DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
DÁIL ÉIREANN
TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(official report—Unrevised)

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Dé Máirt, 11 Meitheamh 2019

Tuesday, 11 June 2019

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

Paidir.
Prayer.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: For those of you who perhaps have not noticed, I wish to announce for your information that four Members of the Dáil have been elected to the European Parliament, namely, Deputies Clare Daly, Frances Fitzgerald, Billy Kelleher and Mick Wallace. Pursuant to the European Parliament Elections (Amendment) Act 2019, the Deputies will cease to be Members of the Dáil when they take up their seats at the first sitting of the European Parliament, which is likely to be on 2 July. Accordingly, vacancies will exist at that time in the constituencies of Dublin Fingal, Dublin Mid-West, Cork North-Central and Wexford.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders’ Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for that announcement and of course we wish them well. We will miss them greatly in terms of the Dáil.

In 1990 the then Minister, Mary Harney, introduced a ban on smoky coal within Dublin city and the Dublin region. This had a radical and beneficial impact on public health and the environment. It saved many lives and improved the quality of health of many others. This was followed by extending the ban to other cities and across the country but not in all locations.

It took courage at the time to do that and it took some foresight. Thirty years later it is incomprehensible that the last two Fine Gael-led Governments have failed to introduce a nationwide ban on smoky coal despite numerous promises to do so. An Environmental Protection Agency report on air quality, which is published in The Irish Times today following a freedom of information request by Jack Horgan-Jones, reveals the degrees to which towns that are not covered by the smoky coal ban are above World Health Organization air quality guidelines on a continuous basis. That is at many locations across the country. Enniscorthy has the highest observed concentrations of this pollutant among all monitoring stations in Ireland. We can look at Longford town, Roscommon and other areas and see a similar situation. The pollutants PM2.5 and PM10 are 20% higher there than in Dublin and Cork. This begs the question of why the lives, health and quality of health of people living in Longford or Enniscorthy are less im-
Professor John Sodeau from UCC has stated in dramatic - probably melodramatic - terms that Enniscorthy risks becoming the New Delhi of Ireland. He warns that the public health and climate change consequences for those areas not covered by a ban on smoky coal are very severe. He also refers to air particulate pollution that attacks every cell in the body and carries carcinogens, heavy metals, and acids. This pollution and harmful material is not just confined to those towns. It spreads across the country and moves about. Professor Sodeau makes the central point that air pollution is inseparable from climate change. Up to 1,500 lives are lost annually as a result of diseases linked to this particular air pollution. I ask the Taoiseach to read the accounts in The Irish Times today of Paula Freeman, an athlete from Enniscorthy, and Breda Flood, a 33 year old GAA activist from Gorey, who cannot watch sport outside during the winter period. We have had promises from previous Ministers, including Phil Hogan and Deputies Kelly and Naughten on this. Recently, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, delayed introducing this nationwide ban, 30 years after the first one was introduced. I ask the Taoiseach why there is such inertia, indecisiveness, lack of courage and conviction in such a vital public health matter, and why the lives and health of people living in those towns without a smoky coal ban are less important to the Government than those that were covered a long time ago.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy and I join him in congratulating Deputies Clare Daly, Fitzgerald, Wallace and Kelleher on their election to the European Parliament. I understand that they will continue to be Members of this House until 2 July, but all of us would like to be associated in extending our congratulations to them as they move to a bigger House and new roles.

It is very much Government policy and a Government priority to improve the air quality in our cities, towns and rural areas. We want to do so not just because of health, because we know that poor air quality has a very severe impact on people, children in particular, with respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, emphysema, asthma, but also as part of our climate action agenda. We can improve air quality in two major ways. The first is restricting or banning the sale of smoky fossil fuels, and the second is reversing some of the errors made in the past in encouraging people to buy diesel cars, which we now know are very bad for air quality because of nitrous oxide and sulphur oxides and nitrogen oxides, SOx and NOx. The Deputy will be aware that though the then Minister, Mary Harney, did a very good thing for the people of Dublin in banning smoky coal, a subsequent Government did a wrong thing by encouraging people to buy diesel cars, which we now know are very bad for air quality and have damaged the health of our children.

The difficulty we are running into is that a number of coal firms have indicated that they intend to challenge the introduction of a nationwide smoky coal ban, which is Government policy. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, has received advice from the Attorney General on this. He is determined to reduce the levels of harmful particulate emissions from residential heating and is working to finalise a legally robust plan which will improve air quality, particularly in our cities and towns. Banning the use of smoky coal would have a positive impact on public health, especially in urban areas, but a number of coal companies have indicated that if the Government attempts to extend the smoky coal ban, they will challenge the new ban as well as the existing ban that applies in Dublin. If that challenge were successful, not only would we fail to go forward, we may even end up going backwards. These companies have indicated that they would challenge the ban on the grounds that we should also ban other fossil fuels, such as wood and peat, which they claim do as much
harm in terms of air pollution as smoky coal. We have to give this proper consideration. We do not want to end up voting for the law of unintended consequences whereby we extend the ban but the ban in Dublin gets reversed. We also need to bear in mind the possibility that peat and wood do the same level of damage to our air quality and that we would therefore have to apply the same policy principles to them.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I find that response pathetic and incredibly weak. The ban on smoky coals was introduced in this city nearly 30 years ago. Thirty years later, the Taoiseach is saying that the Government cannot do the remaining 20% because the coal firms have said they will take legal action. The smoking ban would never have been introduced had we been afraid of the threat of big tobacco coming after us legally.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Hear, hear.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That threat was there all the time, but we went ahead. The bottom line is that, for any Government, public health is number one. Where the evidence is demonstrable in terms of the improvement in air quality and in improving people’s lives where respiratory diseases and cancer, in particular lung cancer, are concerned, there is no argument. This Government should have taken them on without any hesitation.

We are down to the last 20%. It is shocking when one reads the accounts of people’s daily lives in the towns where the ban on smoky coals does not apply. The comparisons between those areas of the country and those areas where the ban has been in place for a long time are significant. Health is being damaged as a result, but the Taoiseach is saying that he must give it due consideration. In 2013, the then Minister, Phil Hogan, stated that he wanted to see a ban on smoky coal throughout the country within the next three years. This was formalised by a later Minister, Deputy Kelly, at an air policy conference in 2015 where he stated that the ban would come into effect in 2016.

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

Deputy Micheál Martin: He was followed by another Minister, Deputy Naughten, confirming to the Dáil in April 2018 that a ban would come into effect incrementally. In 2019, the Minister, Deputy Bruton, has deferred. Has the Government not been considering the ban for the past six years? Announcements from the Government mean nothing. When the Dáil declared a climate emergency, the Taoiseach stated that actions were what were important. There is an absence of action in this situation, as well as a complete indecisiveness and a lack of any firm response to the vested interests, which want to continue damaging our health.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry if the Deputy is angry and upset once again, but the answer I am giving him is the honest one, and that is that we have to give due and full consideration to this matter. Before the Deputy brought in the smoking ban in the workplace, I am sure that he gave full consideration to the legal consequences and legal risks before proceeding.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It did not take him six years.

The Taoiseach: I doubt he just went ahead without knowing the risks and preparing a defence.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We knew that there was a threat all the time. We were not fazed by it.
The Taoiseach: The same applied for me when I published the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015. We studied the law and we made sure that we would be on robust grounds if it was challenged in the courts. We examined what happened in other jurisdictions-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Did Phil Hogan not study the law?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Surely that means that-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Big Phil said it six years ago.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----where it was challenged in the courts. I think-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: But this ban was introduced 30 years ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: Perhaps if the Deputy can calm down for a moment and contain-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Are these the new lines, Taoiseach? The spin doctors have fed him new lines.

The Taoiseach: ----himself, I can give him something that might be of use and some help to him, that is, to advise him that powers do exist for local authorities to make decisions in this area.

Deputy James Browne: They do not.

The Taoiseach: For example, recently Wexford County Council unanimously passed a motion calling on the Minister to extend the smoky coal ban to Enniscorthy. However, it is open to Wexford County Council to now make an order to begin the process to ban the burning of a substance under provisions of the Air Pollution Act 1987.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: So there are existing legal provisions that allow cities and counties to pursue the ban if they so wish-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Two minutes ago, the Taoiseach said that the Government could not legally do it.

The Taoiseach: ----notwithstanding the risks.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: So, Wexford County Council should take the initiative.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This is farcical.

Deputy James Browne: The council will take this up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I congratulate Deputies Clare Daly, Wallace, Fitzgerald and Kelleher on their election to the European Parliament.

This is national carer’s week. It is a week in which we acknowledge and recognise the tens of thousands of carers throughout the State for the contribution that they make to people’s lives,
to families and to communities. We can safely say that they are everyday heroes without whom many people would not enjoy a decent or normal life. We can all agree that they are to be commended on their efforts and work.

Therefore, it is with much regret to learn as we did recently that the HSE has effectively suspended the allocation of home help hours to new applicants. It has applied this suspension at a time when more than 6,000 people are waiting for access to home care supports. The Taoiseach knows as well as I do the impact this will have on older people, people in need of care and people with disabilities and their carers, as well as their wider communities. The Taoiseach also knows it will place further pressure on hospitals by compounding the problem of delayed discharges. The HSE says it has taken this action to balance the budget for 2019 but curtailing home help hours is a false economy. Directly employed home help, in particular, represents exceptional value for money. It allows older people to remain in their homes or to be safely discharged from hospital. If patients do not have enough home help hours, they are forced to remain in hospital at a substantial cost to the HSE or their families are forced to pay privately for home care support. Neither of these options represents value for money. Both of them end up costing more in the long run. We consistently hear from patients in hospitals who cannot be discharged because of a lack of home care supports. There are people who want to go home, and who could and should be going home, but adequate supports are not in place. Despite a budget increase of €10 million for this year, the number of hours being provided is simply not enough. I could say “we told you so” because Sinn Féin warned that the allocation would be inadequate. We argued for an extra allocation of €40 million in respect of home care packages to make adequate provision, but the Government chose not to listen. I would like the Taoiseach to commit to looking at whether funding can be found in the HSE budget to fund additional home help hours that can ease budgetary pressures elsewhere. I ask him to do that quickly because it would be money very well spent and it would save the HSE money in the long run. At a time when there is rightly a focus on budgetary practices, we need to focus on things that work and on real and prudent public spending.

The Taoiseach: This is national carer’s week. I want to join my voice to those of the Deputy and others in this House who have paid tribute to carers, who do enormous work for their families and others. The Government and society place enormous value on the work of those who care for people in their own homes and in other homes. Those are not just words; in the last couple of years the Government has made some substantial changes to improve the supports that exist for carers. The carer’s support grant, which had been cut, has been fully restored and is being paid at the moment. Indeed, there is no means test for that. Over the course of the last three budgets, we have increased carer’s allowance and carer’s benefit by €15 a week. The means test for carer’s allowance is considered to be one of the fairest and most generous in the developed world. Last year, we extended free GP care to people in receipt of carer’s allowance and carer’s benefit because we believe carers need to be cared for too. Now they can attend their doctors without having to pay consultation fees. There has been an increase in provision for respite. Approximately 12 new respite houses are being opened across the country to provide more respite for people. This allows carers to take a break, which is important for their physical and mental health. I reiterate that there has not been any cut in funding for home support and home care. In 2018, the total budget was €418 million and 15.7 million home support hours, including intensive home care packages, were provided. Almost €30 million extra has been provided in this year’s budget, which allows us to increase the number of home help hours being provided from 17.5 million to 18.5 million. An additional 1 million hours are being provided this year. This is quite a substantial increase. As is always the case when it comes
to health and social care, however, there is no limit to demand. We have to manage within our means. We have to make sure that we come in on budget and that we provide for this appropriately.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach has not addressed the central point of my question. It has been confirmed by the HSE that between now and early November, there will be a reduction or a restriction on the number of new or additional hours allocated. As I said in the course of my question, this comes at a time when more than 6,000 people are on a waiting list for home care supports. Very often, as the Taoiseach knows, those will be the only supports afforded to carers. I asked the Taoiseach a simple question and he recited what he regards as his record of support for carers. Carers, of course, will dispute many aspects of that but I am asking him about this particular issue. Will he go back to the HSE management and tell them that it is not acceptable to say to people who are waiting for home help hours that they may not receive any assistance until November? That is months away and anybody who cares for an older person or a person with a disability will tell the Taoiseach that it is not sustainable to ask them to wait for months on end for additional supports. The HSE said it is taking this action because of budgetary pressures but this is a classic case of penny wise and pound foolish.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** A cut of this nature runs against the grain of Sláintecare and the stated intention to keep people in the community. It runs against the ambition of dealing with delayed discharges and overcrowding in our hospitals. It makes eminent sense for the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, to go back to HSE management and tell them that the money has to be found and that 6,000 people or more cannot be left in the lurch, particularly now, during National Carer’s Week.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I ask the Taoiseach to make a commitment to the people he has commended so warmly that he will go back to the HSE and that the money will be found for home help hours.

**The Taoiseach:** If it is a case of comparing records, one only has to look at the difference north of the Border when it comes to the income supports provided to carers, where Deputy McDonald’s party served in government for a long time. I am happy to compare that record at any point in time.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** That is an old record.

**The Taoiseach:** The budget for home help and home support in 2015 was €306 million. This year it is €446 million, so in the course of only four years there has been a 50% increase in the budget for home help. People will argue that providing extra money for home help takes pressure off hospitals and reduces hospital costs but there is no evidence that this is the case because notwithstanding a 50% increase in home help funding in the past four years, savings have not arisen further up the line in hospitals, unfortunately.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That is because people are stuck in hospital.

**The Taoiseach:** What appears to be logical does not often turn out to be the case when one actually does it.
**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is not drilling down into those figures. There is a story behind them.

**The Taoiseach:** An extra €30 million has been provided for home help this year and that will provide an extra 800,000 home help hours this year.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Where are they?

**The Taoiseach:** There will be 800,000 more home help hours this year than last year. It is necessary for the HSE to manage that additional resource appropriately.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** There will be no more hours until November. Where are they?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Bríd Smith is next.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I hope it is okay for me to remain seated. I have a broken leg and I find it hard to stand. I did not fall off a swing and I am not suing anybody.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Very funny.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I want to raise something that is very urgent and important; much more urgent than anything of that nature. This month two new reports on what is happening to our globe were published. Ice is melting in the Arctic at six times the rate that was previously thought according to a report from the University of Edinburgh, which was published in early June. The global plant survey from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew shows that plant life is becoming extinct five times faster than was thought to be the case. In northern India as I speak, poor people who have no shelter or access to water are dropping dead in the worst heatwave the country has ever experienced, with 40°C heat recorded in Delhi and 51°C recorded in other parts of northern India. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with us in a serious conversation about what the hell his Government is doing in response to climate change. I heard him on television, following the green wave in the recent election, saying that he gets it and understands it but I ask him to give us evidence of that. In the past week, since the results of the election were announced, I discovered that the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment has slapped a money message on the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018 that we have painstakingly tried to rescue from the hostage position in which it has been held by this Government. There are also money messages on Sinn Féin’s Microgeneration Support Scheme Bill 2017 and the Green Party’s Waste Reduction Bill 2017. These money messages seriously need to be questioned because they involve small amounts - beer money, really - compared with what the Government is willing to spend on defending Donald Trump or on a botched tendering process for broadband. Some €26 million was spent on tendering for broadband and at least €10 million was spent on the Trump visit. The Government is using tiny amounts as an excuse to block serious Bills, which would send a message to the fossil fuel and plastic industries and tell them that the game is up and that they will have to start paying for the damage they are doing to the planet. The State seems to be fond of slapping taxes on little people whether in the form of water taxes, increased carbon taxes, or increased property tax. Why the hell is the same attitude not taken to the global corporations that irresponsibly continue to dig up and burn fossil fuels and to develop the plastics industry which is destroying our oceans and their ecology? Everybody else pays for it while they do not, yet they continue to make vast profits. Rather than attacking my Bill in a sentence again, is the Taoiseach seriously saying that it is worth blocking these measures to pay some kind of lip service to industry while holding back this country’s progress towards being a leader...
The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I am very sorry to hear about her injury and I hope she makes a speedy recovery.

Deputy Brid Smith: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy asked for practical examples of the kind of climate action Government is taking, so I will give her a few.

Deputy Brid Smith: I did not ask for that. I asked why the Taoiseach is blocking these other actions with money messages.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said that there is no evidence that Government is taking climate action. I will respond to that-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Here comes a lot of hot air.

The Taoiseach: -----by giving her examples of four practical measures taken in recent weeks. I signed a joint letter with President Macron to build a Celtic interconnector between Ireland and continental Europe which will allow us to expand our renewable energy sector and to share it with Europe.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It will allow us to import nuclear energy.

The Taoiseach: Irish Rail issued the initial tender for 600 hybrid electric vehicles as we start to move towards an electric rail fleet and to electrify the lines to Drogheda, Maynooth and Celbridge. Dublin Bus received the first of its low-emission buses.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Three buses.

The Taoiseach: All buses being procured for our cities from now on will be low-emission vehicles. Just today Cabinet voted to publish legislation to outlaw the manufacture of microbeads in Ireland. There are four practical examples-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Taoiseach has forgotten about smoky coal.

The Taoiseach: -----of measures taken by Government in recent weeks that will make a difference. These will be followed by the publication of the Government’s climate plan in the coming weeks. Government wants sensible climate action, which will reduce greenhouse gas emissions rather than legislation which pays lip service to doing so. It wants sensible climate action that reduces greenhouse gas emissions but which does not cost us our jobs, make us poorer, or make us less secure. The difficulty we have with the legislation the Deputy is putting forward is that it will not reduce greenhouse gas emissions at all. We all know and acknowledge that we will need to continue using natural gas for decades to come. Some 30% of our energy mix is now renewable and, with major effort, we can get to 70% by 2030. We will, however, still need to use natural gas as part of our energy mix for decades to come. Homes and businesses around the country will still use natural gas as part of their energy mix. The question arises, if we will still have to use natural gas, a proposal which any reasonable person or climate scientist will accept, should we use our own or should we use natural gas imported from shale sands in North America, from the Middle East or from Russia? We believe that, if we have to use it, it makes more sense to use our own on grounds of cost, energy security and
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Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is nonsense. It is utter nonsense.

The Taoiseach: ----because of the risks and costs of transport. We have accepted other legislation. We have accepted two Private Member’s Bills, one from Deputy McLoughlin to outlaw fracking and another from Deputy Pringle to end investment by State funds in fossil fuel companies. We have, therefore, demonstrated that we will support legislation which makes sense, actually works and will not do unintended harm. Unfortunately, the Deputy’s Bill does not meet those tests.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to pick up on something the Taoiseach mentioned. He said he wanted climate action that does not hurt jobs, make people poorer or make things more severe for people. Bord na Móna workers are facing redundancy and replacement into other jobs. In the words of their union official, they are being treated abysmally because we are making a bags of the first challenge of just transition for both the workers and the community.

On the issue of our natural gas, three days after this House declared a climate emergency the Government issued a licence to Exxon Mobil and the Chinese state oil company - those nasty communist Chinese - to drill for oil 200 miles off the Kerry coast. If they find it, more than likely it will not come back here because it would not be economically efficient or suitable to do so. It would not be commercially viable. Therefore it is not our gas. It is gas this State is selling off for a pittance to global corporations, which the Taoiseach refuses to challenge. He refuses to challenge them because he is being lobbied by them consistently. These companies are in the oil, plastics and energy industries. Until the Taoiseach takes this seriously he has no credibility. If he does not challenge the corporations, nobody will believe him when it comes to climate action.

The Taoiseach: I have not been lobbied by them at all. I said earlier the Government wants to take sensible climate action, that is, climate action that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and helps us to save our planet, but at the same time does not cost jobs, does not make us poorer and does not make us less safe. The difficulty with some of the Deputy’s proposals is that they potentially would make us poorer, cost jobs----

Deputy Bríd Smith: Like the Bord na Móna workers.

The Taoiseach: ----and make us less energy secure without reducing greenhouse emissions by any amount.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not true. How can the Taoiseach say that?

The Taoiseach: We are transitioning Bord na Móna from a peat company to one that is involved in waste and renewable energy. It is exactly what we should be doing because we are phasing out peat production in the State.

Deputy Bríd Smith: And treating workers abysmally.

An Ceann Conhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: As part of the just transition, there is a voluntary redundancy scheme for Bord na Móna workers which has been oversubscribed. In addition, packages are being put in place for the retraining of workers.
Deputy Noel Grealish: People living in rural areas have long had the perception that they have been largely forgotten about by successive governments. There is a growing regional imbalance between Dublin and rural Ireland. Over the decades Dublin has received enormous investment with more than €750 million on the port tunnel, €728 million on the red and green Luas lines, €368 million on the Luas cross city, and upwards of €3 billion to be spent on metro north. I could go on and bore the House with more figures relating to past and future investment in the capital. I know the Taoiseach will say that much of that investment is of benefit to the country as a whole.

I do not want the Taoiseach to come back with the usual story that the Government invested €300 million on the N17-N18 Gort to Tuam motorway, as if that alone should satisfy us for another few decades. The people of the west deserved that investment.

On a recent visit to Galway, the Taoiseach visited Connacht Rugby’s facilities at the Sportsground on College Road. Connacht Rugby has been very successful in recent years, reaching new heights, including winning the Pro 12 title in 2016. It has just completed a great season earning it a place at the top level of European club rugby. It is unique in a sporting context in the west in that it actively goes out the length and breadth of the province to help develop the game in local communities and schools. It is now embarking on a very ambitious project, costing €34 million, to build a state-of-the-art facility not just for Galway but for the west.

The Taoiseach personally has seen the facilities of Connacht Rugby, as has Deputy Micheál Martin, the leader of Fianna Fáil. He knows they are not suitable for the calibre of team Connacht Rugby has become. The CEO of Connacht Rugby, Willie Ruane, and the head of operations, Karl Boyle, have done excellent work in bringing the project through the planning process to where it is now ready to proceed without delay.

The only issue now is with funding. Connacht Rugby has applied for €20 million from the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. I again stress that the project is not for Galway but for the west, which we rightly deserve. No major investment has gone into sporting facilities in the west on a scale of funding elsewhere. Croke Park received €103 million and Aviva Stadium got €191 million. Other grounds, such as Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Thomond Park, Semple Stadium, the Gaelic Grounds in Limerick, and Irish Independent Park in Cork, also received funding.

There is another very worthwhile development at Oranmore-Maree GAA club, which is embarking on an ambitious €4 million project. It recently won the all-Ireland intermediate club hurling championship. I compliment the chairman, Mr. Gerry Rabbitte, and the manager, the great Gerry McInerney, on their success.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The club proposing to construct a sports centre of excellence in Renvyle and expand existing facilities on a 34-acre site that will include four new playing pitches and a covered terrace, in addition to attractions such as a public playground and looped walkway.

