and equality, no favour will be shown to any individual service or services, and all appraisals will be undertaken on the basis of the content of their applications for funding alone. Decisions are due to be delivered to applicants in June 2019, with the aim that capital works can begin as soon as possible following this. The results of the appraisal process, including the final decisions, will be communicated to providers directly following their completion.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** I acknowledge the Minister's reply. I fully understand she cannot tell me about any project today. I again compliment her on fighting a good battle in securing such money at the Cabinet table for such projects. I know she realises that the up and coming generations are the people we have to nurture and care for. I have made a strong case for Mountbellew. I am sure it will come within the remit of that funding. Basically, what I have been doing here today is making the Minister fully aware of the importance of that facility to the town. It has a wonderful and progressive community and it is one of the liveliest towns in the west, which is very much community-focused. The childcare centre is very much part of that community and people know their children are being nurtured and cared for by good people in a good centre. Indeed I welcome the funding that has become available to several projects in the Roscommon-Galway constituency. I will not labour the point. I sincerely thank the Minister for being here and for listening. I fully understand that she cannot make commitments on the floor of this House, but now she really knows the importance and significance of Mountbellew childcare centre and the pressure it is under. I appreciate the Minister's time today.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** It is very helpful for me to hear the Deputy's commentary concerning the Mountbellew childcare centre, particularly the way in which he describes the quality of provision for the children and the incredible commitment of the providers, the staff and the professionals. It is so important for us and for me as Minister that they stay there and continue to do that work. I know it can be challenging at times. We are working to ensure that their terms and conditions can improve with the investment as well as directing capital investment to create additional spaces.

As the Deputy can appreciate, calculating of the number of places required and allocating money for the necessary investment is not an accurate science. However, as I tried to describe in my response, we are trying to learn from all the stakeholders involved, especially local communities. We use a very special type of science called the geosparsity index, also utilised by Pobal, to get a sense of where the gaps in capacity are. The Deputy has raised, in such a clear, articulate and passionate way on the floor of the House, the issues facing this centre. This helps us to be aware not only of that centre but also of potential capacity issues in the wider area he refers to. I am very grateful that the Deputy did this today.

### **Disability Services Provision**

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to discuss this matter. While I will refer to Dublin Central, the issues facing parents of children with special needs who are trying to access the relevant services is not confined to that constituency. I acknowledge the progress that has been made compared with the situation for children with special needs years ago. I also acknowledge those who work with children with special needs, especially in schools. In my experience in schools, I have seen the frustration of staff and parents. They know the needs of the children. They know the services that are needed and which will make a difference. Without the timely and appropriate services that a child requires, the situation worsens, the child regresses, and the needs become greater. Everybody agrees on the need for timely and appropriate services.

I have a particular case which brought all of this to light. I will not use the child's real name. I will call him Tom. He was born in 2005. Some months ago his parents had a feedback meeting with the clinical psychologist concerned. It was confirmed that Tom has autism spectrum disorder. The assessment of need identified what was needed: occupational therapy, OT, psychological services and speech and language services. The parents also received the service agreement, one part of which reads:

Under the Disability Act I am to provide you with a Service Statement specifying the Health Services which will be provided to [the boy in question] to address the needs identified in the Assessment Report. The Service Statement is based on a number of factors including the needs identified in the Assessment Report and the resources available to provide the services required.

Having consulted with you and potential service providers, I regret to inform you that the services outlined in the Assessment Report as required to address the needs identified for [the boy involved] are not available at present.

That is the reality. I also found out that there are no OT services for children over the age of 12 in Dublin Central. There is a waiting list of at least two years for child psychological servic-

es, and the waiting list for speech and language services is unknown. The recommendation of the psychologist was for the parents to get private services. The Minister of State can imagine the dilemma. Every parent wants to do the best for his or her child. It is a horrible scenario in which a child will get services if a parent has money but the child will not get those services he or she does not. I know the Minister of State's views on this. A child's special needs should not be dependent on the parents' ability to pay. The service level agreement did say that referrals have been made to the primary care service etc., and provided further information. However, we know the reality of the waiting list for OT, speech and language therapy and psychological services.

I will refer to the situation of another young boy who is ten or 11 years of age and has major behavioural issues. Eventually all the players came together. It was obvious that the needs of the child had to be addressed. Otherwise the situation would worsen considerably. The range of services that came together for this child was amazing. Why do we not have a central point of co-ordination for this? About six services were involved here. At the end of the day the child decided not to pursue services, with the backing of the parent. In this case a service is available but there is no compulsion. I know that to engage we must have the agreement of the individuals involved, but who is going to provide encouragement and support so that the parent and the child will engage? I am not being negative, but I know from my own experience of young people that if the child does not engage, we are storing up problems for the future.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I thank Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan for raising this very important issue. I am well aware of her genuine concern for children with special needs in the Dublin Central area. Disability services in Dublin Central are delivered through a combination of directly provided HSE services and statutory, non-statutory and private providers. A wide range of these services are provided to children with special needs on behalf of the Dublin north city and county HSE community healthcare organisation, CHO. Children's services are provided through multidisciplinary teams. and assessment and ongoing therapy are provided to meet their prioritised needs.

A Programme for a Partnership Government commits to improving services and increasing supports for people with disabilities, particularly for early assessment and intervention for children with special needs. However, at the core of the issue Deputy O'Sullivan raises is the fact that challenges concerning therapy services remain. The Government and I acknowledge that more therapists are needed to reduce waiting times for children and their families and to increase access to vital therapy assessments and interventions. Funding for an additional 100 therapy posts was secured as part of budget 2019. A commitment to recruiting these posts is reflected in the HSE national service plan for 2019. The 100 therapy posts provided for in budget 2019 have been allocated to each of the community healthcare organisations to recruit on a phased basis. Dublin Central is situated in community healthcare organisation 9, which has been allocated a total of 16 posts. Each CHO is finalising the allocation of these posts across its network area. The posts are being recruited on a phased basis and the target date for all posts to be in place is the end of the fourth quarter of 2019.

In particular, this initiative will have a positive impact on the waiting list for assessments of need under the Disability Act 2005. It will also drive implementation of the progressing disability services for children and young people programme through new staff appointments to reconfigured multidisciplinary geographically based teams. The progressing disability services for children and young people programme requires a reconfiguration of all current HSE and HSE-funded children's disability services into geographically based children's disability

network teams, made up of teams for early intervention and school-age children aged zero to 18. This programme aims to achieve an equitable national approach to service provision for all children based on their individual need and regardless of their disability, with service provision close to where they live or where they go to school. Some 56 children's disability teams have been established and it is envisaged that the remaining 82 children's disability network teams will be reconfigured from existing services in 2019.