These are two projects of major importance to the west. Will the Taoiseach commit to allocating Connacht Rugby the €20 million it needs and Oranmore-Maree the €2.4 million it needs from the sports capital fund?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Taoiseach catch those balls?
**Deputy Noel Grealish:** It is the Dublin Deputies who were heckling.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Heckling in support.

**The Taoiseach:** I assure the Deputy and the House that the Government is investing public money in infrastructure throughout the State, in every county, province and city. As one travels the country, everywhere can be seen new schools, new school buildings and extensions. They are being built in every county. The sports capital programme is specifically designed so that every county gets a fair share of the funding. It was not always like that but it has been for the past seven or eight years. The rural fund goes entirely to rural areas, and the vast majority of the urban fund has gone to urban areas other than the capital. On airports, for example, there will be an announcement in the coming days. Funding for airports does not ever go to Dublin or Cork. It only goes to the smaller airports. With regard to transport, and I know the Deputy does not like me saying it, but it is true, the single biggest------

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** Like a broken record.

**The Taoiseach:** The biggest single investment in transport in Ireland in recent years was the Gort-Tuam motorway. It cost more than the Luas cross city and Newlands Cross projects combined. That happened in the west. The largest investments occurring at the moment are the N4 to Sligo in the north west, and major projects in Cork due to start before the end of the year, examples being at Dunkettle and Ballyvourney-Macroom. There is a very fair spread of investment around the country.

I agree with the Deputy on one point. There has been underinvestment in sports infrastructure in Connacht, including Galway. The kind of investment we have seen in Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, and which we saw at Thomond Park, Limerick, and Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Cork, has not happened in Galway or the west. Funding for major sports infrastructure in the west, including Galway, is long overdue. I acknowledge the Deputy has a real interest in this issue, as do the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, Deputy Naughton and others. I had the pleasure to visit Connacht Rugby a couple of weeks ago.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Before the local elections.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** The Deputy did too.

**The Taoiseach:** Having done so, I can see that what has been planned is very ambitious. It is much more than a stadium project. It is also about meeting facilities and conference facilities that will be of benefit to Galway. There ought to be performance spaces. It is a really exciting and good project. It is much bigger than a sports project. What I cannot do, unfortunately, is give the Deputy a commitment on that right here and now but there is €100 million set aside in the major infrastructure sports fund. The applications are in. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, and the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, will make the allocations before the end of the year.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That fills us with confidence.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I thank the Taoiseach for his response. This is going to be a political decision. All the applications are being assessed by the large-scale sports infrastructure fund team in Killarney, but there ought to be political intervention to make sure there is regional balance and that the west gets the State aid it deserves. The stadium proposed to be built in
Galway has gone through the planning process. It is not going to go ahead unless €20 million is received from the Government. If more money is needed, will the Government commit to allocating more to the fund to ensure there is regional balance and that it is not just a matter of Dublin? There are two applications in from the west. One is from Connacht Rugby and the other is from Oranmore-Maree GAA club. I ask that the Taoiseach ensure proper funding is put in place to ensure the two much-needed projects get the funding they deserve.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Grealish makes a very strong case on behalf of Connacht Rugby. We will see what happens later in the year when the allocations are made. There is €100 million for the country. This is one of the major projects that is competing for funding.

I am sorry to say that there will not be an increase to the €100 million fund. I expected to be called on today to defend the Government from criticisms that have been made of it by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC. The Government increased spending last year by 6% when the council suggested spending should have increased by 5% or less. We need to take that criticism on board, think about it and respond to it. However, what we see in the House today is part of the problem. Fianna Fáil is demanding more money for pay and pensions for the Defence Forces and it is not the case that Fianna Fáil has particular regard for the Defence Forces because it will be asking the same things for another group next week.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I asked about banning smoky coal.

**The Taoiseach:** An Independent Deputy is looking for more money for sport. Sinn Féin is looking for more money for home care. This Government is holding the line on spending and it is difficult.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Was that the case for the children’s hospital?

(Interruptions).

**The Taoiseach:** The Government is keeping the barbarians from the gates.

(Interruptions).

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can Members please contain their excitement?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** We are trying to contain our disbelief.

**An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** The business this week shall be as set out in the first revised report of the Business Committee, dated 30 May 2019. In relation to today’s business, it is proposed that No. 11, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the enhanced partnership and co-operation agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Cuba, referral to committee, shall be taken without debate; and No. 34, statements on Northern Ireland shall conclude within 85 minutes if not previously concluded. Statements shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, of ten minutes each with a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

In relation to Wednesday’s business, it is proposed that expressions of sympathy shall be
taken after Leaders’ Questions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes each, and shall be followed by Questions on Promised Legislation and contributions shall not exceed two minutes each. Nos. 12 and 13, motion re Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009, continuance of certain provisions, shall be discussed together and shall be brought to a conclusion within 85 minutes if not previously concluded and any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately. Speeches shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, and shall not exceed ten minutes each with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

In relation to Thursday’s business, it is proposed for No. 37, statements on sustainable tourism, that statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each with five minutes for all other Members and a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are three proposals to be put to the House today. Is the proposal for dealing with today’s business agreed to? I call Deputy Naughten.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I object to the schedule for today’s business if it does not include provision to discuss the HSE decision to suspend the allocation of new home help hours for the next five months. The action taken by the HSE is contrary to the programme for Government and the HSE’s own service plan and needs to be reversed immediately. It will have a serious impact on the health service and a devastating impact on older people and carers.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I ask that consideration be given by the Business Committee within the week to a special debate on the home care issue. The Taoiseach’s earlier replies seemed to indicate a lack of understanding as to what is going on when one drills into the figures. I instance the Tyco ruling of the European Court of Justice. According to the Taoiseach, the programme for Government allows a million extra hours. The Tyco ruling means that the time it takes for home help to get to a client’s location is now factored in. The allocated funding has to take account of that. That was not provided for last year. It is eating up much of the time. We need an honest and transparent debate to drill through the figures and issues relating to home help care to get a better understanding. A debate should be facilitated this week in the House for that purpose because Deputies are inundated with calls from all over the country on the issue and the degree to which it is impacting on people. It takes a bit longer for that message to get through to the Government, but that is what is happening.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Select Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment was due to deal with Committee Stage of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018 today. Instead, at 3 p.m. there will be a meeting of the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment to consider the approach the Government has taken to block the Bill. This matter is related to the Order of Business. To help the committee in its work, I ask the Ceann Comhairle whether we can seek advice from the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, regarding the constitutional position the Government has taken in this case, which I believe breaches the rights of Deputies and Senators to go about their work in the way set out in the Constitution. I am keen to know whether that legal advice is available before the committee meeting commences because I think what the Government has done is constitutionally flawed.
It has treated the Oireachtas and the representatives of the people in a way that is the worst egregious example of blocking our ability to do our work.

**Deputy Louise O’Reilly:** Sinn Féin supports the call for a special debate on the allocation of home help hours because the response given by the Taoiseach to Deputy McDonald indicates that there is not a full understanding on the Government side of the implications or the difference between the money allocated and hours delivered. Many Deputies have discussed this issue with me and I presume they have also petitioned the Office of the Ceann Comhairle. It would be in order for the Business Committee to reconvene and schedule time for that debate.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The Labour Party strongly supports the holding of a debate on this matter. The responses given by the Taoiseach do not meet the concerns that all Members are hearing in their constituencies and from organisations lobbying for carers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A large number of Deputies today submitted Topical Issue matters dealing with home care and, as such, it was not practical to consider it in that way. I wrote back to them that we would ask the Business Committee to consider scheduling time to look at this matter. If there is agreement on all sides, we will request that the committee contact the relevant representatives to see whether the debate can be facilitated. Is the Chief Whip happy with that?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** Having considered the schedule, I am happy to accommodate such a debate immediately after the sos on Thursday.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** How long will be allocated for the debate?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will work that out. As long as is necessary will be allocated, within reason.

On the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill, it is open to any committee to seek the advice of the OPLA. That is what it is there for. However, I do not think advice is needed from any quarter on the decision that a money message is required. The determination has been made that a money message is required and there is no way around that.

Is Tuesday’s business agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday’s business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday’s business agreed to?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Subject to the change.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Subject to the change, yes. More than 25 Deputies are offering on questions on promised legislation. I call Deputy Micheál Martin.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The second Scally report has been published and should be debated in the House. I ask the Business Committee to consider, and the Government to commit to, a debate on the report and an assessment of the recommendations of the first report, particularly the legislative proposals arising from it. There is still an enormous backlog of women awaiting results. That unacceptable situation was caused by the decision of the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to award a free smear as a panic response when the crisis erupted. I ask the Taoiseach to indicate when the legislative provisions dealing with the issues of mandatory reporting and full disclosure will be enacted. When will the Bill in respect of the Cervical-Check tribunal be enacted?
The Taoiseach: I am advised that the Minister, Deputy Harris, will be away on Thursday, but is happy to come to the House next week to discuss the Scally report directly and other matters related to health. We are making progress on the smear test backlog. A contract has been signed with Quest Diagnostics, which is one of the laboratories, to do the work. In the meantime, MedLab, which no longer does smear tests for Ireland, is catching up on its backlog. In one part of the country, women are now getting results in six or seven weeks, which is a significant improvement; in the other part of the country there is still a significant backlog but it has gone from 80,000-odd down to 60,000-odd and is now finally going in the right direction. I have asked the Attorney General and the Minister for Health to prioritise the tribunal legislation above all other health legislation. We anticipate having the tribunal legislation in the House this session, with the patient safety Bill in the next session, after the recess.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Report and Final Stages of the National Minimum Wage (Protection of employee Tips) Bill 2017, introduced by Sinn Féin, are due to be held in the Seanad tomorrow afternoon. This is important legislation which would make it illegal for an employer to withhold or deduct employees’ tips and would require businesses to display their tipping policy so customers know how tips are distributed. The Bill has received cross-party support to date on Second Stage and Committee Stage and has received tremendous support from the trade union movement, particularly the ICTU, and from the ONE Galway and ONE Cork organisations. This is broadly supported and important legislation which would ensure that workers’ tips are given the legal protection they deserve, and I believe it should be enacted as soon as possible. Will the Taoiseach indicate to us whether Fine Gael will support the legislation tomorrow?

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): While I totally agree with the premise of what the Bill tries to do, I cannot in good conscience agree with the unintended outcomes the Bill will produce if we pass the legislation, so no, I will not support it tomorrow. We want to ensure that tips are given to the people who receive them.

Deputy Seán Crowe: That is what the Bill is about.

Deputy Regina Doherty: A tip is a gratuity from the patron of an organisation to reward good service. We propose to pass legislation to amend the Payment of Wages Act to ensure that tips cannot form part of anyone’s wages and that tips are just that: a gift or gratuity between a patron body and a service. In addition, we have agreed with the industry a code of practice on transparency of the tips policy of each individual organisation. The outcome of Sinn Féin’s Bill would be employers managing tips on behalf of employees. It would therefore result in all tips being taxed, which would have a negative outcome for the income earnings of the people who work in that relatively low-paid industry in the first instance. It would also have serious financial implications for people’s working family payments and medical card applications. There are a lot of unintended consequences of the Bill that I do not think Sinn Féin meant.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I join others in congratulating Deputies Clare Daly, Fitzgerald, Kelleher and Wallace on their election to the European Parliament.

I return to the matter raised earlier of the ban on smoky coal because I am really concerned about the answer the Taoiseach gave to the House. I will not rehearse again the impact on my constituency of Wexford, particularly the town of Enniscorthy, of particulate matter, which is extraordinarily damaging to people’s health. Also, those industries that invested in good faith to produce smokeless fuel are now at an enormous disadvantage. If there is any suing to be
done, it is probably those industries that would feel aggrieved by a stated State policy to ban smoky coal that is now not being acted on. I see the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment is preparing to answer this. When Wexford County Council asked that the ban be extended to Enniscorthy, the Taoiseach said the council should do it itself, so the State is not willing to take on this industry and is asking a local authority to do so. Is that the Government’s answer to this matter? Surely not.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The position is, as the Taoiseach outlined, that there has been a legal challenge to the proposal to extend the smoky coal ban, which was introduced in good faith by my predecessor Ministers, as Deputy Micheál Martin said.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is there an actual challenge?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The position is that-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is it a threat to challenge or a challenge?

Deputy Richard Bruton: A threat to challenge. I apologise. The position is that the nub of this issue is whether the existing smoky coal ban, which is confined to coal, can distinguish coal from peat. Currently peat is not included in the smoky coal ban but, based on particulate matter emissions, a distinction cannot be drawn between peat and coal, so the implication of this would be that peat would be banned as well as smoky coal. That is a matter to which we must give due consideration. The question immediately following the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition was from Deputy Bríd Smith, who expressed concern about the impact on Bord na Móna of changes that are occurring on a phased basis. It is appropriate to consider the matter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is it a policy or legal matter?

Deputy Richard Bruton: An individual county council can initiate a process to have a ban in an individual town-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is unacceptable.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It can do so under existing law.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We are back to the position-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: It is the same law that is blocking others.

Deputy Richard Bruton: There is the opportunity for an individual local authority to identify a black spot but not propose extending it to the entire county.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Companies could sue the local authority.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Would they be indemnified?

Deputy Richard Bruton: It would apply to all fuels.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is this a policy matter?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is less than transparent.
Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I wanted to ask-----

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is the reality. What is the Deputy advising?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Minister should do it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He should do it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Should peat be included?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We did it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Peat was not included. There is an industrial issue.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Some 80% of it is banned.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Martin, please. Deputy Coppinger is in possession.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was being provoked by the Minister.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Is the Taoiseach and his Government willing to consider amending the sexual offences legislation, given the prosecution last week of two women in Kildare? Those two sex workers were jailed for nine months for running or keeping a brothel. Solidarity submitted an amendment to that Bill to change the definition of brothel-keeping in order to decriminalise sex workers who were simply working together, in pairs and indoors, for their own protection. This was instead of living off the earnings of anyone else but themselves. The Government refused that amendment and we have now seen the jailing of women, including one who is pregnant. It was for these reasons that Solidarity did not vote for the Bill, as it continued the criminalisation of sex workers. It is wrong to victimise people who are working in the sex industry and I ask the Minister to seriously consider adopting our amendment or a variant of it now.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I will not comment on an individual case. I can confirm for the Deputy, however, that as this is relatively new legislation, I would be happy to see its outworkings and, in the event of there being a requirement or demand for a review, I would be happy to have it done.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Small farmers and businesses, especially shop owners, have been waiting for a revised fair deal scheme for many years. The Minister of State at the Department of Health has announced that he will shortly bring forward this Bill, which was promised several times before. I will highlight what is wrong with the proposals the Minister of State will bring forward. The Department is still insisting that 100% of the value of the farm must be assessed for the fair deal scheme, as well as the family home, which is wrong. If a farmer gets sick or hurt, which is a possibility because of the type of physical work involved, the young person taking over must have been farming for three years and must continue to farm for six years. What is going to happen when young children cannot take over the farm and a wife would have no other income if she did not rent the farm, for example? That is very wrong. Has the Minister of State any regard for small farmers and rural Ireland, where people are barely surviving? It is very wrong and after all the time we have waited, is this the best the Minister of State can do?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): There was approval by the Government this morning at its Cabinet meeting to proceed with this as planned. I have
an answer for some of the matters raised by the Deputy but they are somewhat extensive for this forum. The Bill will move to pre-legislative scrutiny in the health committee, where the Deputy would be welcome to tease out the matters he has raised. The Deputy should be under no illusion but that this is a very good news story for rural Ireland, including small businesses and farmers. This has a price tag of in excess of €10 million per annum and it is, above all, an equality matter. These people should be treated in the same way as every other citizen of the State.

3 o’clock

That is to be welcomed. Whatever we do the Deputy will say there is more to be done but what we are doing is a significant step and one to be welcomed by all. I can address the issues the Deputy raised in more detail at pre-legislative scrutiny stage.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What the Minister is doing is not fair.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I return to the issue of CervicalCheck and the *ex gratia* payment scheme announced earlier this year, applications for which opened in May. I am hearing from some members of the 221+ group that they are being met with a wall of silence in terms of how this will play out. They have been told that it could be the end of the year before they find out the amount of the payment but also that there could be a further delay before that payment is made. What is needed is information to be given to the 221+ group. Some of its members are sick people. Some of the women have died and it relates to their families. There will be a tribunal and we await the legislation for that but can the Taoiseach clear the air in terms of how exactly the *ex gratia* scheme will work because I am being told there is a wall of silence around it?

The Taoiseach: I cannot but I will undertake to come back to the Deputy with some more information. On the proposal for the *ex gratia* scheme, which is a payment given with respect to the non-disclosure approved by Cabinet some time ago, a judge - I think it is Judge Ó Caoimh - has been appointed and has a team supporting him. I will make inquiries but from the Government side all the work is done and the resources are in place. If there is a delay in making awards I will have it examined to see why that is the case. It has not come back to us in terms of anything we can do to speed that up but I will check it out.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: This morning, we had another homicide on O’Connell Street. That follows a string of terrible murders in my constituency, the Taoiseach’s constituency and across the northside generally. Nearly two weeks ago I wrote to the Taoiseach, the Minister for Justice and Equality and the Minister with responsibility for communities asking if they were prepared to set up some kind of interdepartmental task force to examine the resources that hard-pressed, disadvantaged communities need, especially those that are deeply affected by serious anti-social and criminal behaviour, including these recent murders. Is that something the Taoiseach would embark on given that it was his party’s Governments that slashed spending and resources to the many community bodies in my constituency over the past eight years since 2011? As he knows, I am a director of a number of those bodies.

It was also very disappointing that when the Minister for Justice and Equality finally came to Coolock it seemed to turn into a Fine Gael type occasion in that no non-Fine Gael representatives were invited to the meeting even though many of us are members of the local joint policing committee. The reality is that Fine Gael is soft on serious crime.
An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, can we get an answer?

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: That is the problem we have and the sooner you are gone the better.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I am very happy to engage with the Deputy at any level here in the House, outside the House or at meetings. I have no difficulty with Deputy Broughan. Many of the suggestions put forward by Deputy Broughan have been helpful to me in dealing with this issue. I was very pleased to act promptly and visit Deputy Broughan’s constituency last week. I am not sure where he was on the occasion-----

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I was not invited. Nobody outside of Fine Gael on the political side was invited.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath-----

Deputy Michael Collins: No one got an invitation.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: -----who is not a member of Fine Gael, was very active on the ground.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Charles Flanagan: He remains very active on the ground in that constituency.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It was the same when the Minister went to Drogheda.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I was very pleased to meet local stakeholders in the areas of education, welfare and community development. A number of important suggestions were put forward. I would be very happy to engage with my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, to ensure what whole-of-Government approach might be taken to what is a very serious issue in that area. I was also pleased to be in the presence of the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, in Templemore on Friday last when a number of new gardaí were assigned to Garda stations in Deputy Broughan’s constituency and who have already taken up duty to ensure we can maximise efforts against crime and anti-social behaviour in the Deputy’s constituency.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: I raise the issue of Rockall in view of the unilateral illegal decision by the Scottish Government last Friday. Will the Taoiseach confirm whether the issue of fishing rights around Rockall was raised when he met the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, some weeks ago, particularly given that discussions have been taking place over the past two years between Ministers and officials? Would the Taoiseach accept that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of December 2012 decided that no rock without economic activity would confer rights on any country to declare an economic zone or continental shelf? What steps does the Taoiseach propose to take to defend the rights of Irish fishing vessels that have fished unhindered in these waters for decades? Has the Taoiseach or his Minister communicated with the European Commission as this is also a Common Fisheries Policy issue?

Deputy Margaret Murphy O’Mahony: Many west Cork fishermen fish the waters off Rockall. In the Taoiseach’s discussions with Nicola Sturgeon, did fishing in any aspect arise?
What is the current position with the negotiations that are ongoing? This is more important than squid and haddock. What is at stake is how fishermen will be treated during the Brexit process.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** On 3 April I raised serious concerns on the Sea Fisheries (Amendment) Bill with the Taoiseach. I felt it was being rushed through the Dáil without any pre-legislative scrutiny. I pleaded that we would have more time to weigh up all concerns but Fine Gael, joined by Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, voted to hand over our fishermen’s rights in the zone up to six nautical miles off our coastline. Only weeks later, we have found out that the Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine, Deputy Creed, have both received a formal letter from the Scottish Government stating that it will ban any Irish vessels fishing within 12 miles of Rockall. Irish fishing vessels have operated unhindered in the Rockall zone for many decades, fishing haddock, squid, and other species. The actions of the Scottish Government to protect what it regards as its own waters will have a detrimental effect on the livelihoods of many Irish fishermen. Will the Taoiseach intervene and achieve an urgent solution to this worrying crisis?

**The Taoiseach:** The matter was not raised at my recent meeting with the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, but it has been discussed by the Tánaiste and his counterpart, and by the Minister, Deputy Creed. The European Commission has been informed of the matter.

Rockall is a rock, essentially a sea stack in the middle of the ocean. It is uninhabitable and uninhabited, and it is not something that Ireland and Scotland should fight over. We do not have a claim to it and we do not accept any other sovereign claim to it. We believe the fishing a territory around it should be shared. The Irish vessels which are fishing in those waters have EU quota and these waters are part of EU waters. Under the Common Fisheries Policy, we believe they are within their rights to continue to fish in the area around Rockall.

The views of Scotland and Ireland have differed on this issue for some time, but we have built a strong and positive relationship to our mutual benefit over many years. In light of the most recent developments, dialogue continues between the Irish and Scottish Governments and there have been close contacts at official level in recent days to de-escalate tensions. The matter was discussed at Cabinet this morning and also at a meeting of the Scottish Government. We have agreed that dialogue should continue between the Irish and Scottish Governments. There have been close contacts at official level and these will continue. It has been agreed that a process of intensified engagement will take place, led by senior officials from both administrations. Both Governments would like to see this matter de-escalated.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** With more than 2 million houses and apartments in the State, and almost 200,000 lying empty, according to the Simon Communities in Ireland, it is about time that the Government took the housing crisis seriously. I live in County Louth, the smallest county in Ireland. Our local authority has more than 60 unoccupied houses. These include voids, where the people who once lived there have passed away, others which have been subject to compulsory purchase order, or houses which are vacant for other reasons. The local authority is crying out for help. There are thousands on the waiting list. There is also a great deal of land in Louth. For some unknown reason, however, the Government has stopped our local authority from building houses. We have the land. All we need is a bit of funding. Is there any chance that the Government could use Louth, the smallest county in Ireland, in a pilot scheme to get 60 families off the waiting list and build these houses directly? The Government keeps talking about billions of euro, but it would not cost big money to get this sorted out. I saw three houses yesterday in Dundalk. It would only take a little paint work and other works to get this
done. If the council boards up these houses, it will cost tens of thousands of euro. Let us sort out the problem.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): In the case of County Louth there is no block on allowing the local authority to develop houses. In fact, we have engaged with the council on several projects. We have more than 60 projects going through the pipeline at the moment to develop houses. The council has a large landbank that carries a great deal of debt. We are happy to work with the council on that to bring forward housing solutions, including a combination of private, public and affordable housing, if needs be.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: It is not happening.