There is a high demand for early intervention services in the CHO area 9, especially in the Dublin north city and county area. The service is working proactively with the HSE national disability office to meet this need. The Government will continue to work with the HSE to ensure that therapy posts are recruited as quickly as possible and the remaining children's disability network teams are reconfigured this year in line with progressing disability services.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** When I listen to the Minister of State, I must ask myself how much satisfaction will the parents of those children or those of other children with special needs get from his reply. I acknowledge that progress is being made but I return to the point that services must be timely and while we are waiting on the reconfiguration and the posts to be filled, children are missing out on a service which, if it were available to them now, would have a really important impact on their recovery and ability to get on with their lives. I accept that progress is being made but I also make the point that urgency is needed because children are falling through the cracks at the moment and the situation is worsening.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, gave a very interesting presentation in the audiovisual room last week or the week before. It brought it all together for me. We were given a nice, glossy information booklet for parents of children and young people with special educational needs. I have that book to hand and there is a lot in it, including information for parents, children and young people with special needs. It covers a range of topics including definitions, assessment, supporting roles and organisations that support children. That book also refers to a number of other publications. However, all of us in the audiovisual room had faced situations showing that what is contained in the book is not being delivered. There is a disconnect between what agencies and Departments claim to be happening and available or what is supposed to happen or to be available and the reality. The reality is that those services are not there when parents in that situation look for them. Alternatively, they are told there is a waiting list and no parent wants to wait for a service they know is vitally needed for their children. Booklets like that are false advertisement as they give out false information. They are raising parents' hopes that all they have to do is check this leaflet, ring that organisation and they will get the service. I do not think that is fair.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I absolutely take the Deputy's point about the two families she mentioned, their expectations and the urgent need for services. We all share a common desire to have the best possible policies and services for people with disabilities, children in this case. Both personally and as Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, I want every child with additional needs to have access to the necessary supports in every aspect of their lives to enable them to achieve their full potential, maximise their independence and live a rich and fulfilling life. This includes ensuring that therapy services are available on an equitable and accessible basis to all children regardless of where they live, the school they attend or the nature of the disability. A key priority for the HSE in north Dublin city and county is to improve the waiting times for early intervention services through the reconfiguration of the network teams and a revised model of care for children's speech and language therapy, psychological services, occupational therapy, social work, physiotherapy and other specialist child mental health ser-

vices.

This year's budget has allocated €1.9 billion to the HSE disability service plan. This is the highest in the history of the State and constitutes an increase of 7.5%. This will fund the provision of a wide and complex range of services for children with disabilities, including the provision of the 100 new therapy posts across disability services for children through the HSE and voluntary providers. This will continue the Government's commitment to maximising the potential of children with disabilities through the provision of high-quality therapy assessment intervention.

I fully acknowledge the concerns that Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has articulated to the House today in respect of services for children with disabilities in the Dublin Central constituency. I sincerely hope I have been able to address her concerns and I will address them. The HSE has assured me that it is a priority to ensure the recruitment of 100 therapy posts for children's services in 2019. I take on board the Deputy's points, will follow up on them, and thank the House for the opportunity to address this issue.

### **Disability Support Services**

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Tá mé buíoch don Cheann Comhairle as ucht deis a thabhairt dom an t-ábhar seo agus an buachaill seo a lua ar urlár na Dála inniu. I am grateful to the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this urgent, emergency situation on the floor of the Dáil Chamber today. This is a story that has been reported in some media outlets today. A child has been in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda for approximately 13 days but it is not hospitalisation this child requires. The child urgently requires residential care for at least a portion of time. He also needs further support from the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, and from whatever other disability services are available. I am not confident that the child has received all of the medical and associated services he requires, particularly in recent weeks. I strongly urge Deputy Finian McGrath, both in his role as Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues and in his role as Minister of State at the Department of Health, to try to bring the hospital and disability sides of the HSE together.

I have been informed that this matter has been escalated to national level within the administrative structure. I am now escalating it to the national level of the Dáil. One side needs to talk to the other. There is no complaint about the hospital but it is not the place for him and, as I understand it, he does not need to be there but there is nowhere else for him to go. When this case came to my office and the media reported on it, it turned out that other, similar cases have happened or are happening. That is frightening. Services are not there when they are needed in this particularly urgent and critical situation.

I will not say too much more because I want to leave it as general as possible. I have already discussed the matter privately with the Minister of State. I gave him some more information about it which I will not put on the floor of the Dáil but I hope the Minister of State appreciates the urgency of the matter and the officials who make decisions, under the Minister, will be able to make the right choices for this child in conjunction with his parents. The parents are waiting for services. A particular service was supposed to be discussing matters with them this morning and that fell through for some reason. I was very disappointed to hear that did not happen. Another service interviewed the family on Friday and, as I understand it, that service does not have a place at the moment. It was very disappointing that what was meant to happen this morning

did not happen. I strongly urge the Minister to do something. It is really urgent.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and particularly for the manner in which he raised it. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the issue.