Deputy Damien English: It is up to Louth County Council to bring forward a plan, and we are happy to engage on that.

I wish to be clear on vacancies. We have used Louth as the best example of a local authority that has tackled vacancies. The council has gone out on many occasions in recent years under various schemes through which we have allocated money. The council has been successful in bringing forward vacant houses that belonged to the private sector. The council took them over through schemes and brought them back into use. We are encouraging the council to do more of that. We certainly reward counties where that is done and Louth is one that has successfully achieved this.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I know of 60 families who need housing. I appeal to the Minister of State to come to County Louth and sort this out.

Deputy Mary Butler: The home help crisis is hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Currently, there are 6,310 people waiting for home care supports and 53,000 in receipt of supports. One in ten people who need these supports to ensure they can stay at home safely and securely for as long as possible is not receiving these vital hours. We heard recently that no further packages will be provided to deal with costs incurred from travel expenses until November. I need the Minister for Health to clarify exactly how many people will be affected by the proposed cuts. There is no doubt that any reduction in hours will push an already-stretched service to the brink.

Minister of State at the Department of Health Deputy Jim Daly: We have agreed to talk about this on Thursday. I am happy to take questions from individual Members to address direct questions. That might be the most productive way of dealing with this issue. I trust that is okay with the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Regrettably, 12 Deputies have not been reached. They will be given priority tomorrow.

Health (Amendment) Bill 2019: First Stage

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health Act 1970
and to provide for related matters.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to introduce the Bill, the purpose of which is simple. It seeks to ensure that there are regular three-year reviews into the effectiveness of the long-term illness scheme in order that changes, upgrades and additions can be made to ensure the scheme is always fit for purpose.

Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 allows for the provision without charge of drugs, medicines or medical or surgical appliances to persons suffering from a precise disease or disability of a permanent or long-term nature. These drugs, medicines or medical or surgical appliances are then provided without charge to the patient under a community health scheme known as the long-term illness scheme. The scheme means that people who are diagnosed with specified long-term disease or disability can get a range of medicines from their community pharmacy without cost.

The long-term illness scheme has been a great success since its establishment. It aids thousands of people throughout the State. However, the scheme has not been updated in decades. This means there are many different disabilities, ailments and illnesses that we now know more about and that are long-term or lifelong but which are not covered by the scheme. It is important that the scheme be monitored and reviewed on a consistent basis to determine whether it is fit for purpose and delivering for those who need it.

The absence of any review has caused severe difficulty and distress to many of those affected. They believe the Government does not care about them or want to review the effectiveness of the long-term illness scheme.

The Bill amends the Health Act 1970 to ensure the effectiveness of the provision without charge of drugs, medicines or medical or surgical appliances to persons suffering from a precise disease or disability of a permanent or long-term nature through a review every three years. A regular three-year review into the effectiveness of the long-term illness scheme would ensure that changes upgrades and additions could be made to the scheme to ensure it is always fit for purpose and that it always delivers for those with long-term illnesses.

Several Members raised the issue of the scheme not being updated in almost 50 years in April during statements on fibromyalgia. Many have raised the matter in Topical Issues debates and in other forms. I hope they will engage with and support this Bill so that we can secure the changes to the long-term illness scheme that are so long overdue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.
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Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Cuba: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the terms of the Political Dialogue and Co-operation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Cuba, of the other part, signed at Brussels, Belgium, on 12th December, 2016, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 31st May, 2019, be referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(3)(b), which, not later than 25th June, 2019, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss the confiscation of cannabidiol, CBD, products by customs officials; (2) Deputies Thomas Pringle, Pat The Cope Gallagher, Pearse Doherty and Martin Ferris - the need to discuss territorial disputes over fishing rights regarding Rockall; (3) Deputy Gerry Adams - to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to make a statement on the ECRI report on Ireland published last week which criticises Government policy failures in respect of Traveller accommodation, anti-racism laws and hate crime; (4) Deputies Denis Naughten, Mary Butler and Bobby Aylward - the need for the Minister for Health to ensure that there is a reversal of the HSE decision to suspend the allocation of home help hours to those in need of support as a result of an increase in their home care needs and to fund a new nationally negotiated contract for health care support assistants; (5) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the implications for competition distortion and workers conditions arising from the issuing of a permit for Ethiopian Airlines to operate under 5th freedom between Dublin and Madrid; (6) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the urgent need to review the application process and decision timeframes for applications for overnight respite services in Kilkenny; (7) Deputy Marc MacSharry - the need to address serious concerns within the Irish Prison Service; (8) Deputy Jackie Cahill - whether the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine will address the lack of flexibility in the appeals process following the changes to the area of natural constraints scheme; (9) Deputy Dara Calleary - the cancellation of agency contracts and curtailment of other contracts at Belmullet District Hospital in County Mayo and the serious impact of these cancellations on bed numbers and other services at the hospital; (10) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the reasoning behind Ballymun being declared a litter blackspot; (11) Deputy Joan Burton - to ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he is aware of the deteriorating quality of Dublin’s air, his plans to address same and if he will make a statement on the matter; (12) Deputy Mattic McGrath - the urgent need to extend the occupancy level of the Glenville Crisis House in Clonmel; (13) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - to discuss with the Minister for Health the need for capital funding for the development of St. Joseph’s Community Hospital, Stranorlar, Ramelton Community Hospital and Lifford Community Hospital to ensure they meet HIQA standards as well as retaining and expanding existing bed numbers in County Donegal;
(14) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss progress of the new three-school campus of Carrigtwohill community school; (15) Deputy Eamon Scanlon - to discuss flooding and flood water protection measures in Sligo; (16) Deputy Louise O’Reilly - to discuss the outsourcing of smear tests by CervicalCheck; (17) Deputy Micheál Martin - to discuss the status of phases 2 and 3 of the proposed paediatric development at Cork University Hospital; (18) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss the recent death of a person at a Galway direct provision centre; (19) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss air quality in Enniscorthy and the possible extension of the smoky coal ban; (20) Deputy Martin Kenny - tourism funding for the north west and Border regions; and (21) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to ask the Minister for Health if he is aware that 1,102 people lay on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick last month and what action is he taking to address this severe overcrowding.

The matters raised by Deputies Gino Kenny, Micheál Martin, Dessie Ellis and Marc MacSharry have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach’s Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach further to the reply to Parliamentary Question Nos. 5 to 14, inclusive, on 5 February 2019, if he will report on any contacts he has had with a person (details supplied). [21768/19]

2. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if agricultural issues or the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, were discussed when he met President Macron on 15 May 2019. [21766/19]

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his visit to Paris on 15 May 2019 and the Christchurch call to action which commits governments and online service providers to undertake a series of actions to counteract and remove extreme violent activity online. [21774/19]

4. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he met with other world leaders in Paris on 15 May 2019; and if so, the issues discussed with them. [21775/19]

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meetings in Paris on 15 May 2019. [22684/19]

6. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach his plans for visits abroad over the next six months. [22696/19]

7. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meetings with world leaders in Paris on 15 May 2019 and the issues he discussed with them. [23598/19]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

On 15 May I travelled to Paris for a series of events co-hosted by the French President, Mr. Emmanuel Macron, and the New Zealand Prime Minister, Ms Jacinda Ardern. These events were part of an initiative spearheaded by Prime Minister Ardern in the aftermath of the horrific...
terrorist attack on the Muslim community in Christchurch on 15 March.

I joined several other leaders, including Prime Minister Ardern, President Macron, Prime Minister May, Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada, President Sail of Senegal, Prime Minister Solberg of Norway, King Abdullah of Jordan and the European Commission President, Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker. Representatives of leading technology companies, including Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter, also attended.

Ireland has endorsed the Christchurch call to action, which commits governments and online service providers to undertake a series of actions to counter and remove terrorist and violent extremist content online. I attended a dinner hosted by President Macron with more than 150 business leaders, at which I outlined Ireland’s solidarity with the Christchurch call. While technology company leaders were present, I did not have specific bilateral meetings with them.

I was asked a question on contacts with Facebook representatives. I have not had any contact with the chief operating officer, Ms Sheryl Sandberg, since an exchange of letters following our brief meeting in Davos in January.

I spoke with Prime Minister Ardern about the Christchurch call and what practical steps we can take to try to prevent the spread of terrorist content online. I spoke to Prime Minister May about the latest developments on Brexit. Prime Minister Trudeau and I spoke about Brexit and ratification of CETA. President Macron and I discussed the European elections and Brexit developments. We did not discuss agricultural issues or CAP on this occasion. King Abdulllah and I spoke about the opening of Ireland’s new embassy in Amman and the strengthening of bilateral relations between our two countries.

Ireland is committed to eliminating terrorist content online and countering radicalisation through educational and social inclusion initiatives. No civilised society can tolerate a situation where extremist ideology of the type that motivated the Christchurch attack finds oxygen and spreads its poison online. For this reason Ireland was pleased to endorse the Christchurch call and we continue to engage at national, EU and international levels to ensure its implementation.

I was asked about my plans for visits abroad over the next six months. I expect to travel to Brussels for the meeting of the European Council that is taking place on 21-22 June. After the Council, I will travel to Luxembourg to visit the European Investment Bank, the European Court of Justice and have a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister, Mr. Bettel. I will then attend a meeting of the British-Irish Council in the United Kingdom during the summer in Manchester. I plan to attend further scheduled European Council meetings on 17-18 October and 12-13 December. Other visits are being given consideration but at present none is confirmed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I refer to the discussions on the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. It is very important that every opportunity is used to discuss CAP at European level over the next while because there are many challenges coming in relation to funding cuts. The agricultural industry feels a lot of pressure with regard to Brexit, how it will pan out, and what the future is going to be, particularly on the beef side of it. We have seen many challenges over the past 12 months with beef and the future of the beef industry, and there are comments coming from the European Union about decoupling payments or reducing cattle numbers. It is vitally important that the Taoiseach discusses CAP at every opportunity he has at European level. We have had a great relationship with the French over many years in discussions on CAP, going right back to our joining the European Union, and we should use every opportunity to build that
friendship further and to ensure that the advance of Irish agriculture is kept at the forefront of any discussions on CAP.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** This group of questions includes a number of distinct elements, including CAP reform, cybersecurity, Brexit, and the future of the European Union. I do not know whether we can get a bit more time on it, but there we are.

On the discussions about CAP with France, we have formed a very positive working relationship with the French Government historically on this issue over many years. The important thing is to avoid a return to the zero-sum approach to the European Union’s budget, which always leads to unreasonable demands for cuts to agriculture and rural development. This is especially acute in the context of Brexit. Will the Taoiseach explain if he has backed off his support for the letter issued earlier this year by some governments which rejected the idea of additional revenues for the Union?

Regarding the informal session the Taoiseach had, it is disappointing that he continues to support the Spitzenkandidat system for party political reasons. We need a European Commission President who will be a clear and focused leader and who will address the problems with communications in Europe generally that are evident at the moment. It is surprising that Ireland is so enthusiastically backing someone who has no record to indicate that they have these skills. Anyone looking at the record of the past seven years will know that the President of the European Central Bank, ECB, is a most critical appointment and has made far more of an impact in delivering recovery than our self-regarding Government is willing to admit. We should be clear that it would be against the interests of Ireland, and indeed Europe as a whole, if there was any attempt to return to the failed orthodoxies of the pre-Draghi era. This is a decision which is, in my view, more important than the multi-annual budget, and countries such as Ireland, which were damaged by the policies Mario Draghi eventually abandoned, need to speak up and oppose the attempt to bring back policies which could undermine both the euro and the European Union. Is it the Taoiseach’s intention to say anything on the topic of the appointment to the ECB? The Taoiseach should also be aware that there will be a major backlash if there is any attempt to put a person associated with the far right in either of the other two jobs being discussed. The politics of Orbán, Salvini, and others cannot be allowed to destroy the independent institutions of the European Union, and we need a far more robust approach to the politics these individuals are pursuing across the Union.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** As Deputy Micheál Martin has said, this is an eclectic grouping. My question is about the Taoiseach’s intended meetings for the next six months. I regard the next six months as being potentially crucial ones for Ireland’s foreign policy. There will be a new British Prime Minister, who could be and most likely will be a harder Brexiteer than the current one. As a result, there is a very strong view that a hard Brexit is more likely and we, particularly our businesses, have to up our preparations for that. The European Union is also gearing up for a series of major cyclical changes, including the election of a new Commission President and a new Council President, and the next few months will be critical in this. We are also preparing ourselves for the next round of the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which will be pivotal in areas like CAP, our demand for a change in structural funding in areas like housing, and for co-ordinated pan-European action on climate. Despite the visit of President Trump, we still have real fears about the trading impact of this nation and Europe generally with the European Union. In that context, I am interested in where the Taoiseach intends to visit and who he intends to talk to internationally in the next six months, especially during the holiday period when he might have more time to have impactful one-to-one meetings. He gave
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a list of meetings, including meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg and British-Irish Council and European Council meetings, all of which are important but all of which are routine. Has he given strategic consideration to the meeting he needs to have in the next six months, bearing in mind the crucial issues for our country that I have just instanced?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I suggest that the Taoiseach prioritise a visit to Edinburgh and that he very speedily ramp up the conversation with the Scottish Government and the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, in particular. The stance adopted by the Scottish Government on fishing and fishing rights around Rockall is, frankly, bewildering. Scotland wishes to remain within the European Union, and that position has been well articulated and mandated democratically. Scotland is part of the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP, and therefore I cannot understand, in either diplomatic or economic terms, the stance taken by the Scottish Government. This matter requires immediate and high-level attention because, as others have said, the matter of Brexit now looms and the prospect of a hard Brexit looms ever greater with the prospect of a hard Brexiteer Prime Minister in 10 Downing Street. This scenario threatens the livelihoods of fishing families directly in the here and now, raises the hackles, and raises real concerns as to what Brexit might look like and how it might play out. Scotland is considered an ally on the matter of Brexit, and both fishing communities and people beyond them are saying that if this is the stance adopted by an ally, heaven help us if we are to consider a stance that might be adopted by those who are not an ally of Ireland. Will the Taoiseach, in the course of his response, set out his contact to date with the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and if he intends to go directly to Edinburgh to raise, and I hope resolve, this issue with her directly?

**The Taoiseach:** The issue of CAP funding and reform, which was raised by Deputy Michael Moynihan, is going to be our top priority when it comes to negotiating the new MFF, which is the next five-year budget for the European Union. There are different views across the European Union. Some countries believe that we should reduce that budget, invest in other areas and tackle other problems, while some believe it is well-functioning EU programme and one that we need to protect. We are very much in the latter camp and are building alliances with like-minded countries - not just France, but also many Mediterranean and central eastern European countries which benefit a lot from CAP. The best way to ensure the CAP budget is protected is by having a very strong environmental and climate action component to it. Often the best way to succeed in a budgetary negotiation is to have two objectives rather than one, and marrying the need to protect the incomes of farmers and rural development with environmental action and climate action is our best chance to protect the budget for CAP. That means greening CAP. It means more investment in green schemes like the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, for example. Some 60,000 farmers are participating in that already, but there could be a lot more. It means funding for diversification and incentivising farmers financially to move into areas of agriculture that are better in terms of climate change and which help promote biodiversity. That is the negotiating approach we will be taking and it is the right one.

Regarding additional revenues for the Union’s budget, the Government has stated that we are willing to increase our direct contribution to the EU budget, but only if important programmes like CAP, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and others are protected.

On the Spitzenkandidaten system, I support it not for partisan reasons, but for democratic reasons. The European elections matter. When it comes to selecting who holds the most important positions in the EU institutions, we should have regard to what the people said in the European elections. On this occasion, the EPP won those elections both here and across Europe, but it could have been different.
Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is the largest party at any rate.

The Taoiseach: Had it been different, I would not have changed my position on it and would have been willing to support a candidate from a different group. The way it is going to work is that, because nobody has a clear majority or anything remotely approaching it, there will have to be a coalition involving three or four groups - the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and possibly the Greens-European Free Alliance - and the four top jobs will have to be shared out. In that regard, everyone knows where I stand. I would welcome knowing from the Opposition parties where they stand and which candidates they would support for those top jobs - the Commission Presidency, the Council Presidency, the High Representative and the Presidency of the Parliament. The Deputies know where I stand. I would love to see Mairead McGuinness as President of the Parliament. I would love to see Manfred Weber as President of the Commission. I think he would be a good one. However, I know that there will have to be a negotiation. I know it is going to be a package. If other parties have particular candidates they believe the Irish Government should support when it comes to voting in June, I would welcome their opinions. Whether the candidate is Commissioner Vestager or Vice-President Timmermans, I would like to know. It is easy to criticise but not always as easy to put forward-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach has already nailed his colours to the mast.

The Taoiseach: -----alternative solutions. I am happy to hear them.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That sounds as flexible as Boris Johnson.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What about the European Central Bank?

The Taoiseach: What we did agree at our last European Council meeting was that the position of the head of the ECB should not be considered as part of the package. It is different to the other four posts; it is not as political a post. We agreed that that would not be part of any deal, as it were. I have to say that I think Mario Draghi has done a really excellent job as head of the European Central Bank and has pursued broadly the right policies in saving the euro, keeping interest rates low and reflating the European economy. I would like to see his replacement following a similar approach to the euro and not the one that perhaps was followed by his predecessor.

European Council Meetings

8. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the informal European Council meeting held on 28 May 2019; the issues that were discussed; and if he held bilaterals at same. [22676/19]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with EU leaders at the informal European Council meeting. [22683/19]

10. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with President Macron of France. [23294/19]

11. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if will report on the recent informal meeting of the European Council. [23296/19]
12. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the outcome of the informal European Council meeting held on 28 May 2019; if the appointment of the new President of the European Commission was considered at the meeting; and the approach taken by Ireland on the issue. [23321/19]

13. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with EU leaders. [23402/19]

14. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the informal meeting of EU Heads of State and Government on 28 May 2019. [23550/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 14, inclusive, together.

I attended an informal meeting of the EU Heads of State and Government in Brussels on the evening of 28 May. We discussed the outcome of the European Parliament elections and procedures for the important appointments to the European institutions that fall to be made in the period ahead. We mandated President Tusk to start consultations with EU member states and the European Parliament and agreed to continue discussions at our next meeting of the European Council on 20 and 21 June.

Before the dinner, I co-signed a letter with President Macron requesting President Juncker’s backing for our joint grant application for the Celtic interconnector. The interconnector, which will run between Ireland and France, will improve security and diversification of electricity supply, decrease the cost of electricity and help us to achieve our climate ambitions.

I also spoke informally with several of my EU counterparts in the margins of the meeting about Brexit and other important EU issues. I used the opportunity, as I always do, to promote our interests.

I have not had any discussion with other EU leaders since the meeting on 28 May, but I will meet again with my European counterparts at the next European Council meeting in Brussels on 20 and 21 June.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I have asked the Taoiseach about the issue of the budget and whether he supports the idea of additional revenues for the Union. The broader question facing us will be the budget to be spent by the Union and the financial framework for the next five to six years. The Brexit situation looms large and we do not know who is going to win the Conservative Party’s leadership battle and become the next Prime Minister, but it could have a particular bearing on the financial outlook, given that Britain leaving the EU has financial implications for the overall EU budget and, particularly from an Irish perspective, on the CAP. Unsurprisingly, Commissioner Hogan has already indicated that there will be a reduction in the CAP budget. It is important that the Taoiseach indicate that the Government is consistent in supporting an increase in the overall EU budget as being in Ireland’s best interests in terms of our sectoral needs, agriculture and rural Ireland in particular.

The Taoiseach is correct in saying that it is a more fragmented European Parliament. It is obvious that, at European rather than Irish level, various groups will negotiate a package and a compromise on the key positions. That said, will it still be the EPP’s position, for example, to rely on leaders like Orbán to support its candidates and give it with the strength that it enjoys in the European Parliament?
On a broader level, the European Union has been under threat for some time. Luckily, the European elections turned out reasonably well in some countries. In others like France, there are still some alarm bells ringing in terms of the far right making progress. There must be much less tolerance of the far right’s approach to many issues. Democrats need to stand up for the fundamental values that have informed the European Union from the outset, in particular free speech, independent judiciaries and independent and free media, in order that people can speak out without fear or favour. Where regimes within the EU are suppressing free speech in the media and undermining the independence of the judiciary, the EU must take a much stronger stance in response to those countries. Such behaviour is incompatible with continued membership of the Union.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Concerns around the budgetary position post Brexit will have been raised even more loudly by those who saw the statement in the weekend’s edition of *The Sunday Times* by Boris Johnson, potentially the British Prime Minister, that he would withhold the £39 billion in outstanding British contributions to the EU budget for 2019 and 2020 unless the EU agreed what he called more favourable terms in Brexit. There are deep concerns, particularly regarding CAP, about the sustainability of the budgetary forecasts. Some might accuse Boris Johnson of simple bombast. That might prove to be the case but given that he is certainly one of the runners for the Prime Minister’s position, this is a matter that we must take most seriously.

President Macron responded to this assertion - rather, a source close to him responded to Reuters - by saying that withholding Britain’s contribution to the EU budget would amount to a sovereign debt default. President Macron has a habit of upping the ante in the debate with Britain. While Britain must be held to account and, as we all agree, this country cannot be the collateral damage in the Brexit debacle, there is a danger that we will get caught between anglophone and francophone bombast on some of these matters.

Given the new European Parliament term and the dynamic introduced by Brexit, now is the time to have a debate on the future of Europe and on protecting the democratic foundations and values of the Union. As democrats, however, we must open up to scrutiny the direction being taken by the European project. That would be a necessary and healthy thing to do. How does the Taoiseach propose to promote that debate? I am not talking about a shouting match or a scenario in which those with critical views are denigrated as anti-European or negative. We need to have a grown-up, mature and democratic debate about the future direction of the European project.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** The results of the recent European Parliament elections are to be welcomed. As others have done, I congratulate the four Deputies who have been elected to the European Parliament and I wish them well. It is to be welcomed that the expected swing to the far right did not materialise. It seems that we now have a fragmented and diverse sector. This will be challenging. I have no doubt that the political system will rise to the occasion in the interests of the citizens of Europe.

I would like to speak about the United Kingdom and Brexit. We are in despair as we watch developments in UK politics at this time. The Conservative Party leadership race is particularly depressing. Now that we know the positions of a number of the contenders, it is especially depressing that many of the candidates seem to have no interest in, or feel for, Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. I suspect that Anglo-Irish relations will be particularly difficult in the months ahead. I think the Taoiseach will need all his diplomatic skills to deal with that. The
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Rockall fisheries dispute is now on the agenda as well. It is a sign of things to come. I would say that the leadership race in the Conservative Party is especially depressing.

When the Taoiseach spoke in his previous contribution about last month’s European Council meeting, he outlined his position on several important and central posts that need to be filled. Does he think it would be worthwhile to pursue Jean-Claude Juncker’s suggestion that there should be gender balance in the filling of these positions? I think we need to give serious consideration to the suggestion. Although the wheeling and dealing is fascinating, I would say it is a little unseemly. I suppose that is democracy in action. Will the ultimate decision be taken by the European Parliament or by the European Council? It looks like the ALDE group, to which Fianna Fáil is affiliated, will have a central role in the make-up of the European Parliament. It will be very interesting to watch. I hope the best people fill the positions in due course. If we get a new President of the European Commission, we will have to appoint Commissioners and Ireland will have to appoint a European Commissioner. Has the Taoiseach given any thought to that yet? What qualities does he think our newly appointed Commissioner should have? I would be interested to know what he thinks about what might transpire in respect of the Irish appointment over the next couple of months.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I know the normal process here involves Opposition Deputies asking questions of the Taoiseach, who then answers those questions. On this occasion, I do not mind answering the question the Taoiseach has asked. I could give a fuller answer in respect of all the positions. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats candidate for the position of President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, is an exemplary candidate. He understands Ireland very well. He has had a long involvement with this country. I have been involved with him over many years in various Ministries. He understands Ireland and is very supportive of Ireland. He would be an excellent choice for us.

I would like to mention another important position that is coming up. The Taoiseach has said that the position of President of the ECB is not part of the general brokering. I have a great deal of experience in this area. I know the Taoiseach was not a great fan of the Economic Management Council during the period for which it existed. When we started to tackle the worst economic crisis this State has met in many generations, it was very important to have a tight-knit group of people grappling with these issues. The transition from Jean-Claude Trichet to Mario Draghi was critical and essential not only for our economic survival but also for the survival of the eurozone. It is important that whoever replaces Mr. Draghi is of the same mindset as him. When he said the ECB would do “whatever it takes” to preserve the euro, he meant that every ounce of strength in the bank and in the economies of Europe would be deployed to that end. It was a pivotal moment in the preservation of the eurozone. I do not want to have an auction of candidates, but I must mention that Mr. Jens Weidmann, who is being touted as a candidate, opposed all of that. He did not believe it was the role of the President of the ECB, or the ECB itself, to preserve the eurozone. He continues to argue this extraordinary point of view on the basis that the role of the ECB is simply to maintain a low inflation rate within the eurozone countries. I say these things because this is very important. Many good candidates could fill the other positions, but the mindset of the President of the ECB will be critical. Will the Taoiseach comment on this issue? I am sure he is well briefed on it. I would be very happy to discuss it with him. I am sure Deputy Noonan will have briefed the Taoiseach separately about the pivotal position of the ECB at critical junctures in our economic travails.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take three or four minutes from the third batch of questions to hear the Taoiseach’s response to the questions that have just been asked.
The Taoiseach: As Deputy Howlin probably picked up from my remarks on the previous group of questions, my assessment of the characteristics of the new President of the ECB is very similar to the Deputy’s assessment. I agree that Mario Draghi has done a very good job in saving the euro and keeping interest rates low. He pursued a policy of quantitative easing when it was necessary. It is still necessary at this point in time. I would like the next President of the ECB to be somebody of a similar mindset who would continue to adopt similar policies to those of Mr. Draghi. It is useful that the position of chief economist of the ECB is now held by an Irish person in the shape of Philip Lane.

Deputy Micheál Martin asked about revenue raising on two occasions. I am not sure if I misunderstood the question. We are not advocating any new EU-wide taxes. That is not something we propose.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, I did not ask that. The Taoiseach knows I did not ask that.

The Taoiseach: Perhaps the Deputy asked his question twice because he did not hear what I said earlier. I said that Ireland has indicated that it would be willing to increase its direct contribution from its own resources. It will increase anyway because our GDP is increasing. We are willing to increase the percentage as long as the programmes we support continue to be well funded. We are willing to pay more into the budget as long as important programmes like the Common Agricultural Policy, Erasmus, Horizon and INTERREG are protected. We do not want to end up paying more into a budget only to see the programmes we find most valuable being cut back.

I was asked about the package for the four top jobs. It is anticipated that three or four of the major parties will come together to create a majority in the European Parliament. It has to be an absolute majority. We will have an absolute majority that does not require the support of parties like Fidesz that have been suspended. I am very conscious that the V4 nations - Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic - tend to stick together at European Council level. Even though their Governments are in different groups - liberal, centre-right and socialist - they tend to stick together. Often, the dynamic is not just one of political groups as there can be regional groups too. They will stick together on these issues. It will be necessary for the European Council to vote by qualified majority on some positions.

Like everyone in this House, I am a little concerned about political developments in London at present. Theresa May was not a bad negotiator. She had a good team. I believe they got the best deal they could have got, given the limited leverage that a country leaving the EU has. It took two years to negotiate the withdrawal agreement. It is not perfect. It is a finely balanced compromise. Everyone had to give and take. Sadly, the House of Commons failed to ratify that agreement. I am a little concerned that some people in London seem to think the failure of the House of Commons to ratify the agreement automatically means they will get a better agreement. That is a terrible political miscalculation. I hope it is not the one that is being made across the water. They made some miscalculations along the way. After the UK decided to leave the EU, they initially thought that Ireland would somehow fall into line and leave too. We did not leave and we are not leaving. Some of them thought that when push came to shove, Ireland would be abandoned and EU unity would break. They were wrong about that. I hope they are not making a further political miscalculation, which is to think that the House of Commons, having failed to ratify the deal, will somehow get a better deal. That is to really misunderstand how the European Union works.
In terms of the wider future of Europe debate, we have had a detailed public consultation, led by the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, with meetings held all over the country and a lot of people engaging. A few months ago we issued a Government statement on the future of Europe that sets out our vision for how the EU should grow and develop in the coming years. If we have not had one yet, a Dáil debate-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We had statements-----

The Taoiseach: -----on that would be very wise.

Deputy Haughey asked about balance. It is essential that we have gender balance, political balance among the groups, geographical balance and balance between big and small as well as between new and old member states. It is very hard to have that level of balance when there are only four jobs but we need to achieve it. President Macron and I are very keen to see at least one of the major top jobs going to a woman. The high representative position is currently held by a woman but it seems to me that one of the presidencies should be held by a woman in the next term and there are some very good candidates who could potentially fill those roles.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There are many good Irish candidates for one of those jobs.

The Taoiseach: Indeed.

Seanad Reform

15. Deputy Brendan Howlin asked the Taoiseach the status of his plans for Seanad reform. [22697/19]

16. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Seanad reform implementation group. [24204/19]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 15 and 16 together.

The report of the Seanad reform implementation group was noted and discussed by the Government at its meeting on 30 April 2019. The Government also noted that the report includes four statements from various groups outlining why their position was not in line with the recommendations of the report, including Fine Gael, Sinn Féin and some Independent Members. The Government will reflect on the views of the Houses of the Oireachtas in considering the next steps to be taken following statements in both Houses. The Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan, will liaise with the Chief Whip and the Business Committee concerning the scheduling of time for a debate on the aforementioned report in this House.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In his final published article, the late and very much respected Feargal Quinn, who served as a Member of Seanad Éireann for 23 years, directly called on the Taoiseach to respect the commitment in the programme for Government on Seanad reform. He asked the Taoiseach to acknowledge that “significant reform is now long overdue” and urged the Government to pursue the “implementation of the Manning report” as a priority. The all-party committee report on Seanad reform published last December has not been acted on. We are now talking about facilitating another debate but I have a very simple and direct question. Does the Taoiseach intend to simply talk these things out or will he have the recommendations,
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or something like them, implemented in the lifetime of the current Dáil and Seanad?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** While the Taoiseach has “noted” the report and said that it will be reflected on and discussed, he seems to have no appetite to act. I know from speaking to people that although the Seanad for all of its importance may not be the stuff of excited conversation on a daily basis in the real world-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It is, sometimes.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----nonetheless there is a general sense that Seanad reform is a bit like rural broadband, namely, something that is spoken of at length but which never happens. I question the political will of this Government to deliver reform. The Taoiseach has expressed strong views on proposals for reform and that is all very well and good but given reform of the Upper House has been a matter of debate, contemplation and reflection for decades now, we must ask if it is going to happen. If the answer to that question is “Yes”, then I ask the Taoiseach to tell us when but if the answer is “No”, the political system should simply own up to that. The Government should state that clearly and we should stop having conversations about something that the Government has no intention to deliver.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach should take the honest position and admit that he has no interest in pursuing Seanad reform within the context and parameters of the Manning report and the work of Senator McDowell, who feels that he has been hung out to dry by the Government’s, and Fine Gael’s, approach to this issue. The honest thing to do would be to say that the Government is not committed and has no interest in pursuing this. The people of Ireland voted to retain the Seanad; Fine Gael wanted to abolish it. The alternative to abolishing the Upper House was clearly to reform it and a template was provided for same. Seanad reform is in the programme for Government but it is there in name only. There is no deeply held commitment. The Taoiseach is against reform and if he was honest, he would say so. He should abandon the commitment and take it out of the programme for Government so that we are all clear on the matter. He should stop wasting people’s time.

The core lesson of the plebiscite on the Seanad, when Fine Gael sought to abolish it, and recent plebiscites on mayoralties is that people want significantly more information about how major political changes will operate in practice before making a decision. Just as Opposition parties predicted, there was a public backlash against the reasonable idea, which I supported, of directly elected mayors. Nowhere near enough information was provided on the practical details of what was being proposed. I pointed this out to the Taoiseach two or three months before the plebiscite. It sums up the hyper-partisan nature of this Government that the Minister responsible has stated repeatedly that his failure is the fault of the Opposition. His objective seems to have been to squeeze out a win rather than obtain wide legitimacy. We could look to London as an example. When London held a similar vote to create a unified mayoralty, detailed implementing legislation and budgets were prepared and 72% of the people voted in favour. The obvious lesson of this reform proposal, as with the Seanad proposal, is that we need a return to the past practice of preparing detailed White Papers, legislation and budgets before seeking public support for changes. What has been going on here in recent times is bread and circuses - produce a nice-sounding idea for a bit of reform to keep them going until the autumn, with no detailed work put into it.

Earlier the Cabinet apparently discussed the extension of the presidential franchise. I ask the Taoiseach to give us a commitment that he will publish not just a general proposal but a full
implementation schedule, legislation and a budget before seeking approval for that proposal. That is what people need and deserve. A referendum on that proposal should be held separately from local, general or European elections because it is serious enough to merit that. The Government is going to the people for a decision and should treat that with the respect it deserves.

**The Taoiseach:** Our intention is to hold the referendum on extending the presidential franchise to Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland and around the world later this year, most likely concurrent with the four by-elections, the writ for which must be moved within six months of the vacancies arising. If four constituencies are going to the polls anyway, it makes sense to have the referendum at that time. Legislation will be introduced in this House before the recess. We have a detailed paper on how it is going to work, running to approximately 100 pages. The short answer to the Deputy’s question is that we will put out as much information as we possibly can.

A policy paper was published on the plebiscites for directly elected mayors. There was an information campaign-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It was very late-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----led by a judge. There were also campaigns on the ground and it was passed in one city. Limerick city and county voted in favour of having a directly elected mayor and will now have one. That will act as a demonstration project and other parts of the country will see how successful it is and in time, they will want the same. I would like Dublin and Galway to vote on the matter in 2021 but there will be a Dublin citizen’s assembly before that, which needs to examine the wider issues of local government in Dublin, how it should work and where the mayor would fit in. The decision of the people of Limerick to vote in favour gives them a real chance to get ahead of other cities and regions and I am determined to see that new office work. I deeply regret that Cork narrowly voted against having a directly elected mayor.

4 o’clock

When a vote is defeated narrowly, one sees many different things that could have been done differently or better that might have changed the result. One such thing would have been Deputy Micheál Martin actively campaigning for a yes vote.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is all my fault.

**The Taoiseach:** When a narrow margin-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The Taoiseach has no concept of the Opposition.

**The Taoiseach:** When defeat is narrow, one sees many things that could have gone differently.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I supported it. The Taoiseach did not do his homework.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Did Deputy Micheál Martin support it?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I did.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Really?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yes.
The Taoiseach: The Deputy was asked to take part in events with the Minister, Deputy Coveney-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, I was not.

The Taoiseach: -----to write op-eds, and to take part is the campaign but decided not to-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: No. I got a phone call two days before polling day when the die had already been cast.

The Taoiseach: -----unlike Deputy Niall Collins-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach did not approach us at all.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Share the blame.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach did not approach us on this at all.

The Taoiseach: -----in Limerick who showed real leadership, actually took part in the campaign, and helped to secure the passage of the plebiscite, as did the Green Party, the Social Democrats, and Labour in some parts of the country. I am sorry to say that it is my sense that the Deputy secretly wanted the plebiscite to be defeated in Cork because he hoped it would make the Government look bad.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I voted for it.

The Taoiseach: He was willing to let down his own city in that regard.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I voted for it.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: That is a strange charge to make.

The Taoiseach: He showed no leadership on this matter-----

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: That is an outrageous charge to make.

The Taoiseach: -----and as a result of that, Limerick city and county will now get a head start over Cork.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Taoiseach should withdraw that remark.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy really let down his city in this regard. He showed a lack of leadership, unlike Deputy Niall Collins, who showed much more leadership on this matter by supporting the plebiscite in Limerick and helping it to get across the line.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Taoiseach is talking about some parallel Fine Gael universe. He will not take any responsibility for this himself.

The Taoiseach: With regard to the question-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: His appointment of Senator Buttner as director of elections was his most inspired in many years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputies should behave. They should not invite interruptions.
Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is a personal attack; it is very unbecoming.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was most inspired.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: It can hardly be considered a personal attack after the abuse we have just heard.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Perhaps we should move on to housing.

The Taoiseach: The truth hurts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I voted for it; the Taoiseach made a bags of it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy did not campaign for it.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: We have not seen Deputy Eoghan Murphy in eight weeks.

The Taoiseach: The plebiscite could have passed if Deputy Micheál Martin had shown a little bit of leadership, as Deputy Niall Collins did. I am sorry he did not do so.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I will pass the Taoiseach’s good wishes on to Deputy Collins.

The Taoiseach: With regard to the Seanad, as I have said before, I supported its abolition. Many countries, including New Zealand, Finland, and Portugal, have unicameral systems which work well, but I accept the referendum result. The people have decided that the Seanad will remain. That matter is now settled. Whether that was a vote for reform or not is a matter of debate, as is whether the people were fixed on any particular type of reform. If we are going to proceed with reform, it needs to be the right reform. I have expressed reservations about the Manning report in the past. I do not believe the reforms in it go far enough, largely because they retain the institutional panel structure, which does not befit a modern democracy.

With regard to the all-party report, we should not forget that dissenting reports attached including dissenting reports from Fine Gael Members, Sinn Féin Members, university Senators, and many Independent Members. Unlike many other all-party reports, this did not have all-party support.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach has been against it since day one. He should state that.

The Taoiseach: The next step is to have a debate in the Dáil to allow people to give their views and to say what they think is right and wrong.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have given our views. We have had an Oireachtas committee.

The Taoiseach: The legislation has been published and it is open to anyone to bring it forward in Private Members’ time if he or she so wishes.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: To clarify, according to the email we received, these questions have been grouped. Could the Leas-Cheann Comhairle explain the time allocations for us?
Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I did not know they were grouped.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is very unusual.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Priority questions are not usually grouped.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: From the email we got, it seems they are. I would be quite happy if they are not.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Yes, I would rather if they were not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No priority questions have been grouped.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Perfect.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: That is great.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am sorry, the three are grouped.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, they are not.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Priority questions cannot be grouped.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a long-standing practice.

Housing Policy

35. Deputy Darragh O’Brien asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the next round of funding for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme; if each local authority is still issuing loans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24050/19]

36. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the price range for affordable housing projects to be delivered under the serviced sites fund with respect to the various initiatives on affordable housing; the rents to be charged on the cost rental projects to be delivered in 2019 and 2020; and when a second tranche of funding will be provided to local authorities for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. [24274/19]

37. Deputy Darragh O’Brien asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the cost rental pilot project scheme; the timeframe for completion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24051/19]

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Six weeks ago I asked a question about the position in respect of the Rebuilding Ireland affordable home loan. That affordability measure was the Minister’s flagship, and only, measure with regard to affordability. What is the status of the next round of funding for that home loan measure? Is each and every local authority still issuing loans? Will the Minister provide an update on the status of the additional funding in respect of which he apparently has been in discussions with the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Three questions have been grouped and the answers will be given together. I will give everyone ample opportunity.
**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** They are grouped.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We can have 18 minutes.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** As long as we all-----

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** It is all the same if they are all happening together.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputies will not be deprived. The Minister will answer and then we will go around the House.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** Tar éis sin will I get to ask my other question? Are the three being grouped?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will get two supplementary questions, as will Deputy Ó Broin. We will be as generous as possible. The Minister has a long reply.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** He should have. This requires a detailed explanation.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** For clarity, I was informed that the three priority questions had been grouped so my answer covers the first three.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is okay, we will take them that way.

**(Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 35 to 37, inclusive, together.

When the Rebuilding Ireland home loan was initially being developed, it was estimated that the drawdown of loans under the scheme would be approximately €200 million over three years. From the data collated on the scheme to date, the home loan has proven to be more successful than initially anticipated. The Housing Agency, which provides a central support service to assess loan applications, has confirmed that up to the end of May 2019, 4,193 applications have been assessed, of which 2,153, or 51%, have been recommended for approval. The latest information available from local authorities indicates that 823 loans, totalling some €139.9 million, had been drawn down at the end of March 2019.

As a result of this very significant level of activity, the scheme requires a further tranche of funds to be borrowed by the Housing Finance Agency in order to enable its continuation. My Department is currently in discussions with the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform and Finance with regard to this amount, which I anticipate will be finalised very soon. When these discussions are concluded, I will be in a position to make an announcement on the matter. Ahead of such an announcement, the operation of the scheme is not affected. The scheme remains open and all local authorities have been advised to continue to receive and process applications up to and including the issuing of loans.

The delivery of affordable housing remains a key priority for the Government. To support the delivery of 6,200 affordable homes, €310 million is being made available under the serviced sites fund from 2019 to 2021, to facilitate the delivery of infrastructure on local authority sites. Last December, €43 million was approved under the fund for ten infrastructure projects in Dublin and Cork, which will deliver 1,400 affordable homes. Under the second serviced sites fund call, 30 submissions have been received from 15 local authorities. These are currently being assessed and I expect to issue approvals under this second call in the coming weeks.
The serviced sites fund will also play an important role in making cost rental projects as affordable as possible. Two pathfinder pilot projects are currently being progressed in order to facilitate the development of the cost rental model. These pilot projects are at Enniskerry Road, Stepaside, and at St. Michael’s Estate, Inchicore, both of which will inform further the development of a cost rental model for the Irish context.

The Enniskerry Road project comprises 155 homes, 50 of which will be cost rental. Funding of €4.5 million under the serviced sites fund is being made available to this project and construction is due to commence later this month, with completion of the homes scheduled for 2021.

The St. Michael’s Estate project is estimated to have the potential to accommodate more than 470 social and cost rental homes in a high quality development. Dublin City Council has appointed a dedicated project manager and a project team to move this development forward and professional advisers have also been appointed to develop an urban design framework plan for the site. This is a key project and my Department is currently working closely with the council with a view to accelerating the delivery of much needed cost rental homes and community facilities in the area.

The price of individual homes, or the reductions on market rents, to be delivered with the support of the serviced sites fund will be determined on a project-by-project basis. Part 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which was commenced last June, provides for a discount of up to 40% on the market value of affordable homes for purchase, with the discount being held as an equity stake by the local authority until it is repaid by the household or captured on resale.

These new schemes are set in the context of moderating growth in house prices and rental levels in the market and will complement other key Government affordability initiatives. These include the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, which I referred to earlier, and the help-to-buy scheme, under which some 11,500 applications, to a value of some €169 million, have been approved.

In addition, approximately 2,350 affordable homes will be delivered on mainly publicly owned lands supported through the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, while 5,600 further homes will benefit from a LIHAF-related cost reduction, some of which are already coming to market. The work of the Land Development Agency will also be of crucial importance in terms of delivering more affordable housing. The initial portfolio of sites to which the agency has access will have the potential, over the short to medium term, to deliver 3,000 affordable homes in line with the Government policy of achieving 30% affordable housing on State lands generally.

Taken together, programmes are in place under which nearly 18,000 affordable homes or homes with a LIHAF-related reduction will be delivered, with over 12,200 households also supported through the Rebuilding Ireland home loan or the help-to-buy scheme.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien**: For the record, both of my priority questions have been grouped and they are on two very different things. The Minister has been able to get away with an omnibus answer, covering everything and not dealing with any specifics of the questions asked.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: The Deputy is getting the opportunity------
Deputy Darragh O’Brien: For the purpose of priority questions into the future, I respectfully say by way of feedback-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will have a look at that.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: -----if you understand the point I am making-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I would rather if the Minister came here today and said he does not know what is happening. That is basically what he has been saying in recent weeks. He says he is discussing it with the Departments of Finance, and Public Expenditure and Reform. He is saying there is no change to the scheme and that nobody is affected. That is all nonsense and untrue. Thousands of people do not know what is happening with their mortgage applications. Local authorities such as Kildare County Council and others are not granting or approving loans because they have not got their allocations for 2019.

I remind the Minister that we are now in June 2019. We found out about this through a freedom of information request and not through any response the Minister gave in the House. It had to be dragged out of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Since March or April the Minister has come into the House and talked nonsense about the issue. He is saying it is being discussed and that it is going to be resolved very soon. It is the same answer he gave me six weeks ago and it is not acceptable. Obviously, either he does not know what is going on or he is not willing to tell the House what is happening. When will the allocation be given? Will the Department of Finance give approval for the continuation of the Rebuilding Ireland affordable loan or not?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I have questions on cost rental as well-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will have an opportunity.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: ----which I have not been able to ask. This is a simple question. When?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister to respond to that specific question.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I was informed that the grouping of questions was in order. Two weeks ago in the committee we discussed all these issues for about three or four hours.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: This is the Dáil Chamber.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am happy to stay in the Dáil Chamber for as long as the Deputy wants to come back and answer every question-----

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I am saying-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must have some order.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: -----just so long as the Deputy does not mislead the House.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I have not misled the House once.
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I would rather if the Minister gave a proper answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will move on. I have no difficulty.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Deputy Eoghan Murphy is the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and he should know what is going on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind the Deputy that there has to be some order in the House. The Minister to continue.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: After 14 months of this scheme being in operation, €140 million has been drawn down from €200 million.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I got that.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The fund has not been exhausted yet. That is why I entered in-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will move on to Deputy Ó Broin now. Whether the Deputy likes the answers or not-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: If I am going to be interrupted, I cannot-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am going to move on to the next question unless there is some-----

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Sorry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to respond. The Deputy got his opportunity to ask his questions and nobody interrupted him. I will be fair to everybody on all sides of the House.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Tá brón orm.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Some €140 million has been drawn down to date and €200 million is available in the first tranche. I entered into early discussions with the Department of Finance to ensure funding would be available for a second tranche when it is needed. However, it is not yet needed because the allocations have not run out.