I am aware of the urgent case of this child which has been the subject of media attention this morning. While it would not be appropriate for me to go into the specifics of any individual case here in the House, I can say that I have been advised by the Health Service Executive that the child in question was brought by his parents to the emergency department in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** That is not the case.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Okay, right.

I also am advised by the HSE that this child does not require hospital care. However, I have been assured that the community disability services in the CHO 8 area are actively addressing this issue and exploring all possible options in securing appropriate services for this child as a matter of urgency. The Government's ongoing priority is the safeguarding of vulnerable people in the care of the health service. We are committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities, which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. Significant resources have been invested by the health sector in disability services over the past number of years. This year alone, the HSE has allocated €1.9 billion to its disability services programme. This is an increase of about €314 million in the lifetime of this Government since 2016.

As part of its ongoing service provision, the HSE will provide more than 8,500 residential places this year to families in need. In fact, residential services make up two thirds of the disability budget. Our policy is for people with disabilities to be supported to achieve their full potential in order that, where possible, they can live ordinary lives, in ordinary places, doing ordinary things. Residential placements are provided on the basis of need

*2 o'clock* and within available resources. The HSE engages with families to ensure that those with the greatest need are prioritised. Where residential placements are not immediately available, the HSE provides supports for families including day and respite services, home support and personal assistant services, early intervention services and multidisciplinary supports for children and adults. The need for increased respite and residential facilities is acknowledged and I accept that point. However, the HSE continues to work with agencies to explore various ways of responding to this need as it arises and in line with the budget available.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I appreciate that the Minister will not go into too much detail on this issue. The child was originally brought to the hospital in respect of a medical matter. I am not a doctor, but I agree that he does not need hospital care in Our Lady of Lourdes. However, there is no doubt that he needs further support from CAMHS and occupational or other appropriate therapists. I provided the Minister of State with the full details of this case prior to the debate. On behalf of the family, I beg him to do everything possible to get this child out of the hospital and into an appropriate setting. He does not belong or wish to be in the hospital and his parents do not want him to be there, but there is nowhere else for him to go. It is important

that this be treated as a top priority. We know that there are significant deficiencies in this area generally. This child has fallen through the cracks of HSE services over the past year and a half. I met him and he is a lovely child, but he has autism and needs strong support to be provided immediately. I cannot overemphasise the pressing and urgent need for this child to be provided the appropriate support now. I am begging the Minister of State on behalf of the parents because that is what they want me to do. They want the child to come home when the appropriate interventions have been made and appropriate therapies given and that needs to happen as soon as possible.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I accept the Deputy's point that there is an urgent need and that this must be a top priority. I am aware of the details and will deal with this issue directly. We all share a common desire for the best possible policies and services for people with disabilities, including autism, and particularly in the case of children with special needs. In my capacity as Minister of State, I want everyone with additional needs to have access to the necessary support in every aspect of their lives to enable them to achieve their full potential, maximise their independence and live a rich and fulfilling life. I wish to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by this and other families. I have been assured by the HSE that it continues to liaise with the family to resolve this issue. I fully acknowledge the concerns raised by the Deputy in respect of this child. I have been further assured by the HSE that it is actively addressing this issue and exploring all possible options in terms of securing an appropriate service for the child as a matter of urgency. I will ensure it is treated as an urgent matter.

### **Homeless Accommodation Provision**

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House to take this Topical Issue matter. I agreed to a substitute dealing with it in his place, but it is an added bonus that he is present.

We hear much about homelessness in Dublin. Obviously, as a consequence of its size and population, it has more homeless people than Galway. However, there is a crisis in housing in Galway. Very few social houses have been built there over the past seven or eight years, leaving a significant deficit. Many decent families cannot get permanent accommodation. In all my time in politics, I have never seen as dire a housing situation as that which currently prevails in Galway city.

Every Monday, I hold a clinic in the city which is attended by a large number of people. The extraordinary thing is that more than half of those who come to my clinic each week raise issues related to the housing crisis. In most cases, they are on the HAP scheme or renting and their landlord wants them to vacate. The first thing my staff and I do in such a situation is to ensure that the tenant has checked with a body such as Threshold to ensure the order to quit is valid. We then contact the city council.