In March the Department issued a circular informing local authorities to continue to process loans and issue loans despite the approvals that have gone through. If we identified any issues with local authorities indicating that was not happening, we contacted them directly. The scheme’s continued operation is not dependent on me announcing the additional amount that will come in the second tranche. There will be an additional amount as I have previously confirmed. We will honour all loans that have been approved. I have said that. At the moment discussions are happening with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as to the amount of that second tranche. That is not impeding the issuing of loans and all loans approved to date will be honoured.
I repeat that of €200 million in the first tranche, only €140 million has been drawn down to date. There are still ample funds in the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme for those approvals already given. We are debating a second tranche of funding that will come to follow after the first tranche has been drawn down.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I take it the Minister has said that the next tranche will be announced when the €200 million has been expended, effectively. The Minister is telling me that he will wait for another €60 million to be drawn down before we get an answer and we know the size of the next tranche of funding. I understand that. The Minister has said here repeatedly that all loans will be honoured. The experience of many people in many different local authorities is the opposite of what the Minister has stated. Kildare County Council has been returning applications indicating it cannot go to the final stage of the loan, the drawdown, because it does not have its allocation for this year. It is as simple as that. While the Minister says €60 million is left, how many local authorities have expended their allocations?

I allow the Minister the latitude to outline this even in the broadest possible timeline he could give. Are we expecting these ongoing discussions between his Department and the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform to continue for another six, 12 or 18 months? Will we get some clarity on this at long last or do we have to submit further freedom of information requests to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to get to the truth of the matter?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am not waiting for the fund to run out, which is why I have had this early engagement with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to get a second tranche of funds. I engaged early on that basis, noting that the first tranche has not even been drawn down yet. Local authorities are also not waiting and that is why the circular was issued and contacts have been made.

The additional money is significant. I hope it will be finalised this week, but I need to be prudent with the public finances and I also need to be prudent with how the local authorities manage their finances. That is why we are taking care and time with this, as is appropriate. It is not impacting on local authorities approving loans. Today we are publishing details of the Rebuilding Ireland home loan approvals and drawdowns by each local authority in the first quarter of this year. This continues to be in operation. Local authorities do not need to wait for me to announce this figure. They are not waiting for additional allocations because they have been told to process and approve loans and let them go to drawdown. The data published today will show that has been happening. We will announce a further amount of money that will allow the scheme to continue because it has proved to be so successful.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I have questions on each of the three schemes. The first is on the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said. Some local authorities currently are not accepting or processing new applications. I accept the circular has been issued, but it might be useful if the Department contacted local authorities to ascertain which are and which are not because there is considerable confusion. My local authority, South Dublin County Council, currently is not accepting new applications.

With respect to the affordable home purchase scheme, some recent newspaper coverage suggested that three serviced sites fund projects in Dublin could have sale prices of between €116,000 and €233,000 for those developments. That would be good news if that is the case. Will the Minister confirm if that is his understanding?
I again express concern over the entry level rents for the cost rental pilot in Enniskerry Road in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council area. To cover €1,200 a month would require a net income of €4,000 a month for it to be genuinely affordable under, for example, the criteria the ESRI uses of 30% of net disposable income. Will the Minister look at that again to see if that entry-level rent can be reduced to a genuinely affordable level?

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** The Deputy is correct. The circular issued to local authorities in March, informing them that they could continue to process and approve loans, and that those loans could be drawn down. That came as a result of my commitment to the Oireachtas and the public that any loan approved would be honoured. At the previous meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government the Deputy said some local authorities were not doing that. He referenced his own local authority. Since then, it has been contacted about that. I thank him for bringing that to my attention.

Some interesting things are now happening on the serviced sites fund because of the work we have been able to do in the past year or so. As the Deputy knows, we commenced Part V last year. We have the regulations on the scheme, which we all discussed at the committee, approved in March. The first call was in June last year and it was approved in December. There are ten projects in Dublin and Cork comprising 1,400 homes with €43 million of Exchequer funding. For example, in the Ballymun site a two-bedroom home is €150,000 after the discount that would be held as an equity stake by the local authority, and in Ballyfermot a three-bedroom home is €240,000, which is very welcome.

Significant work is happening on cost rental. We have officially engaged the European Investment bank, EIB, to act as an adviser on how we can achieve cost rental that works at the entry level. The National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, has also done financial modelling on this. I have engaged with one of the housing bodies on this site to ensure the entry-level rents we are discussing are below market levels. The key thing about cost rental is that while it might start off at 15% to 25% below market value, over time that increases to up to 40% below market value.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Cost rental needs to be affordable based on the tenants’ income. Comparing entry-level rent with market rent is not the right metric. That is why we use a metric such as the ESRI’s 30% of net disposable income. The problem is that the rent for the homes on Enniskerry Road will be €1,200 per month, meaning a household will need a net disposable income of €4,000, which is considerably above the income of many households required for this. In real terms - St. Michael’s estate in Inchicore is a good example of this - we need entry-level rents of between €700 and €900 a month to meet the need of those whose household income is between €40,000 and €70,000. That is what is done in other cities. They construct the finances in a different way than what is proposed for Enniskerry Road. I urge the Minister to re-examine this. Otherwise a large group of households that today cannot gain access to social housing will not be able to afford the rents, either on Enniskerry Road or in Saint Michael’s Estate, if it follows what is happening in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. That would be a mistake given the importance of the two initial cost rental projects.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I accept that point completely in terms of making sure the rents are actually affordable for the people at whom the solutions or apartments are aimed. We have a new working group on cost rental in the Department now. I have the European Investment Bank agreement, as I have said. It was signed in May. The agreement states the bank will provide advisory services. The NDFA has done its own financial modelling.
In regard to Enniskerry Road, there are a number of different actors involved, from the Housing Agency and the Housing Finance Agency to my Department and the county council, as well as Tuath and Respond. I am aware of the challenge that exists and certain requests that have been put to the State actors involved regarding the changes they could make that could make the rents even more affordable. They are being considered.

With regard to Saint Michael’s Estate, obviously because it is a larger project there is a bigger scale. We will be considering quite a significant amount of European Investment Bank financing in that regard. Hence, we have taken it on as our adviser to make sure we can make real the projections the NDFA modelled in terms of the funding and the price at which it comes. I take the Deputy’s point completely and that is why we continue to engage with those involved, particularly in Enniskerry Road. It is now why we have the working group established in the Department.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: On cost rental, in particular, I wish to follow on from Deputy Ó Broin. The Minister will know that the fourth quarter daft.ie report has shown that in Dublin, it is approximately 89% more expensive to rent than to purchase a home if one is able to get a mortgage. In some areas, it is three times more expensive to rent. That is why cost rental is important.

With regard to St. Michael’s Estate specifically, there was a public announcement that I welcomed on progressing the work on the estate with the agreement of residents and the campaign group. My colleague, Senator Ardagh, has been heavily involved with residents. What is now happening with St. Michael’s Estate? Has the Minister a timeline for the completion of the initial phase in the estate? There seems to be some frustration on the ground based on the view that very little has happened or that there has been very little engagement with residents since the announcement the Minister made. Is there any truth in the rumour that there has been a change in the Minister’s policy and position on St. Michael’s Estate due to the intervention of the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne. Is the Minister still committed to the cost rental model at St. Michael’s Estate? What is the timeframe now? What can we say to residents in the area regarding what is happening at St. Michael’s, Inchicore?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Deputy for his follow-up question. When one looks at the rental information we have and the rent index produced by the Residential Tenancies Board, it is crazy that in many parts, particularly the capital city but also in Cork, someone’s rent might be more expensive than a mortgage. That is why we brought through, as quickly as we could, the recent rent Bill to moderate rents even further and to extend rent pressure zones. It is also why we have other initiatives to help people to put together a deposit for a home and help people to buy, including the Rebuilding Ireland home loan. The Deputy will be aware of all the schemes now in place for supporting home ownership.

On St. Michael’s Estate, my commitment has not changed at all. It has not changed in regard to the vision we have for cost rental there. The Deputy mentioned his colleague, Senator Ardagh. I am not clear she supports the project because it was not clear when she turned up at the event we held. There has been a significant engagement with the local residents. They are in no doubt about how matters are progressing.

Dublin City Council has appointed a project manager for the St. Michael’s site. There is an Inchicore regeneration consultative forum. We have appointed professionals for the design aspect of the site. We have also appointed Mr. Jack Nolan to carry out a wider scoping exer-
cise for the area. We have meetings under way with the European Investment Bank, as I have mentioned, and I have been out of the site on a number of occasions to meet local stakeholders and local community representatives, as well as to look at some of the ancillary things we need to do on the site in so far as the community is concerned. It is a question of making sure that, as we build all these great new homes and bring in all the people to live in them, there are appropriate facilities.

**Housing Policy**

38. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his views on the minimum guidelines for dormitory space and for cubicles and the shared kitchen ratio for co-living arrangements. [24035/19]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next question is being taken by Deputy Coppinger, who has 30 seconds to introduce it.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** While I acknowledge the Minister has been asked about this incessantly, the public is still very interested in where the Minister got the exciting concept of co-living. Just how small do the units have to be? Could the Minister comment on yesterday’s very detailed evidence that the proposal would actually be a disaster for those facing a housing crisis because it would push up the price of land and veer developers in this direction?

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I thank the Deputy for the question. In 2018, I published updated Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. The guidelines propose one possible format for shared accommodation or co-living units comprising two to six bedrooms, including en suites, those bedrooms being larger than standard bedroom sizes, with a common shared area for living and kitchen facilities, which would have a maximum occupancy of eight people. While the guidelines do acknowledge that other formats may be proposed for consideration by individual planning authorities in certain circumstances, the articulated format is a strong guide to what is expected from this emerging sector.

In assessing proposals, planning authorities are required to ensure that sufficient communal amenities are provided in accordance with the specified standards and that the scale of the development is appropriate to the location and buildings involved. They must also be cognisant of the specific role that the development of the shared accommodation sector should play in the wider urban apartment market.

It is important to note the guidelines were the subject of more than five weeks of public consultation, following the issuing of draft guidelines on 18 December 2017. Neither the Deputy nor her party availed of the opportunity to make a submission as part of this consultation. The guidelines were finalised on 9 March 2018 and were broadly welcomed by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, with the institute’s president commenting that the “new guidelines respond to our changing demographics and create four specific types of apartments which will allow for better housing mix: Build to Rent, Shared Living, Owner Occupier and Student Accommodation”. Furthermore, he stated the new approach should:

see the sector innovate to respond to the changing market. Two thirds of new households in Ireland over the past twenty years consist of one or two people, yet we are not
building enough apartments to cater for this new demographic. At present there are 2.5 times as many one- and two-person households as there are homes to suit them.

While I am satisfied that the guidelines, as issued, are robust, given the relatively new nature of this form of accommodation, my Department will monitor the emerging shared accommodation sector and may issue further additional technical updates, as appropriate, to ensure the appropriate development of this form of accommodation.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am not going to spend too much time dealing with the fact that it is clear most people do not want to live in a dog box, which is what the Minister is proposing, but I ask him to comment on yesterday’s revelations by Mel Reynolds, the architect and housing analyst. He made the excellent point that there are some people in Dublin getting very excited about co-living, namely, the developers. It just stands to reason that if one owns land that is lying vacant right now, one will apply to build co-living units, just like the student accommodation that is flying up all around Dublin and other cities. Many people thought there was a tax incentive for this but there is not. It just makes perfect sense: yield equals value for developers.

Under the co-living arrangement the Minister is talking about, five co-living bedrooms can fit in a site the same size as a typical two-bedroom apartment. Those in one and two-person households do not want to live in co-living arrangements in modern tenements.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: More than a year ago, the new guidelines came into force. The Deputy and her party did not participate in the public consultation that was held at the time. According to the logic of the article published yesterday and to which the Deputy referred, which is that allowing for more units on a site will drive up the cost of that site, one would build only one unit of accommodation per site regardless of the size of the site or demand in the area. Therefore, the logic behind the article is essentially flawed.

What we are trying to do is cater to a very small part of the market. The demand is small but there is still demand. If over the next 12 months, 1% of new builds in this country provide for co-living, it will take between 200 and 250 people. That will free up potentially 100 to 125 apartments in the same area. That is how we provide choice. That is how we make sure the various needs in society can be met. At present, people do not have choice. That is the real crisis we are trying to address. We are not trying to replace the traditional apartment; nothing like it. We are trying to add an additional layer to what is being built because there is a demand for it. We know this from the other cities we are trying to emulate. I refer to their stable rental sectors, cost rental models and more compact growth. It is a matter of making sure we are cognisant of our climate obligations in terms of how and where we build. Co-living can be part of that, in terms of shared accommodation and what some people might choose to live in.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: People know that property developers are not social workers and are only concerned about profit. They will go for whatever yields the most profit. Property developers are business people. They want to get the best possible return for themselves and their shareholders and that is a logic with which the Minister agrees. The Minister is leaving housing in the hands of private developers and private landlords by not intervening and he has handed them a gift on a plate.

People who live in Dublin and other cities will have noticed that student apartments are flying up. Of course we need student apartments but we also need homes for families and single
people. Student apartments are proliferating and using up vital inner city land because of the yields and returns available. The project in Dún Laoghaire is a perfect example of fitting five units, rather than a two-bedroom unit, into a space.

These co-living units are not very different to bedsits. They have bathrooms but very few kitchens, no balconies or parking and crucially there is no obligation to provide the legally mandated 10% social housing that other developers must provide.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** Co-living is an attempt to provide a choice and an option for people. The bedrooms are en suite and larger than traditional bedrooms. These units are not for families nor are they social housing. There is no evidence that this sector is exploding in the way the Deputy thinks it is. It is approximately 14 months since these guidelines were published.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Student accommodation has exploded.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I am talking about co-living which is the question the Deputy asked. There is no evidence that co-living has exploded in the way she says it has over the past 14 months. Of course, because it is new, we will keep it under review and ensure the guidelines are robustly enforced. The fact of the matter is that we must provide homes for everyone. Student accommodation takes pressure off other parts of the rental sector. If four students are in student accommodation instead of sharing a house, that house is available for a family to rent or for adults to share.

In the course of 2019, between 21,000 and 23,000 houses will be built and other homes will be added to the housing stock through the finishing of unfinished housing estates and other houses being taken out of long-term vacancy. Through providing homes, apartments, student accommodation and approximately 1% of co-living units, we will take the pressure off many families and individuals who do not have the kinds of choices they need in order to find a house they can afford to live in which is close to their work or family. The central objective under Rebuilding Ireland is to increase supply and, as that happens, to increase choice.

### Defective Building Materials

39. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the justification for allocating €20 million in funding for homeowners affected by MICA in County Donegal as part of the MICA redress scheme; his views on whether €20 million is sufficient to address the outstanding structural issues facing homeowners due to MICA; if further funding will be allocated to ensure there is no funding shortfall for any family in need; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23872/19]

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am seeking clarification as to how the Government came up with the figure of €20 million for the mica redress scheme and whether the figure is sufficient to address the housing needs of all those affected. Was this tokenistic, given that it was announced during local elections? Anyone can tell the Government that €20 million is insufficient. An estimated 4,600 homes, most of which are in County Donegal, are affected by mica. Taking that into account, a large portion of those are not even taking up the scheme. It is good news that the scheme will be delivered but how will the funds be made available and will those funds meet the redress needs of all those affected?
Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): In October 2018, the Government approved in principle the development of a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in counties Donegal and Mayo to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to defective concrete blocks. This followed on from the work carried out by the expert panel on concrete blocks established by my Department in 2016.

Last month, agreement was reached with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to allocate €20 million to a scheme for this purpose from within the €2.4 billion housing budget for 2019. The full terms and conditions of the scheme will be finalised over the coming weeks, again in consultation with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This process will take account of the engagement that my Department is currently having with both Donegal and Mayo County Councils on the arrangements for the scheme. On completion of this work, it is intended to revert to Government on the matter.

The ultimate costs of the scheme will be determined by the scheme’s final agreed terms and conditions and will, of course, also depend on the number of applications made under the scheme and the extent of the damage to be remediated in each individual house ultimately approved for grant assistance. The €20 million earmarked for the scheme in 2019 is an initial allocation to support its early phase of operation. Funding for future years will be agreed on an annual basis as part of the normal Estimates process.

As the Deputy is aware, I have met regularly with the mica action group over the past couple of years. We have talked through this process on numerous occasions and I always explained that, similar to the pyrite scheme, there will be an initial allocation of money to get the scheme up and running and to deal with houses deserving of priority. Further money will be drawn down as the years progress. That is exactly what is happening.

Nobody is saying that €20 million will fix all the houses. We wish it would, but we know, as does the Deputy, that it will not. Every house will cost a different amount to fix based on the standard protocol and an engineer’s assessment and agreement and we will work through that. The scheme will need additional funding and that is part of the process and those funds will be drawn down in the time ahead.

We are sincerely committed to this scheme. This was not just a local election issue, it was announced last October. The people with whom we dealt on a regular basis needed to know, once and for all, could a scheme be done and we told those people it could last October. They accepted it would take a little time to bring the scheme forward.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The scheme has been announced but its terms and conditions have not yet been finalised. When can people expect the actual work to be carried out on their houses? That will be significant because the houses are deteriorating further as time drags on so it will end up costing more. When will actual work start? It seems as if there are still many procedural issues to be sorted out. It could easily be this time next year before any work has actually been carried out on the ground and no one wants that.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy asks a fair question. We told the mica action group when we last met in Donegal that we had a target of this July to start fixing houses. It looks now as if that will not happen until the autumn. I do not see any reason why we cannot work out all
the procedures and start fixing houses then.

There have been a couple of meetings between Mayo and Donegal County Councils and officials from the Department since we announced the clarification. All sides have agreed to move this as quickly as we possibly can because, naturally, we all want to step in and start fixing houses. I see no reason why the procedures and all the rest of it cannot be put to bed in the weeks ahead and it will be for the Government then to give the final sign-off. We should be able to fix houses in the autumn. I put my hands up and admit that is a number of months later than we anticipated when I formally met the group in Donegal most recently. At that time, we were hoping to start work in June or July. It now looks like it will start in the autumn. Hopefully we will start then and we can move on.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** What about people who cannot afford the balance of the cost of remediation works? I understand that the scheme will pick up 90% of the cost but what about people who cannot afford to bridge the gap? Will the scheme accommodate those people? Is the order in which houses will be remediated to be based on the deterioration of the house rather than whether someone can afford to deal with it or not? That will be critical. People have already paid a lot of money and may not be able to afford the balance of the cost of remediation.

**Deputy Damien English:** Deputy Pringle will understand that the scheme is not yet fully finalised; that will happen in the weeks ahead. Those who are most in need will be helped first and that is the logical way to approach this. We have been in some of these houses and we know how bad they are. The full cost of remediation works will not be met under the scheme but Donegal and Mayo local authorities said they will work with the Department to try and ensure this option will suit most people. We will try and deal with it when the scheme is finalised in the weeks ahead. We recognise the issues and have chosen this form of scheme to get started as quickly as possible. The Minister and I gave a commitment to develop a scheme that would start fixing houses as quickly as possible and that is what we are trying to do.

**Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

**Home Loan Scheme**

40. **Deputy Jan O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when extra funding for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme will be allocated; the changes proposed for the scheme following interaction between his Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23685/19]

47. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to delays in approving and the drawdown of funding under the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23989/19]

74. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the reason some local authorities are still not accepting or processing new applications for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme; the number of loan drawdowns, offers and refusals to date from the first tranche of funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23995/19]
93. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to ensure that Meath County Council has sufficient funding to approve applications for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23489/19]

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** This issue was earlier raised on Priority Questions. I am trying to find out exactly when the Minister will announce extra funding for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme and if there will be changes to the scheme. Specifically, if there are changes, for example to the interest rate, what happens to people who have tried to apply and been told they cannot apply in certain local authorities under the original scheme?

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 40, 47, 74 and 93 together.

When the Rebuilding Ireland home loan was initially being developed, it was estimated that the drawdown of loans under the scheme would be approximately €200 million over three years. From the data collated on the scheme to date, the home loan has proven to be more successful than initially anticipated, as a result of which the scheme requires a further tranche of funds to be borrowed by the Housing Finance Agency in order to enable its continuation.

My Department is currently in discussions with the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform and Finance about this amount, which I anticipate will be finalised very soon. As I said in response to an earlier question, I hope to finalise that amount this week. I will be in a position to make an announcement on the matter when the discussions are concluded. Ahead of such announcement, the operation of the scheme is not affected. The scheme remains open and all local authorities have been advised to continue to receive and process applications up to and including the issuing of loans.

The Housing Agency, which provides a central support service to assess loan applications, has confirmed that 4,193 applications were assessed up to the end of May 2019, of which 2,153 or 51% were recommended for approval. The latest information indicates that 823 loans totalling some €139.9 million had been drawn down at end March 2019. Funding is still available in the first tranche that was originally borrowed by the Housing Finance Agency more than two years ago.

My Department continues to publish information on the overall number and value of each local authority loan approval and local authority loan draw down on a quarterly basis. Information for the first quarter of this year will be published on my Department’s website today and will show that in that period 280 loans, amounting to €47.7 million, were drawn down and a further 270 loans, amounting to €46 million, were approved. This information will continue to be updated and published on a quarterly basis as additional data are compiled.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** Although the Minister stated that there is still money in the scheme, some local authorities have run out of money. What are officials in those local authorities being told to do? Can they approve loans even though their local authority has run out of money? Can they get more money from the Department? What specifically have they been told to do? Deputies stated that some people’s applications have been returned. If there is a change to the terms of the scheme under the new announcement, such as a change to the interest rate, will people who applied but whose local authority had run out of money qualify under the old scheme because they sought to apply before the scheme was changed or will they be subject to new conditions which may mean they cannot buy the home they had intended to buy?
Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No local authority ran out of funding. They were each given an allocation which some met early because of higher demand in their areas. As those allocations were met, they were topped up. However, because of the concern expressed publicly, I issued circular 7/19 in March of this year, which directed local authorities to continue issuing and approving loan applications. In addition, where certain Deputies raised concerns in the House that their local authorities were not doing so, the Department has been in touch with them directly.

After the scheme had been in operation for a few months, several proposals were made as to how it might be improved. There was a lack of consistency in its application across different local authorities. I engaged a small group of people to carry out a semi-independent review of the operation of the loan scheme, engaging a couple of local authority managers from outside the Department to work with officials on the reforms that might be made to ensure it was being operated consistently. The group returned two sets of proposed reforms: those that could be acted upon immediately, such as clarification of the forms that constitute a refusal from a bank or confirmation of the need for mortgage protection, and proposals to extend the scope of the scheme or what would be applicable under it in terms of for what one was borrowing the money. Those types of reforms are still being examined for application in a future iteration of the scheme.

Deputy John Curran: Will I have a second opportunity to contribute?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will have a second opportunity. He will not be denied his rights.

Deputy John Curran: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Does the Department monitor how the scheme is implemented by the various local authorities? The information we have received from colleagues and so forth is that they are implementing the scheme differently and that there are varying degrees of delay in the processing of applications and the drawdown of funding.

The Minister put several figures on the record. He stated several times that the scheme is open because there is €60 million left. The problem is that local authorities are concerned that although there is €60 million left, there is €220 million in loans yet to be drawn down and they have not seen the colour of the back-up money to underpin that. That is causing concern for local authorities that do not want to pay upfront without seeing what type of scheme is envisaged. The announcement to be made this week by the Minister is crucially important. Everybody knows the scheme is grossly oversubscribed, but the underlying reason for the delay is that local authorities do not know how much money will be provided this year or next year or for what period they might have to carry this loan. The €60 million the Minister stated is available is not sufficient comfort when local authorities know there are other loans in the system and €220 million in loans have been approved.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: There are national criteria for how the Rebuilding Ireland home loan is to be implemented. As I stated, I brought together a group of people to ensure those criteria are being applied consistently across local authority areas. Each local authority has its own credit committee. After an application is approved by the Housing Agency, which acts as a clearing house or backstop, it is up to the local credit committee to make a decision on approval of the loan. That responsibility must rest with the committee.

Data for quarter 1 of 2019 will be published and show exactly what has been happening in
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Each local authority in respect of approvals and drawdowns in that period. We will continue to publish such data. One of the issues about which I am in discussion with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, is more accurate and up-to-date data to be provided more regularly than on a quarterly basis to see whether we can get a much clearer picture as the loan develops over the coming months. That is happening.

Further significant funding is coming. All approvals that have been given will be honoured. I made that commitment several months ago to a colleague of the Deputy’s at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government. The Housing Finance Agency has a significant loan facility available to borrow more funding as needed. Every comfort has been given to local authorities, either in the circular I issued or through direct contact, that they can continue to issue and approve loans and that those loans will be honoured by my Department, working with the Housing Finance Agency. There has been no delay on this. The scheme is not oversubscribed. The rate of approval is different from the rate of drawdown because some people apply in multiple local authority areas and not all approvals are drawn down within a six-month period.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: The Minister stated that approvals will be honoured. However, a person living in a particular local authority may receive approval quite quickly, whereas it may take longer, for whatever reason, including those outlined by Deputy Curran, for a person living in another local authority to receive approval. There is an equity issue, which is why I am asking whether conditions are likely to change when the next tranche of the scheme is announced. If they are, will persons who have applied to local authorities that are slower to grant approval be disadvantaged in spite of being in the same circumstances as a person who received approval from a local authority that is quicker to grant approval? That is an important question in respect of fairness to people in various parts of the country.

Deputy John Curran: This is a good and necessary scheme, which has surpassed the Minister’s wildest expectations. We all want to see it succeed. We also want a level playing pitch. It is important that the Department plays a key role in the oversight and monitoring of implementation across various local authorities and that there be a reasonable expectation that loans are processed and funding drawn down in similar timeframes in each local authority. The Minister stated that €60 million is available and he has repeatedly stated that he informed local authorities that loans will be honoured. Local authorities know that. However, they do not know when additional funds will come on line when the €60 million is spent. There has been an air of uncertainty in recent months, which has contributed to the delay in some drawdowns.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No one who sought approval under the new loan scheme, received approval from the Housing Agency as the first clearing house and their local authority credit committee has been prevented from drawing down that money to buy their home. We have very good timelines in place. However, each local authority has its own credit committee and different demands on it depending on the number of applications it has received. Part of the review we carried out sought greater consistency in timelines across local authority areas.

On the question asked by Deputy O’Sullivan, all loans approved are approved at a rate that is subject to change at the time of drawdown, as is the case with any loan from a financial institution. If four or five months pass following initial approval before one draws down the loan - the mortgage for a house in this case - the conditions may have changed somewhat. The initial €200 million was borrowed at a particular rate and that will not change. As the Housing Finance Agency goes to borrow a further tranche of funding, it may do so at a rate that is higher.
by in the region of 25 basis points or 0.25%. This still has to be clarified with the Housing Finance Agency in the context of the amount it will seek to borrow and the rate at which it thinks it can borrow it. Loans will then be approved at the approval rate the Housing Finance Agency sets with each local authority.

Question No. 41 replied to with Written Answers

Local Authority Housing Provision

42. Deputy Brian Stanley asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the steps he is taking to simplify and speed up the process of approval by his Department for local authority housing schemes. [24032/19]

Deputy Brian Stanley: The question concerns the steps the Department’s officials are taking to simplify and speed up the process for approval by the Department for local authority housing schemes. I approach this in a constructive way. I know the Department cannot magic up houses with the flick of a switch. I am trying to come at this from the point of view of solutions. I have spoken to both the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy English, about this in the past, both inside and outside the Chamber. There are huge delays of two to three years for approval.

Deputy Damien English: I acknowledge that Deputy Stanley understands we cannot just wave a magic wand and deliver housing. He might inform his party’s housing spokesperson of the same logic because he does not seem to understand this. Other members of his party also do not understand it, but I am glad Deputy Stanley does. That is certainly progress.

There are no projects awaiting approval for two or three years. Projects go through many different stages, which I will explain to the Deputy in a moment, and we have made a lot of changes to that process. We have all come across projects in the past that were, for whatever reason, in the system for two, three, four and even five years in some cases, but no one can say to me there is an application sitting in our Department that has been awaiting approval for two or three years. That is certainly not the case. On many occasions colleagues have brought forward examples to the Minister and to me, and when we have checked them out, we have found there are different stories behind them, so I am conscious that very often local information might not match national information. We have brought about a whole new scheme to make this very clear to everyone. We can all track this so we know exactly the progress made on a project.

Social housing projects funded by our Department, like all publicly funded construction projects, must comply with the Government’s capital works management framework, the objectives of which are to ensure cost certainty, value for money and financial accountability. There are nine stages in the framework, which our Department has streamlined to just four for social housing construction projects.

Important steps have already been put in place to improve the timelines involved in the advancement of new social housing capital construction projects. A timeline of 59 weeks is now in place from the bringing forward of an initial proposal to the placing of the construction contract and starting on site, encompassing the full design, planning and procurement processes. This compares favourably with private sector construction projects. I am not aware of
any project, private or public, that from inception has been on site and under construction in 59 weeks. In some cases we come slightly under the timeline but, on average, in the private sector and the public sector, 59 or 60 weeks is regarded as best practice. Sometimes we get there in 50 weeks, which is worth doing.

The 59-week period includes the time required for our Department to assess and approve projects. However, this is just a small element of the timeline.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. He referred to a timeline of 59 weeks, but this is not happening before 59 weeks in many cases. Schemes such as those in Portarlington and Conniberry Way in Portlaoise are all very welcome and all necessary, and I know the Department has taken some steps in this regard, but the process is still very slow and very costly. Since about 2002 or 2003 there has been a requirement, introduced by the Department, that all houses must be architecturally designed. I can tell the Minister of State that the design has not improved. The requirement has led to high maintenance costs because of very bad decisions that look good on paper but are not practical. There are homes that were built in the years following the introduction of this requirement - I can take the Minister of State to them some day he is in County Laois - that finished up being very expensive to heat because of poor decision-making on the part of architects, so there are practical problems there. The four separate stages, as well as the number of steps within each of those four stages, drag out the process. The Part 8 process, whereby planning is passed at local level and the councillors are involved, is not the issue, in my experience. The councillors in general will move quickly with this. I have raised this with the Minister and the Minister of State in the past. What we need is a generic design. There is no reason we cannot have one. We often talk here about the number of houses that were built in the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. I am not arguing with either the Minister or the Minister of State for a return to those designs because, obviously, we want modern designs, but there are good templates there. We should not be starting with a blank canvas with each scheme.

**Deputy Damien English:** I wish to be very clear that our Department has no interest in unnecessarily prolonging the time involved in these proposals other than to comply with the Government-wide rules for capital project oversight. Deputy Stanley and many other Deputies want us to do this, so we do it. We have put in place a project that streamlines the process. I can confirm to Deputy Stanley that the parts of the process involving approval from our Department represent a very small amount of the time allocated and do not delay projects unnecessarily. I wish to be very clear on that. He mentioned two projects in Laois. They were not referred to in his initial question. If he had mentioned them in the original question, I would have brought the relevant information with me and analysed it. I am happy to look at the two projects with him. As I said, there is generally a story behind a case when we look at it. Looking back over all the projects that are there, we are now able to reach our timelines. There are some historical projects that for various reasons might take a little longer. The Minister and I also have our housing delivery team and office to help drive on these projects and to work with local authorities.

The Deputy is probably wrong on the quality of the houses. Any houses we have been involved in funding and opening in recent years under Rebuilding Ireland are of a high-quality design and build and are very efficient to run. The majority of them have building energy ratings of A3 or higher. It is wrong, therefore, to put on the floor of the House that we are building low-quality houses. We are not, and I would have to argue with the Deputy on that.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I am not saying the houses are low-quality. What I am saying is
that they are-----

**Deputy Damien English:** That is what the Deputy said.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** No, that is not the point I made. I said we need a generic template. The Conniberry Way units are finished. The Minister sitting beside the Minister of State opened them. They are of a very high quality. The point I am trying to get across to the Minister of State is that the template for those houses could be used in other counties and other locations in County Laois. They could be used in Donegal, Cavan or anywhere else. The houses are being built to a high standard, but I am telling the Minister of State, on behalf of council officials throughout the State to whom I have spoken, that the Department is scrutinising all the minutiae, every little detail, and drawings are being sent back and forward between local authorities and the Department in the Custom House. That is what is slowing up the process. I am appealing for good-quality housing to be built. I recognise the fact that the housing has been better in recent years. I made that point and said I do not want to go back to 1930s or 1970s designs. We have good models. I estimate that we need six or seven different house types, including one, two, three and four-bedroom houses. We need single-storey housing for disabled and elderly people. We need rural and urban housing. We need about half a dozen or eight different designs, but they are there. Why are we starting every new housing scheme with a blank canvas?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Minister of State to respond. We must have some order.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That is the key point.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has exceeded his time. I call the Minister of State, Deputy English, to respond.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That is what is putting a cost on the Exchequer. Templates would reduce the cost.

**Deputy Damien English:** Each local authority brings forward a house design that suits its area. I do not think Deputy Stanley’s theory that we should have just standard or generic designs is supported by any of the NGOs. No one is demanding we have one standard design. Yes, there are standard specifications we can have for much housing. This is something we in the Department have worked on, and we also work with local authorities to do that. Certain parts of a house can certainly be of a standard template or standard specification, but no one is calling for the same house to be built in every part of the country. I do not think anyone supports that. We want to allow housing to fit into and blend into an area. That is what we try to achieve. However, there are savings to be made, and we have managed them.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The people on the waiting lists will support the proposal I made.

**Deputy Damien English:** Again, I wish to be very clear that there are stages of approval. I am happy to talk through them. We have no time left to do so today, but I will bring the Deputy through the various stages of approval if he so wishes. There is no reason at all the design of a project should delay something unnecessarily. There are quite quick processes out there. Some local authorities have got through the process in 42 weeks, some in 59 weeks, and some take a little longer, but it is possible for a local authority to bring a project through the system in the 40-week bracket if it so wishes and chooses to do so. However, we do not force a design on anyone. That is not what is being asked for.
Land Development Agency

44. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the Land Development Agency; and when legislation is expected in this regard. [24027/19]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta Wallace, agus ádh mór air i bParlaimint na hÉorpa.

**Deputy Mick Wallace**: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. This question relates to the Land Development Agency. Specifically, I ask for an update on the status of the agency and when the legislation is expected. The agency was heralded as groundbreaking and its mandate is to use State land to contribute towards the stability and sustainability of Ireland’s housing market. However, I would argue it has no mandate yet as no primary legislation has been enacted. Will the Minister tell me when the legislation is due before the House? I note that the LDA now has a Twitter page and is hiring a head of urban planning.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy**: It is good to see the Deputy. I congratulate him on his recent campaign.

**Deputy Mick Wallace**: I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy**: The Land Development Agency was established on an interim basis in September 2018 by way of an establishment order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971, pending the enactment of primary legislation, when it will be established as a commercial State agency. An interim board has been appointed to the agency, an interim CEO and establishment team are in place, and recruitment to build the team is well under way. Funding of €20 million is being provided this year to support the agency’s initial activities.

5 o’clock

I expect these issues to be finalised shortly, which will clear the way for the publication of the general scheme and its submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government to be considered for pre-legislative scrutiny. The LDA will play a key role in the implementation of the national planning framework, particularly in terms of the utilisation of public lands and the delivery of housing. The agency is already active in delivering on its remit, especially with the initial basket of public sites that it was requested to progress. These sites have near-term potential for the delivery of 3,000 homes, with the potential for a further 7,000 homes in due course.

**Deputy Mick Wallace**: It would be more transparent for the LDA to be established through primary legislation before it begins its work. The idea of a Minister setting up bodies with such vast power via statutory instrument is not necessarily the sign of a healthy democracy. A former employee of the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, is to be appointed as chief executive officer. Will the Minister explain how Mr. Tim Bouchier-Hayes got a job, given he is involved with McCann FitzGerald, which gave advice on the children’s hospital? He was also on the board and involved in a serious fiasco there.
The statutory instrument setting up the LDA states that the services to be provided by the agency include the development and regeneration of land and property, including structures, for the purposes of delivering housing and the achievement of wider physical, social and economic development and regeneration, as well as supporting the consolidation and replenishment of the publicly owned development landbank, expediting the most effective use of such land. Identifying land for social and economic development is a start but the main goal of the LDA should be to facilitate the development of social and affordable housing. If the LDA is to function properly, it requires complementary legislation to be enacted that deals with landbanking. The Government is currently refusing to address it but I have it going through the system.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** The Deputy is correct that this requires primary legislation, and once we put it on a statutory footing, we can then capitalise it to the tune of €1.25 billion. That will make the Land Development Agency one of the biggest, if not the biggest, players in the land market in the country. It is the State bringing forward State and private land, developing it in a strategic interest for the State and as a public good in the form of social, subsidised and private housing, as well as other things that may be required in the area. We do not want unnecessary delays, so if we can do some preparatory work before the primary legislation, it is what we should do and what we have done. We have an interim chief executive officer and an interim board, and these are in place until the agency goes on a statutory footing. As we have them in place, it is able to progress the eight sites it has. I briefed the Taoiseach only last month on the progress that is happening on each of these sites. It is proceeding in a very transparent way. It is tweeting about the vacancies in the organisation as it gets up and running.

It is important to progress legislation as quickly as possible and that is why I spoke to the Attorney General again on the matter this morning. It is about getting something published as quickly as possible because I do not want any unnecessary delays. At the same time, the agency has its temporary offices and interim board and chief executive officer. It is working on sites.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** Mr. John Moran has said that delivering sustainable and affordable homes for people near their workplaces and social networks is a core part of the agency’s work. This will not be achieved if the Government does not address the elephant in the room, which relates to land and the problems around that. The Government is not taking landbanking legislation seriously and it just wants the issue to go away. It is nuts as it would favour 99% of the Government’s supporters. Will the Government’s need to seek approval from the European Commission on the matter of state aid? As the Minister is aware, Article 107 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union prohibits state aid that distorts or threatens to distort competition. For the LDA to function properly, it would have to distort competition somewhat, as the State needs to lower the price of land if the Government is serious about tackling the challenges around the supply of housing in the country. Will the Minister provide insight into whether discussions with the European Commission are taking place? The Minister did not answer my question as to how someone like Mr. Tim Bouchier-Hayes, who made such a dog’s dinner of the children’s hospital when on the board and working with the advisers, McCann FitzGerald, gets another job from the State?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time may be short here but he should not mention names.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** If the Land Development Agency had been established 20 years ago, we would not have the crisis that we now have in housing or land. It is a very important piece in rebuilding our housing sector in a way that will not break it again like it did in the past.
We must proceed very carefully, and that is why we are putting it on a statutory footing. That is why we have had a number of engagements with the Attorney General on the legislation, which is coming shortly. As a result of the existing Acts, I was able to set it up on an interim basis to get work going on the key sites we have identified. The Deputy has said we are not addressing the land issues, but the purpose of the Land Development Agency is to take State land, as well as private land in the public interest for strategic reasons, into strategic use. We also have a vacant site levy, with €300 million of land under that levy.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** It is useless. The Minister knows it is useless.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** More than 40 sites that had not been developed are under development since the levy came into effect.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** If this land issue is not dealt with correctly, it will be more of a problem than a solution.

### Defective Building Materials

45. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of the mica redress scheme; the date in 2019 from which homes will begin to be repaired under the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23824/19]

81. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the mica redress scheme; if his officials have met Donegal County Council to discuss the details of same; if there is a confirmed commencement date of same; when he expects houseowners can begin to apply to the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23823/19]

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** This relates to the progress in the mica redress scheme for homeowners in counties Donegal and Mayo, which has been shockingly slow. We still have not seen the detail of any scheme, despite the fact that we have been expecting for months an outline of the terms and conditions and the applications. I am asking for a clear update on the current position and the timeline for the scheme’s opening for houses to be remedied.

**Deputy Damien English:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 45 and 81 together.

An expert panel on concrete blocks was established by my Department in 2016 and its terms of reference were focused on the investigation of the problems that have emerged in the concrete blockwork of certain dwellings in counties Donegal and Mayo. The report of the expert panel was published in 2017 and included eight recommendations, which my Department has been actively progressing with the relevant stakeholders.

In October 2018, the Government approved in principle the development of a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to defective concrete blocks. Last month, agreement was reached with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to allocate €20 million to it for 2019. Funding for future years will be agreed annually as part of the normal Estimates process, as we discussed earlier today. The full terms and conditions of the scheme will be finalised over the coming weeks, again in consultation with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.
This process will take account of the engagement that my Department is having with both Donegal and Mayo county councils. In this regard, officials from my Department met both local authority teams last week to discuss implementation arrangements for the scheme in both Donegal and Mayo. The meetings were very productive and further engagement will take place over the coming weeks. On completion of this work, it is intended to revert to the Government on the matter.

Ahead of that work being completed, I cannot be definitive on the date on which the scheme will open for applications. However, the aim will be to complete the outstanding work without delay in order to ensure that the scheme can get underway as early as possible in the autumn.

I have a couple of more seconds-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: The Deputies never remind me when they are over their time.

**Deputy Damien English**: I will make a note and remind you in future. I am conscious the Deputy was not here earlier when I spoke to Deputy Pringle on the matter. We recognise that this is taking longer than any of us would like to get up and running, but it is important that we get it right. The Deputy is familiar with this. At every meeting we had with local residents, we explained the importance of getting-----

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien**: It is the same as everything else, including home loans and land development.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: Deputy McConalogue is well able to ask his own questions.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien**: I know that.

**Deputy Damien English**: This is silly stuff. The Deputy should grow up.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien**: It is serious stuff.

**Deputy Damien English**: In fairness, Deputy McConalogue has kept abreast of these discussions for the past two years, unlike his colleague on the front benches. He understands how serious this is for homeowners and they know how important it is that we get this right. We have had to get the engineering and standard assessment parts right, and that is all in place. We are trying to get this up and running as quickly as possible. It looks like it will be the autumn. I told the residents last year that we had hoped to have been fixing houses by now but we are a few months behind. We should be in a position to fix houses by the autumn.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue**: The response is very disappointing, and the pace of progress and development in the redress scheme has been frustrating for the homeowners across Donegal whose houses are affected. Before the local elections, I asked the Minister and Minister of State on many occasions when this was going before the Cabinet. Both I and the homeowner representatives in Donegal expected the terms and conditions of the full scheme to go before the Cabinet. We expected the workings of the scheme to be approved so it could be opened for applications. What we got a few weeks ago was no more than what we got before, except homeowners on this occasion were told the contribution ratio would be 90:10 between the Government and the homeowners. There was no more detail than that. The Minister of State said the officials would meet officials in Donegal. What has been going on for the past number of months? I was of the view that that was happening and that this was being thrashed
out in full detail, yet here we are now with nothing more than what one get on the back of an envelope. We do not have any detail. We are getting general expectations and hopes in regard to something starting in the autumn. We were told homes would begin to be fixed at the start of this year. Will the Minister of State please tell us if there is any detail because we do not see any?

**Deputy Damien English:** When we met all the residents on the Mica Action Group on a number of occasions, we all agreed that the entire process they are going through is most frustrating. Nobody wants to be in a home that has been affected by these products, and this has been going on for a number of years, but they also clearly understood the importance of it. We got this right through all the different stages. The Government does not intervene in every situation when someone’s home is in a state of disrepair. In this case, a decision was made last October to confirm to everybody in Donegal and Mayo that the Government would intervene and bring forward a scheme. Much work has been done on that scheme since that time. The Deputy is familiar with that. A number of attempts were made to get this dealt with at Cabinet and different issues took over. Brexit and so on might delayed matters somewhat. We are a few months behind where we would like to be but the residents concerned know a scheme is coming forward. They sat with us on many occasions.

Regarding the full details, there has been ongoing engagement with Donegal and Mayo county councils. We made it clear to the Deputy on a number of occasions that this scheme would be administered at a local level in Donegal and Mayo to reach out to people in a clearer way but also to keep costs down and to learn from the pyrite scheme. That element is being ironed out. The scheme will be finalised in the coming weeks and we will be in a position to start the work on the houses in the autumn. The Deputy might not like that but, thankfully, we will be able to help people from the autumn.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The key aspect that has moved progress along at different times in respect of the redress scheme has been the imminence of elections. The initial expert panel was announced in December 2015, a couple of months before the February 2016 general election. What we saw after that was dilly-dallying. The chairman of the expert panel was not appointed until March or April. The panel itself was not appointed until summer 2016, which is after the date the expert panel said initially it would have reported. Once the Government received the report, it sat on Ministers’ desks for months before it was published. Last October, when it looked as though there might be a general election, a scheme was committed to in advance of the budget. A couple of weeks before the local elections we received further confirmation that there would be a scheme but instead of the terms and conditions being published, we were told that officials from the Department would travel to meet Donegal County Council staff to discuss the detail of the scheme. Today, we still do not know the detail of the scheme. We are being asked now to accept that houses will be fixed in the autumn. I sincerely hope they will be but the foot-dragging on this has to stop.

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

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** We have to see the detail of the scheme and get to the stage where the homeowners, who are in an awful way because of the condition of their houses-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Other Members are waiting to contribute.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** -----can apply to a scheme and get their homes fixed.
Deputy Damien English: I want to be very clear on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Murphy, and myself. When a Government intervenes to fix people’s homes with taxpayers’ money the process takes a little time because we have to go through many procedures to do that. We also have to make sure that we fix the houses properly and in a safe manner to ensure people feel safe in their homes again. We met those in the Mica Action Group who are affected in 2016, 2017 and 2018. It was just after an election when I met them first so, please, do not tell me this is election-related. That is silly talk that the Deputy’s Front Bench colleague also continues with.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: We brought it in. We negotiated this in the budget. We are the ones who brought it to the table, not the Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O’Brien, please.