These families have no particular issues other than the lack of a house. I have always accepted that many of the homeless people on the streets require significant social backup and may have challenges such as addiction problems. Those are not the people to whom I refer.

There are currently 53 families, or approximately 200 people, in emergency accommodation. We should consider the nature of emergency accommodation in Galway. In the summer time, there are no hotel or bed and breakfast spaces, so the council uses student accommodation

that is vacant for the summer. When autumn comes, the student accommodation is required and families are put back into hotels and bed and breakfasts if and when they become available. Of course, in a growing city, that is becoming more problematic. One particular hotel closed and all of the families living there had to move out, some into bed and breakfasts. One of the parents asked me how she could feed her children with a proper healthy diet and not takeaways, given that she could not cook for herself or her family in the bed and breakfast. There is a crisis in Galway. People do not know where to go. In some cases, they move in with family members. However, if the family member is in local authority housing, the local authority has complete control and may decide that they are not permitted to share the accommodation because it would be overcrowded.

When will we ensure that everybody in this country has access to proper, permanent accommodation? We are ruining the lives of young people in particular, who are moving from school to school and place to place. Children are only young once. The dislocation they are experiencing may be causing a social problem the consequences of which we and their families will reap in the future.

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Supporting individuals and families experiencing homelessness is a priority for the Government. Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, is being implemented to deliver a range of measures to address homelessness and increase the supply of all types of housing - social, affordable and private. By 2021, some 50,000 new social homes - not including those delivered under the HAP - will be provided and housing output generally will be progressively increased towards the target of producing 25,000 new homes per year through all channels available to us. Galway City Council has a target of delivering almost 1,100 new social homes between 2018 and 2021 through build, acquisition and leasing initiatives.

The focus of the Government is to prevent homelessness to the greatest extent possible while ensuring that pathways for individuals and families in emergency accommodation are secured as quickly as possible. Budget 2019 reflects the commitment of the Government in this regard, with an allocation of €146 million for the provision of homeless services by local authorities in 2019, an increase of more than 25% on the 2018 allocation. In addition, €60 million extra in capital funding has been provided for additional emergency accommodation and €1.25 billion for the delivery of new social homes.

Last year, almost €5.9 million was spent on homeless services in the west region, where Galway city is one of four local authorities. This expenditure is expected to increase this year. Additional capital funding is also being provided to increase the supply of emergency accommodation, reducing the reliance on hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation for accommodating families.

It is a matter for Galway City Council and the homelessness management group of the west region to co-ordinate the delivery of services across that region. Two family hubs, which provide more appropriate emergency accommodation for families, will open during 2019. One of the hubs will open this month, with a further hub, which is a pilot utilising modular homes, will open later this year. These two hubs will provide accommodation for 27 families, who will be supported to identify and secure independent tenancies from there. The Department is also funding a dedicated place finder officer to work with households experiencing homelessness to identify and secure a HAP-supported tenancy in the private rented sector. The place finder

service allows for advance payments of a rental deposit and up to two months' rent to secure a property.

We also must recognise that many of those experiencing homelessness, particularly among single adults, require additional supports. The Deputy referred to this. In that context, it is important to note that the Government's national implementation plan for Housing First was published last year. This plan, which is a joint initiative between my Department, the Department of Health, the HSE and the local authorities, sets a target total of 663 additional Housing First tenancies, with targets set for each local authority for the period of 2018 to 2021. Under the plan, 30 Housing First tenancies will be created in Galway city over the next three years, with a further 19 tenancies in Galway county. A tender process is under way in Galway to deliver these tenancies.