Deputy Damien English: It was not election time when the Minister, Deputy Murphy, was up-----

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: We are the ones who brought it to the table, not the Government.

Deputy Damien English: Am I allowed to speak? The Deputy should tell the truth.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will move on to the next question if there are more interruptions.

Deputy Damien English: These are people’s family homes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy might not like the answers. I have no control over the answers.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: He should tell the truth.

Deputy Damien English: It is a serious conversation. These are people’s-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Damien English: Is the Deputy going to keep going?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are moving on to the next question.

Deputy Damien English: Does the Deputy have any respect for the House?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O’Brien is interrupting. Deputy McConalogue is anxious to get the information-----

Deputy Damien English: Yes. It is a shame.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----and he should be given that right.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is very unfair, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I am sorry for-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O’Brien is almost casting aspersions on Deputy McConalogue. He has to get his answers.
Deputy Damien English: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I have a nine year old at home who has more manners than Deputy O’Brien. To be very clear-----

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Am I supposed to accept that?

Deputy Damien English: -----the reason it was announced in the budget was Deputy McConalogue and many others stressed that it would need to be in the budget or they would not believe it would happen. The Deputy should not tell me it was because of elections when it was something he was demanding. It was important that we signalled at budget time that this scheme would happen. The homeowners wanted to know that. We gave a commitment that we would do that. It is fair to say we are a few months behind. I would be the first to admit that but this scheme will happen.

Shared Accommodation Provision

46. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the expected rental price of the co-living accommodation units; the discussions that took place in relation to co-living accommodation proposals; if he arranged consultations on the proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23191/19]

90. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the protections he will put in place to prevent co-living accommodation developments from becoming high cost, low quality accommodation for low income families or the most socially disadvantaged. [23890/19]

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister and I are former Dublin City Council members. He might recall that when I led the Rainbow Civic Alliance on the council, we abolished bedsits for our senior citizens and prescribed a basic one-bedroom apartment. The Minister now seems to be rushing back to an even tinier concept of living with this co-living plan, which I think appeared in Rebuilding Ireland. What consultations took place on that? Where did this demand come from? Is it not simply Fine Gael kowtowing to developers?

**(Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 46 and 90 together.

I thank the Deputy for the question. In 2018, I published updated Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, to respond to the changing housing needs in light of demographics and the dynamics we are seeing in the urban employment market. An extensive public consultation process took place prior to finalisation of the guidelines during which 63 submissions were made to my Department, all of which are available on my Department’s website. My Department also hosted a consultative workshop prior to finalising the guidelines. I do not believe the Deputy made any submissions as part of that public consultation, which was very well flagged at the time because it was well publicised when it was first announced.

The updated guidelines set out the policy on the range of apartment types needed to meet the accommodation needs of a variety of household types and sizes. This includes the introduction of the shared accommodation or co-living format. This format comprises professionally managed rental accommodation where individual rooms are rented within an overall development
that includes access to shared or communal facilities and amenities. Such developments are only appropriate where responding to an identified urban housing need at particular locations; they are not suitable for families and are not envisaged as an alternative or replacement to the more conventional apartment developments which are provided for elsewhere in those same guidelines.

In assessing proposals for Shared Accommodation, a planning authority must have regard to the need for such a type of accommodation in an area. Planning authorities must also strike a balance between the need for a particular form of accommodation and the need to avoid a proliferation of shared accommodation development to the detriment of the overall objective of providing quality urban apartment development as a viable long-term housing option. Furthermore, there is an obligation on the proposer of a shared accommodation scheme to demonstrate to the planning authority that their proposal is based on an actual accommodation need and to provide a satisfactory evidential base in that regard.

I cannot comment on the expected rental price of such developments as this is dependent on both the market generally as well as the location and accommodation specifics of individual projects. Do they have a gym or a movie room? I refer to those types of developments. Developments of this kind are not intended to provide State subsidised housing for individuals or families; they are designed to meet a particular demand which, although limited in scale, exists in the rental market.

While I am satisfied that the guidelines as issued are robust, given that they are relatively new and it is a new form of accommodation for this country, although not in other countries, my Department will monitor the emerging shared accommodation sector and may issue further additional technical updates to this document as appropriate.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** This is again confusing and difficult to understand. I believe Niall Cussen drafted the specific planning policy requirements - Nos. 8 and 9. The Minister is talking about single shared accommodation of 12 sq. m, which would be smaller than his office, a double or twin accommodation of 18 sq. m - a parking space for a person with a disability is 17 sq. m - and bedrooms of 8 sq. m per person. He seems to be on a road to the capsule living one would find in Tokyo, Japan, at the rate he is going. Distinguished economists and students of the housing market such as Mel Reynolds have said that the fundamental reason for this is to enrich developers. Five co-living bedrooms can fit in a site the same size as a typical two-bedroom apartment. Is that not the fundamental reason for such development? There was demand in Dún Laoghaire, and there is massive demand in my constituency, for houses and apartments, which the Minister is not meeting. Perhaps only 22,000 units will come on-stream this year, with only 4,000 or 5,000 social housing units. He is not meeting the demand that exists. Why on earth are we going down this road?

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

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The British housing market has been characterised as shoebox living. He is becoming an advocate for such shoeboxes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister has one minute to respond.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I thank the Deputy for the supplementary question. When these guidelines were first proposed, he did not make any observations. Was he not paying attention?
Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I made observations.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I will check the website and look for the Deputy’s submission.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I made observations and sought houses and apartments.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No. That is not the same, I am afraid. The Deputy is a little loose in-----

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I made submissions to Rebuilding Ireland. We all did.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will have a second opportunity to come in.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: What we are trying to do with co-living is to bring another choice into our housing market for young professionals who have seen this type of accommodation solution in other cities. We want to ensure there is enough choice in order that people can have a choice of where they live. They do not have that at the moment. That is the real difficulty that many people face in the housing sector today. There is no choice for how they want to live, where they want to live. I admit there is not huge demand for it but there is some demand. If we can accommodate 250 people in new co-living homes over the next 12 months, that will free up other accommodation, houses or apartments that people can rent. Between 21,000 and 23,000 new homes will be built this year and perhaps 1% or not even that might be for co-living. It is meeting a small demand, which will take pressure off other parts of the market. We must look at this in totality. We are not trying to replace social housing with this or to bring back bedsits, it is just bringing an option that we know has worked abroad into the Irish housing market.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: The Minister appears to be offering this to millennial tech workers and he suggests this is an extra provision. There is an enormous need for one-bedroom apartments of a decent size, two-bedroom apartments and so on which the Minister is not addressing. If there is such a demand from the tech sector, why does the Minister not encourage the information technology corporations to buy land and build their own employee accommodation? Why should we take accommodation out of the general mix to meet that demand? Across my constituency and others, more and more applications are coming forward for studio-type bedsit developments. In the past the Minister and I, on Dublin City Council, would have opposed this and would have requested that everyone would have at least a decent one-bedroom apartment for a single citizen living alone. Now we seem to be going in the direction of shoe boxes. That will be another legacy of this Government.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: A primary element in all our plans to build more homes is ensuring that we improve quality, standards and design. The Deputy can visit any social housing home or apartment and he will see the best type of home that can be built in this country today, as it should be. That was not always the way in the past. It might cost a bit extra and it might take more time in the planning but it is important when the State provides housing for those who need the help the most, that it be done to the best quality possible. We are not talking about social housing here or housing for families but about providing an option. The State is not offering or building co-living homes.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Do the young people not deserve better?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: This is providing an option. If people want to avail of that op-
Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: These are 12 sq. m.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: These were introduced a year ago and we have not seen a huge explosion in co-living, because there will not be so significant a demand for it that it will take over the market, but there will be some. This will provide for that demand and will take pressure off other parts of the housing sector. We must recognise that there are so many more individuals who are looking for their own accommodation. If they want to live in their own apartment we need to build that single-bedroom apartment or studio for them. If they want to live in a shared arrangement, to build a two- or three-bed co-living option or something beyond that based on six to eight people sharing, as per the guidelines published recently, it is their choice.

*Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 40.*

**Local Authority Housing Provision**

48. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the extent to which the restoration of a public house building programme can be reintroduced with a view to the provision of an adequate supply of local authority housing (details supplied); the degree to which comparisons have been made between a once-off capital cost and an ongoing and possibly never ending current cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23996/19]

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** This question seeks to make a comparison between enhanced capital expenditure on local authority housing compared with annual subvention through the housing assistance payment, HAP, or other similar support services to local authorities with a view to achieving the best value for money.

**(Deputy Damien English):** Over the course of Rebuilding Ireland, the Government is committed to meeting the housing needs of more than 138,000 households. This will be achieved through blended delivery, with over 50,000 homes being delivered through build, acquisition and leasing programmes, and some 88,000 further households being supported through the housing assistance payment, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and other schemes. A social house building programme is already well under way, with local authorities and approved housing bodies significantly expanding new build output year on year. We have seen increases of seven or eight times in activity over the past 12 to 18 months. It is important that we are back building houses and we are committed to that as a Government and under Project 2040, which allocated the funds to increase the social housing stock to 12,000 units annually until 2028.

At the end of 2018, the housing needs of some 90,500 households were being supported under current-funded programmes. If all the funding provided for these 90,500 households had been transferred to capital expenditure, to support building or buying homes, it would only have delivered approximately 5,500 homes, leaving no resources available to support the other 85,000 households. Looking at it another way, it would take almost €20 billion to provide a new-build local authority home for the 90,500 households supported under current-funded programmes at the end of 2018.

Rebuilding Ireland is working well, with annual delivery targets consistently exceeded.
Dáil Éireann

This has been achieved through a blended approach to delivery, the mix of which is evolving year on year, such that in 2021, the final year of Rebuilding Ireland, more households will be supported through build, acquisition and leasing programmes than through HAP and RAS.

I am confident that the actions, targets and resources available under Rebuilding Ireland provide a strong platform for the continued delivery of high quality, value-for-money social housing supports for those on social housing waiting lists.

As all Members know, if it was possible to build houses immediately and deliver them straight away that would be best, but one cannot. People need homes today. When we started Rebuilding Ireland some years ago and focused resources to build new housing, we also had to find homes there and then. There is a combination of current and capital spending and that blend will change in coming years and rightly so. This Fine Gael-led Government is committed to building social housing.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To what extent have comparisons been made and benefits examined, given that capital is a once-off cost and the current support services are an annual cost, which I think is in the region of €400 million to €500 million annually?

Deputy Damien English: Naturally, we would rather invest all taxpayers’ money into capital projects but we need housing today. The numbers availing of HAP housing in the last three years is around 48,000 families. These could not have been built any quicker in a capital programme. Over time, we are committed to replenishing the social housing stock and bringing it to a level similar to other European countries. We are committed to a level of social housing stock. Other parties are not going there. They talk about numbers but no one reaches our ambition. We have set aside money to put behind that and the pipeline projects, and the new processes to deliver on that because we do believe in building social houses that the State owns. While we are building them, however, we must find people homes for today and the months ahead and for next year. That means we must work with the private sector to subsidise that and support that. We would much rather that money went into social housing, however other Governments did not continue to build social housing. Previous Governments ceased building social housing but we restarted that over the last two and a half or three years. We are making good progress, on which we will continue to build.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Normally I would agree with the Minister of State but there is an issue in respect of subventing through HAP or rent support, to the extent of €2,000 per house or family, per month, compared with the benefits of greater capital expenditure. To what extent has such a comparison been undertaken, because €2,000 per month is almost double the cost of a mortgage payment for the same family?

Deputy Damien English: It is about trying to stretch taxpayers’ money to deliver as many houses as we possibly can and using current funding schemes, which gives us the extra houses we need today. It is a supply issue overall. The cost of rent and HAP will come down when we increase supply. We recognise that we have a duty to find people homes today, which is what we are doing. That is why last year, more than 5,000 individuals and thousands of children left a homeless situation and are now in housing through a combination of schemes, which are capital and current funded. It is a good use of money in the short term but the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, and I, as well as the Department and Government, are absolutely committed to construction of social houses through a capital build programme. However, that takes time to get to where we want. Under our plans, this year,
there will be 10,000 new houses, and that will increase to 12,000 in coming years. I encourage other Departments to match that and deliver the same.

Local Authority Members’ Remuneration

49. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when a report (details supplied) into the pay and conditions for councillors will be published. [23896/19]

958. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the date on which the final report of the independent review of the role and remuneration of elected members to local authorities will be published. [23318/19]

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I wish to ask my good friend, the Minister of State, when the report by Sara Moorhead SC, on pay and conditions for councillors will be published. Obviously, the 949 councillors who were elected last week and others will be interested in this. Many young people will be entering politics for the first time. I know that feeling as it was 20 years ago today when I entered politics for the first time in Meath, alongside the young man, Deputy English, who is sitting beside the Minister of State. While an interim report was published before Christmas, when will we see publication of the report itself?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan):** I did not think it was 20 years ago - that was the same day I entered myself.

I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 958 together.

Following the recent local elections, our 31 new councils are beginning their five-year term serving their communities. I want to join with the Deputy in wishing each of the 949 councillors elected the best of luck in the work that lies ahead for them in the next five years.

To support this critical work, the Government is committed to modernising the role of local authority members and ensuring that the associated remuneration package is fair and equitable. Taking on board feedback from local authority elected members and their representative bodies regarding the current remuneration regime, my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, and I agreed to the commissioning of a review of the role and remuneration of councillors. Ms Sara Moorhead SC was commissioned to carry out the review in June 2018. She submitted an interim report to me at the end of November 2018 and this has been made publicly available on the Department website.

It was at this point where some delay occurred. To progress towards the completion of a final report, it was necessary to survey all local authority members and to seek financial information from all local authorities. In both cases, deadline extensions were granted to allow sufficient time for comprehensive responses to be made. The information requested has now been received and collated and the drafting of the final report is progressing well. I expect to receive it shortly. Following the necessary consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the review will be submitted to Government and published thereafter.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** In the 20 years since we were first elected to local authorities the workload has increased substantially for those who find themselves as members of local
authorities. The requirements for legislative knowledge and how councillors must deal with development plans and other areas are far more demanding. Crucially, the pressures, especially on young people entering public life, are considerable. We discussed this matter in the joint committee before Christmas. Representatives of all parties experience this when it comes to encouraging people and managing the abuse to which they are subjected. These people are effectively community leaders. The people in this House are professional politicians but the people at local level are community leaders. The online abuse for those who are trying to do good for their community is abhorrent. There should be a proper package in place in order that they can combine their work life and commitment to local government in light of the pressures that are being put on them now.

I appreciate that the Minister of State gave a deadline extension. Will the Minister of State indicate whether the report that is to be published has been cleared by the Department on the financial side? Will the report to be published be stood over from the financial side?

**Deputy John Paul Phelan**: I agree with the Deputy. This is something I found during the course of the election. The pressures referred to by the Deputy, especially those relating to social media abuse, for the want of a better term, were an issue in attracting people to stand for election. We need to have a broader discussion in that regard.

The Deputy is also correct in pointing out that the workload, attendance at meetings, the number of meetings and the number of different groups in which councillors are involved have increased significantly in the past 20 years. This is why, as well as reviewing remuneration and what councillors receive for their work, we also asked Ms Moorhead to review the role of councillors and what we see the role being in future. We sought a view to point towards additional roles that should be devolved to local government as well.

The report is being finalised at the moment with drafting. Once that is done there will be consultation between my officials, myself and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Then there will be discussion at Government. I am committing to the House that the report will be published as soon as that discussion has happened.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

**Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

**Misuse of Drugs**

**Deputy Gino Kenny**: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for taking this Topical Issue matter today.

I hope there can be some clarity on the confiscation of cannabidiol or CBD products around Ireland. Many people are confused about the legality of CBD products. Even I am confused on what is legal or not legal.

In recent months some shops in the country have been raided, for the want of a better word, by the police and the Customs and Excise. They have confiscated CBD products such as CBD flower, CBD tea and CBD oil. This is a great inconvenience for the shop owners because they
are not breaking any law.

This stems from the law and in particular, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. There is no exception whatsoever for tetrahydrocannabinol, THC, trace amounts. This is where we run into trouble. The shop owners are perfectly legitimate and law-abiding. They are selling products that are perfectly legal but obviously there is a situation whereby the interpretation by some arms of the State, in particular, the Customs and Excise and the police, contravenes that of other arms of the State, namely, the Health Products Regulatory Authority and the Food Safety Authority. The latter authorities maintain there can be trace amounts of THC in CBD products of up to 0.2%. That is the background. Some of these shop owners will possibly face criminal sanction and thus the stakes are serious indeed.

If the police of this State interpreted the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 by the letter of the law, then there are shops not far from here on Grafton Street that are selling CBD products with trace amounts of THC at 0.2%. If that is the case, then the manager should be questioned by the police. There is a major contradiction in this regard.

Many people use CBD products and find them beneficial for their well-being. This is putting them in a situation whether they do not know whether they are breaking the law. This is a mess and I hope the Minister of State at the Department of Health can bring some clarity.

I have a document to hand from the Department of Health. I understand there are proposed amendments to the 1977 Act to provide for inclusion of trace amounts of THC up to 0.3%. That would give clarity because there is no clarity whatsoever around this issue at present. I hope the Minister of State can elaborate on that point.

The problem lies in laws that were written 42 years ago. They have not been updated to reflect what people are doing at the moment, including CBD shops and CBD derivatives. There has almost been a boom in production of these products during the past two and a half years.

I hope the Minister of State can give some clarity for the people who are listening. Many people are looking and listening to this segment in the Dáil tonight to see where they are going, as shop owners and people who use CBD. I hope they will not be criminalised.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly):** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue in the House today. Revenue’s Customs service has primary responsibility for the prevention, detection, interception and seizure of controlled drugs intended to be smuggled or illegally imported into the State. An Garda Síochána has primary responsibility for the investigation of any offences relating to the smuggling or illegal importation of controlled drugs and sole responsibility for drug law enforcement within Ireland.

Tetrahydrocannabinol, which is commonly referred to as THC, is a derivative of cannabis, which is a controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 and regulations and orders made thereunder. This legal framework gives effect in Ireland to the international conventions on narcotic and psychotropic substances and must be enforced by the relevant authorities.

Cannabidiol, which is commonly referred to as CBD, is not a controlled drug following extraction from the cannabis plant, as it is not psychoactive. However, if CBD products or preparations also contain THC in any quantity, then these are considered controlled drugs. The legislation currently in operation does not provide for any allowable trace element of THC.
I am informed that it is Revenue policy to treat CBD products that contain any trace elements of THC as controlled drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977. Thus, they are liable to detention upon their importation and, ultimately, seizure pursuant to sections 33 and 34 of the Customs Act 2015.

Under current legislation, it is possible to apply for a licence for the growing of hemp from seed varieties specified by the European Commission. These seeds contain a maximum THC level of 0.2% and are deemed eligible for the purposes of Article 1 of EU Regulation No. 1307/2013. Revenue has advised that it has been involved in some seizures of CBD containing trace elements of THC in recent months, and relates seizures at the point of importation which can include seizures at ports or airports where the product is intercepted in a passenger’s personal luggage; seizures at An Post mail centres where the product is intercepted in parcels addressed to either shops or private individuals; and controlled deliveries of product to shops or individuals in conjunction with An Garda Síochána following initial interception in a mail centre or otherwise. The Deputy will be aware that the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, is in the process of establishing a medical cannabis access programme, MCAP, which aims to facilitate access to certain acceptable cannabis products, which have not been authorised as medicines by the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA. The programme will permit cannabis products to be prescribed for three specific medical indications. It is envisaged that over a period, a variety of medical cannabis products - both THC and CBD with trace elements of THC and manufactured by multiple producers - will be available for use in the MCAP. Following consultation with relevant State authorities, the Minister may give consideration to the introduction of legislation to accommodate an acceptable trace level of THC in CBD products.

Deputy Gino Kenny: That does not answer my question. I am sure the police of this State have better things to be doing than breaking people’s doors down to confiscate products that are not illegal. I reiterate that what these shops are selling is not illegal, but at the same time, these products are being confiscated. There is obviously a contradiction in the law, and there is a contradiction in the arms of the law. The Minister of State is still not answering the question. The document I have from the Department of Health states: “It is envisaged that national legislation will be amended in the future to exempt finished products containing trace amounts of THC at levels not greater than 3%.” Is the law going to change, or is it not? Is this going to continue, because it will continue and will get worse because CBD products and cannabis derivatives have become very popular? People use them and find them beneficial. The lack of clarity on this issue is making it confusing for shop owners and those who use CBD products. Is the law in this regard going to be amended? The World Health Organization, WHO, stated in January that it should be amended. Even in the European Union, subsidies are given to farmers for hemp under the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Cannabis is not as dirty a word as it used to be, and we should embrace cannabis as a drug, a plant, and for all its purposes. Can the Minister of State comment on the amendment of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 in regard to cannabis?

Deputy Jim Daly: It is an offence to cultivate, import, export, produce, supply and possess cannabis, except in accordance with a ministerial licence issued by the Minister for Health. The Misuse of Drugs (Exemption) Order 2017 limits the purposes for which such licences for cannabis can be issued, including, for example, forensic analysis or research, including research involving the cultivation of cannabis for use in approved clinical trials. An exception to the legislation relates to the cannabis-based medicine, Sativex. This prescription-only medicine is authorised by the HPRA as a treatment for symptom improvement in adult patients with moder-
ate to severe spasticity due to multiple sclerosis, who have not responded to other medication and who demonstrate improvement during initial trials. It is important to take this opportunity to confirm that the Government has no plans to legalise what is commonly referred to as recreational cannabis.

On the issue of the interpretation of the law, we have to operate under existing law, and as the Deputy will be aware, interpretation of that law is a matter for the courts.

**Hospitals Funding**

Deputy Micheál Martin: I again raise the issue of the plans to extend and build a new children’s unit in Cork University Hospital, CUH. The Minister of State will be familiar with this but I must articulate my extreme concern at the lack of transparency and honesty in answering clearly whether there is a specific budget for this project and a meaningful timeline for its planning and extension. The Minister of State will be aware that the development of regional units is an essential part of the national paediatric model. Substantial funding has been allocated for the national children’s hospital. It will probably cost up to €2 billion, and that involves the completion of Blanchardstown and Tallaght hospitals.

The national model of care for paediatrics involves regional units, Cork being the largest of those and Galway and Limerick the others. The funding envelope for the Cork project was estimated to be between €34 million and €38 million. It was approved for preliminary planning in 2015. There are issues not only in respect of the building, but in the availability of surgical and anaesthetic care. It is available at the moment but the facility has to be built, otherwise the capacity of Cork to attract and retain sufficient paediatric anaesthetic and surgical cover will erode. That will have serious implications for the national children’s hospital, and, particularly, for children in the Munster region in particular, because the Cork paediatric facility is essentially a Munster facility. It performs 5,000 operations at the moment. The national children’s hospital would not be able to take that volume of surgical demand on board. In addition, the paediatric centre in Cork deals with paediatric neurology, respiratory, cystic fibrosis, endocrinology, diabetes, allergy, and cardiology cases. It is delivering specialist care as close to home as possible, in line with the national model, in all of those specific areas and it does approximately 5,000 operations per annum. Crumlin does approximately 22,000 at the moment.