My Department will continue to work closely with all local authorities, including those in Galway, to prevent homelessness to the greatest extent possible, to ensure that adequate emergency accommodation is available for those who need it and to support all individuals and families in emergency accommodation to secure long-term sustainable housing solutions.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** When one is working at the coalface, one often finds that the Government complicates things that are quite simple. I wish to make a comment on the place finder officer and ask the Minister for his response. According to the city manager, or the chief executive of the city as he is called now, there are not enough houses in Galway to accommodate everybody in the city. That is not to mention the 40,000 the Minister is planning to bring into the city. God knows where we will house them. Regardless of how many place finders are finding places, if there are always more people looking for accommodation than there is accommodation available, the best place finder in the world cannot solve the problem. That is my experience. It is not the fault of the people because the houses and accommodation do not exist.

The people I am talking about today do not have the social problems the Minister mentioned. Most of the people who contact me are families with children whose tenancies came to an end for legitimate reasons and not due to anti-social behaviour. They have good tenancy records but just cannot get housing.

In addition, when one drills into the figures one finds in the mix that people from the Traveller community face major barriers regardless of their history of good behaviour or how decent they are. The vast majority of the people who contact me are fantastic people. They face massive prejudice in society. All types of sociological reports say it exists. It is nearly impossible for them to compete in the open market for rented accommodation.

We have been hearing for years about how many houses will be built. There is no point in buying houses because that is one in and one out of the system and does not provide extra housing, and Galway is short of housing. How many additional social houses were built in Galway city in the past five years and are available as accommodation now?

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I recognise the concerns the Deputy is raising and he is right to raise them. It is right to speak about what is happening with homelessness outside of Dublin. Dublin gets much of the attention because it has a significant problem, particularly when it comes to families in emergency accommodation. However, that problem is experienced in other parts of the country as well.

I spoke about the two different challenges we are facing with homelessness. One relates to

people who are rough sleeping or adults in emergency accommodation who have more complex needs. The other relates to families who because of housing insecurity and the inability to find a home find themselves in the unacceptable situation of being in emergency accommodation. I have tried to simplify delivery. One of the things I wanted to do in Galway was merge the two local authority areas so when it came to matters such as housing there would be one force, unit or dedicated group with political responsibility to drive it. That was rejected by Members of the Dáil, but that has not stopped me from appointing a task force to the two authorities to drive delivery across both local authorities. The problem does not observe the local authority boundaries.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I represent both the city and the county.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Perhaps the Acting Chairman will allow me to reply without interruption.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Let us get this right. I represent both the city and the county and the problem I raised today is in the city. It is a great deal more acute in the city than in the county.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I cannot allow the Deputy to speak again. He is breaking the rules.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** The point I am making is that the problem is not only in the city but also in the county.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It is ten times more acute.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Part of the reason it is more acute in the city is that some of the people with problems in the county find themselves in the city. We have heard this directly from the people who provide the services on the ground. I have been to the area and I have met people from the NGOs that provide emergency accommodation services and the local authority officials. I am aware of the issues. That is why I appointed a task force to deliver newly built social housing in Galway. That has not been happening to the degree that is required. New builds were built last year. We publish the figures every year on our website. I do not have the five-year figures with me now. New homes were built last year in Galway, although not enough. That is the reason there is a task force to manage both local authority areas.

With regard to emergency accommodation, we have increased the money for services for the homeless. There will be two new hubs in Galway this year because families are in emergency accommodation in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation when they should not be. One of the hubs will open this month.

We also have the place finder service. That service helps families who find it difficult to access accommodation for a variety of reasons. It is not their fault. The place finder helps to identify and secure the accommodation and can help with the rent and deposit where that is required. It is a very important service and it is being utilised.

The Deputy referred to people looking for Traveller accommodation or people from the Traveller community seeking accommodation-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** They are looking for houses.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** There is a prejudice in this regard. That is why we have a dedicated piece of work in the Department looking at this as well as a dedicated budget line. However, we do not use just that budget line. We also use HAP and normal social housing delivery. We are doing different things to try to help. I recognise that we must do more and that is why the task force is in place and there are extra hubs and extra funding.

The Dáil adjourned at 2.20 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 28 May 2019.