We have received different answers to various questions we have put on this. For example, last March, it was stated that funding had been provided for the detailed planning, and that it was funded up to 2019 for detailed planning and design. That reply was signed by Jim Curran, the head of estates in the HSE. Furthermore, on 3 May, I received another reply which stated:

The preliminary scheme design has been completed of the proposed extension to the Cork University Hospital paediatric unit and reviewed by the CUH project team. Progression to the next stage of developed design and submission of a planning application is subject to the availability of capital funding. The HSE capital plan for 2019 is currently being finalised and will be submitted to the Minister for consideration.

That differs from the reply that was given to my colleague in March, which suggested that all the funding was provided for the detailed planning and design and that it was fully funded. I have the letter from 12 March, signed by Jim Curran, which stated that CUH was at stage 1 and was funded up to stage 2b, which is detailed design and planning. That seems to suggest it was
covered for detailed design and planning. It also stated that a capital submission to the national capital and property steering group was being prepared. This was back in March. People who are on the ground working in the hospital are fed up of all the verbosity and meaningless language around this. They want to know whether this is provided for in the capital plan for 2019, 2020, and 2021, because we know that the memorandum from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to the Government on broadband mentions the need for €343 million for the national children’s hospital. We need straight answers because otherwise, it seems to me that the regions, and the Cork facility in particular, are being neglected. I want a straight answer.

Deputy Jim Daly: I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the paediatric development at CUH. A national model of care for paediatric healthcare services in Ireland has been developed by the HSE and sets out a vision for high quality, integrated, accessible healthcare services for children from birth to adulthood with an emphasis on early detection and prompt treatment. The model will ensure that all children access high quality services in an appropriate location and within an appropriate timeframe. The model of care explicitly supports the development of the new children’s hospital and an integrated national network of paediatric units. This will strengthen the connections and roles for local and regional paediatric units, including the regional unit in Cork University Hospital, CUH.

As the Deputy is aware, there are a number of distinct phases within the proposed paediatric developments at CUH. The HSE has advised the Department that phase 1 of the development has recently been completed and entails an outpatient facility and day-care, including a separate outpatient clinic facility for children in CUH, plus day-care for surgery and facilities for children living with diabetes and cystic fibrosis and their medical and nursing teams. There is also an attached facility for paediatric medical education.

Phase 2 of the paediatric development includes 74 inpatient paediatric beds and enhanced facilities for children who have to spend some time at the hospital. It is currently at the design stage. Capital funding for phase 2 is provided up to the detailed design and planning stage in 2019. I understand from the HSE that a capital submission for phase 3 of the development is being prepared to enable the “shelled” construction of this phase during the construction of phase 2. This submission will be considered by the HSE’s capital steering committee.

I am happy to confirm that the paediatric development at CUH has been included in the Project Ireland 2040 policy initiative announced last year. This provides €10.9 billion for health capital developments across the country, including national programmes and individual acute, primary and social care projects. The delivery of these projects and programmes, including developments in Cork, will result in healthcare facilities that allow for implementation of new models of care and the delivery of services in high quality modern facilities.

My Department is continuing to work with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE in a process to finalise as soon as possible a multi-annual capital plan for the HSE, which will include capital projects to be funded in 2019 and beyond, having regard to the available capital funding and the number of large national capital projects currently under way. The availability of funding determines the timeframe for the delivery of capital projects such as the proposed paediatric development at CUH. It is important to recognise that all capital development proposals must progress through detailed appraisal, planning, design and tender stages before a firm timeline or funding requirement can be established.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is time for honest and straight answers. This is a variation of
the same reply that has been given for the past six months, maybe even the past 12 months. It is incredible that the capital plan for 2019 has not yet been finalised and published even though we are in June. Is the Government taking people for a joke? This is crazy stuff. The Government is still considering the capital plan. I have told the House what Mr. Jim Curran, the HSE’s head of estates, wrote to me, namely, that progression to the next stage of development, design and submission of a planning application was subject to the availability of capital funding. Is that capital funding available for the detailed planning and design stage? Is funding available for the hospital’s construction?

In terms of paediatric care, this represents a shocking discrimination against the regions. Three facilities in Dublin are covered - that is fine and I wish them the best of luck and I have no issue there except with the inability to control costs - yet there seems to be nothing for the rest. I would ask the Minister of State to contradict me. Is it the case that funding has not been provided for this project over the next three years? Is it the case that no capital money has been provided for this children’s facility in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022? Can the Minister of State contradict me? I would be happy if he could, but it is time to be honest with the people on the ground who are providing this service. They cannot find answers.

Do not cite Project Ireland 2040. It is a wonderful piece of fiction and made it into the geography exam in this year’s leaving certificate. The terminology involved in that surprised me a little by the way, but the question of who is setting exams these days and the politics of that is another day’s work. Project Ireland 2040 is a piece of fiction, though. People want to know what the budget for 2020 to 2023, inclusive, will be. I read the memo from the Secretary General of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding the broadband plan. He is saying that the Government’s national development plan, NDP, figures do not align with the reality of available funding. It is time to come clean and tell the people of Cork whether money will be available in the next two or three years. Please, do not mention Project Ireland 2040.

Deputy Jim Daly: I promise not to mention it so as to avoid the risk of annoying the Deputy opposite, but I will not announce the details of the capital spending plan now. They must be submitted by the HSE and finalised.

Deputy Micheál Martin: But this is June.

Deputy Jim Daly: A submission has been made to the HSE to include phase 3 in its capital plan, but it is yet to be finalised by the HSE’s steering committee on capital projects and submitted to the Minister. As such, I cannot preordain what the plan will contain or announce it selectively in the Chamber on a case-by-case basis. We must wait to get the plan from the HSE. When it comes to the Department, the Minister, Deputy Harris, will be in a position to confirm funding, but I cannot do so ahead of then.

I do not see anything dishonest in my reply. I have given the House the facts as they are.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State has been given a reply that he has read out.

Deputy Jim Daly: I refute the Deputy’s allegation that there is a dishonest element to the reply. I cannot preordain what will happen with the capital plan. When the Department receives it from the HSE, the Minister will publish it for everyone’s information.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is there funding to take this project to the planning stage?
Deputy Jim Daly: It is funded up to the detailed design and planning stage. The Deputy understands the phases of development from when he worked in what is now the Department of Health.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I understand the language the Minister of State has read out. It tells me that nothing is happening.

Deputy Jim Daly: A submission in respect of phase 3 is being made under the capital plan, but I cannot confirm-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: This has been going on since 2015.

Deputy Jim Daly: That is a matter for the Deputy to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Members, but we must move on

Litter Pollution

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister for taking this debate. Ballymun has been given what can only be described as a bitter pill to swallow in the recent Irish Business Against Litter, IBAL, report on littering. Ballymun is not unique when it comes to having litter and illegal dumping problems. Across the city, illegal dumping and littering have become a major problem, as they have nationally. The damning report from IBAL does not do justice to the considerable amount of work being done by local residents, community groups, Ballymun TidyTowns and Dublin City Council and its personnel. In fact, many residents in Ballymun deserve recognition and commendation for the hard work and dedication they have shown in improving their area and the quality of life for the people there. Communities and residents in many parts of Ballymun have transformed their environment and great credit is due to them. The IBAL report does not reflect the work being done by such dedicated and conscientious people.

It is clear that we have a serious problem with illegal dumping and littering. It should also be clear that the report identifies a particular area of Ballymun that has long been a bone of contention, that being the shopping centre where the report has stated much of the illegal dumping and littering has taken place. The vacant shopping centre site is located on Main Street and was once at the heart of Ballymun and its community. Now, this derelict site is an eyesore that greets people as they drive into or otherwise enter Ballymun.

Since the privatisation of Dublin City Council’s bin services, illegal dumping has escalated to the point where, despite the use of private companies, combatting the problem is costing the council substantial amounts of money. In 2018, Dublin City Council spent €1.16 million cleaning up illegal dumping. That was on top of the money paid to private companies. It is unfortunate that so large a sum of money has to be spent in such a manner. Without the scourge of illegal dumping, that money could have contributed to community projects instead.

We have repeatedly called on Dublin City Council to increase the frequency of street cleaning and road sweeping. Currently, these functions are at the discretion of a supervisor or inspector, follow a complaint or are carried out where a road or street needs cleaning. This leads to a lack of consistency. Clearly, the system is not workable in many areas. We need to return to a system of consistent weekly cleaning of roads and streets.
The ill-judged decision to remove litter bins from roads, streets, parks and shops has led to increased littering in many areas across the whole city. When an area has a littering problem, it is disheartening for many people in the community. People in Ballymun do not want to live like this. They are as passionate about the environment as anyone else. The Rediscovery Centre in Ballymun is an example of recycling at its best. It is also an example of the community’s commitment to the betterment of the local area. The Rediscovery Centre, which is unique in Europe, places Ballymun at the centre of environmental awareness. Many local schools are actively involved with the centre, which teaches a new generation about the responsibilities and benefits of looking after the local community and the environment. People need to be educated at an early stage and at an early age.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I agree with him that this problem is caused by a relatively small minority of people whose behaviour does not do justice to the many communities that are making considerable efforts in this regard, as is Dublin City Council. I represent similar areas that are afflicted in the same way. It is important that the implications of this survey are taken seriously by those responsible. As the Deputy has indicated, Dublin City Council has primary responsibility for this issue. I am responsible for providing the legal framework within which it operates. To be fair to the council, with which I am familiar, it had a litter plan that ran from 2016 to 2018. I am sure it is in the course of being renewed. The council has an active litter warden service and operates a system of fines. Anyone who examines the statistics will be disappointed to see the rate of payment of fines and the level of success in prosecuting those involved.

I think the Deputy is right when he says that everyone needs to look at the detailed findings in the report. As he has said, the findings relate to several particular locations and the illegal dumping was not confined to those who do not accept their responsibility to use the collection service. Some of this is random. Coffee cups and cans are thrown away carelessly. As the Deputy has confirmed, there is evidence that some of the litter that was identified was very old, which suggests that areas had not been swept for a long time. It is important for Dublin City Council to sit down with the community to look at how improvements can be made.

We provide support for awareness campaigns in schools. We fund the green schools initiative and the anti-graffiti awareness schemes. Local authorities can apply for funds. In addition, I have increased the budget for our anti-dumping initiative by 50%, to over €3 million, this year. Applications from the various local authorities had to be received by the end of April. I hope the city council, which is aware of the difficulties in a number of parts of the city, has made submissions to tackle this problem. I am familiar with the street sweeping approach. The Deputy is correct when he says this happens infrequently. Nonetheless, the council seeks to respond to individual complaints when it receives requests for street sweeping on the fixyourstreet.ie platform.

While the issues raised by the Deputy are disappointing - I can understand his frustration - there is an opportunity for us to develop a multi-agency approach to these matters that involves the community and some of the regional and national enforcement authorities that are seeking to target illegal dumping, in particular, this year. I am wholly sympathetic to the Deputy’s concerns. I think reports like this can act as a spur to improvements. The overall picture depicted in this report is one of improvement. Some areas that have been found wanting in the past have
improved their performances significantly by working together. I hope the same improvements can be achieved in respect of Ballymun.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** It is clear that there is pride in the community of Ballymun. Those who litter or dump illegally strike at the very heart of the community. There are many reasons for the litter problem in Ballymun. I have outlined a number of them. There are many reasons to be proud of Ballymun. There is a great community spirit and sense of community there. This report, which is negative about Ballymun, does not reflect on the many positive aspects of the area. The problem is not insolvable. It will require actions and determinations from the council working with the community. When I was a councillor, refuse was collected far more frequently. A planned timetable was put in place to ensure each area and each street received a refuse collection service on a weekly basis. The situation across the entire city has deteriorated since we moved away from that approach. We have stepped backwards from putting bins into parks and in front of shops. They have been taken away in certain areas because people were dumping large quantities of rubbish in them. That step backwards has helped to increase the amount of litter and illegal stuff thrown around the place across Ballymun and other areas. It is clear that the privatisation of the service in Dublin City Council has not worked. When the city council was in charge, we did not have the problems we have now. Those problems have escalated since the city council service was privatised. Dublin City Council is paying extra money on top of that. The Minister has put in extra money as well. The private services are there. The Minister is putting money in. Dublin City Council and the Minister are making top-up payments. The situation has deteriorated over the years nonetheless. I think it is mad. We should consider the possibility of returning this service to the control of local authorities.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I simply cannot agree with the Deputy’s final point. Nothing in this report suggests there are deficiencies in the way litter is being collected or bins are being emptied. The report indicates that people are failing to use the weekly collection facilities. A small minority of people seem to be systematically dumping in areas where they can get away with it. That has nothing to do with the efficiency of bin lorries or segregation. Perhaps it indicates that some people do not understand the system and are not operating it properly. In a small minority of cases, people are not willing to co-operate. I agree with the Deputy that the Rediscovery Centre in Ballymun is a fantastic phenomenon. It emphasises prevention, reuse and recycling, which must be at the heart of our strategy. There must be an effective collection service that is used by people in an informed way. We need to see the collectors helping people to use their services more often and in a better and more informed manner. Dublin City Council is responsible for enforcement and effectiveness in this area. I think the council should consider these issues as it formulates its litter plan for 2019 and beyond. To give the council its due, we are seeing improvements in several parts of the city. This problem is not a universal one. The city council is not in the corner being pointed at. It has had many successes as well. Perhaps it is a question of refocusing on particular areas that have difficulty, such as Ballymun. In my own area, parts of Coolock are suffering from the same sorts of problems.

**Irish Prison Service**

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accepting this important issue for discussion. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, for being here. With no disrespect to him, I am disappointed the senior Minister could not be available given the issues at stake. Through my work in the Committee of Public Accounts since last January questioning
and researching for the questioning of the Irish Prison Service and the Department of Justice and Equality, tens of prison officers and other prison staff from all over the country have come to me unsolicited to share their concerns about what is going on within the Prison Service. I put on record, very clearly, that the vast majority of prison staff work extremely hard in a very difficult and challenging environment. They deserve our respect and support, including proper remuneration, equipment, terms and conditions and facilities. Despite utterances by the prison officers’ union, those facilities should include the availability of hot meals and tuck shop facilities while on duty.

Sadly, a small number of prison staff, at various levels, including senior ranks, are supporting, nurturing and facilitating a culture of *omerta*, whereby what goes on in the prison and Prison Service stays in the Prison Service - “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”. Through the evidence alleged to me - and to the Government through various protected disclosures, media reports and the Gilheaney report, which it has been sitting on for three months without publishing - it is clear that in some instances there is a parallel investigative, judicial and prosecution system within individual prisons and the Irish Prison Service. I am sure the Minister of State will agree, and certainly the Minister for Justice and Equality who is a solicitor in private life would agree, that we cannot allow this to continue.

I have met tens of prison officers over the past few months and have received reports from them that victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault have been bought off and pressurised to accept money instead of going through due process with An Garda Síochána. It has been alleged to me, and proof provided, that career blocking and spurious transfers have taken place against those who do not play ball and do not row in with the few who pursue and nurture corrupt procedures and systems. On the misappropriation of State funds: it is alleged a governor channelling funds and materials owned by the State to the governor’s favourite sporting clubs, organisations and charities. Even - listen to this one Minister - having their homes decked out with prison materials from the prison workshop, put in by staff on duty for the Prison Service at the behest of the governor in question. A store’s employee in another prison selling prison uniforms and equipment online when found out was allowed to resign without any recourse to the rigours of the law and without any recovery to the State. Mess committee and tuck shop profits were flagrantly used for sporting trips abroad, including a significant trip to Savannah and New York, costing tens of thousands of euro, to the benefit of just a few at the expense of many.

In terms of illegal surveillance, I have evidence, as does the Government and it is sitting on it, that covert cameras were put in place to monitor prison officers in their workplace who were not implicated in or suspected of any wrongdoing. Covert listening devices were placed in visiting boxes, listening to solicitors and their clients, betraying the age-old law that we must respect this confidentiality. Covert cameras were placed in Portlaoise Hospital to monitor prison staff but, of course, also the poor Joe Soaps who went in there to have their medical issues dealt with. Surveillance of prison staff outside the prison environment: a company, AOC Security Solutions, was paid €28,500 by the State, and that is all we know about, to carry out this work. It has been alleged to me that it was provided with false identification to get into prison and install equipment to spy on hard-working prison staff, and we are paying for it.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):** I thank the Deputy for raising these very serious issues this evening. I also wish to convey the apologies of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, who cannot be here because he is dealing with the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill 2017 in the Seanad as we speak. However, he will note with great interest what the Deputy has just said. As the Deputy
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will be aware, the Inspector of Prisons furnished the Minister with a copy of the report of her investigation, carried out under section 31 of the Prisons Act 2007, into allegations of improper surveillance and other wrongdoing in prisons. The Minister is considering the report in the light of recent advice from the Attorney General with a view to publishing it in accordance with section 31 of the Prisons Act 2007. This will provide the basis for consideration of what further steps may need to be taken. It is his intention to publish that report as soon as possible.

I can advise the Deputy that a number of policies and procedures are available both within the Department of Justice and Equality and the Irish Prison Service in respect of the various issues raised. All matters relating to bullying, harassment and sexual harassment are addressed by the service under its dignity at work policy. Regarding assaults, any criminal act carried out within our prisons, including an assault on a staff member, should be reported to An Garda Síochána for investigation and prosecution. The Irish Prison Service’s policies on dignity at work, protected disclosures and the grievance process are accessible to all employees. I can also advise the Deputy that there is an extensive financial control environment in place in the Irish Prison Service. As part of its protected disclosures policy, workers are encouraged to report any concerns about relevant wrongdoing which come to their attention in connection with their employment without fear of penalisation.

In respect of an independent prisons inspectorate, Ireland has signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, OPCAT, but has yet to ratify this instrument. The protocol is preventative in nature and provides for the establishment of national preventive mechanisms which would inspect facilities where a person is held involuntarily. This instrument impacts on a number of sectors and a consultation process with key stakeholders took place during 2018. On foot of these consultations, a draft scheme is being prepared which the Minister intends to circulate to stakeholders for their comments as soon as possible before it is finalised for submission to Government for approval and transmission to the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel for formal drafting this year.

I take note of what the Deputy said and will ensure that the Minister is made aware of the serious issues raised.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I appreciate there was a pre-prepared statement for the Minister of State to read and I appreciate him being here. I am doing this with the benefit of Dáil privilege because the shutters come down, whether at meetings of the Committee of Public Accounts or the justice committee, in the media or in written and oral parliamentary questions. Everybody knows what is going on but nobody wants to know. I want the Government to publish the Gilheaney report. Because of the mismanagement of this illegal surveillance that went on under the Government’s watch, the State is liable to cases being taken by many prison staff who were illegally surveilled, prisoners, solicitors and so on, which could financially expose the State to an awful lot of money. The Government must get on and publish the report. Beyond that, I call specifically on the Minister of State to get the Minister to acknowledge my call and to give a response. We need to establish an independent inspectorate of the Prison Service, at arm’s length from the service, with GSOC-style statutory powers. The Inspector of Prisons does not have the power to insist on documentation, for example, as was the case for the report she recently carried out, whereas a GSOC-style entity would.

Staff of the Prison Service are terrified. Of the 20 to 30 I have met, some have made protected disclosures but most have not. Why? Because there is no confidentiality with protected disclosures. It goes around that X made a protected disclosure, X is labelled a rat, is intimidated...
and ostracised, and the system goes on. We want an independent inspectorate with GSOC-style statutory powers and appropriate resources to give hard-working prison staff the confidence that they can go to a body that is above reproach. They do not have that now because the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 in that sense does not function within the Prison Service.

Second, under the Commission of Investigations Act 2004, I call on the Government immediately to commence an investigation into corruption in our Prison Service among the chosen few - I am at pains to point out the vast majority of staff are very hard-working and want to get on with their lives and do the best they can - on issues to do with misappropriation of State funds, examples of which I have given, sexual harassment, intimidation, career blocking and illegal surveillance. Simply, nothing less will do. We owe it to the Prison Service and and to hard-working prison staff. We faced some of our demons in this country in the past in terms of clerical abuse. We have cleaned up politics a little bit with the Standards in Public Office Commission and we have made a start with An Garda Síochána. It is time that we rooted out the small number who are nurturing a corrupt culture within the Prison Service.

Deputy David Stanton: I will bring these matters to the attention of the Minister and assure the Deputy that he will treat them as seriously as he is treating the report he received from the Inspector of Prisons recently. He intends to publish that report as soon as possible.

I am advised that there are policies and processes in place to deal with many of the issues raised by the Deputy. The financial procedures in place in the Irish Prison Service and the Department are comprehensive and deal with the assignment of responsibility, accountability, reporting arrangements, audits, the safeguarding of assets, risk and cost control. In respect of protected disclosures, the policies and procedures in place are designed to ensure that all such disclosures will be subject to an appropriate investigation by independent external investigators. The Irish Prison Service further commits that any resulting actions arising from investigations will be undertaken as soon as possible in the circumstances. Further, as part of its commitment to protecting workers who make protected disclosures, the Irish Prison Service has signed and complies with the integrity at work pledge to ensure that workers reporting wrongdoing will not face penalisation and that appropriate action will be taken in response to protected disclosures.

If the Deputy has any evidence of a crime being committed or of serious wrongdoing, he should consider bringing this to the attention of the relevant authority and the Garda as soon as possible.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: The Deputy is the Minister of State. That is what I am doing here.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne): It is proposed notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or today’s Order of Business that statements on the allocation of home help hours will be taken tomorrow, 12 June 2019, after the conclusion of proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Criminal Justice (Mutual Recognition of Probation Judgments and Decisions) Bill 2018. This item will conclude after 87 minutes, if not previously concluded. The statements shall be confined to a single round by a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups or a Member nominated in their stead, which shall not exceed five minutes each. Following the statements, each party or
group in opposition will have six minutes in total for questions and answers with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State. All Members may share time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: At what time tomorrow?


Deputy Micheál Martin: I missed the beginning.

An Ceann Comhairle: It was proposed to provide 87 minutes tomorrow for statements on home care and for questions and answers.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: At what time?

An Ceann Comhairle: How long is a piece of string? I do not know.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We need to know.

An Ceann Comhairle: It will begin after the legislation is dealt with.

Deputy Seán Kyne: We have Report Stage of two Bills. There are no amendments so they should be dealt with speedily. The statements will begin after that. I cannot give an exact time.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will the Minister of State give a rough estimate? When do the Bills start?

Deputy Seán Kyne: It will be roughly 7.30 p.m.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Bills start at 7.30 p.m.

Deputy Seán Kyne: No, the statements will begin at 7.30 p.m.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister of State’s proposal agreed? Agreed.

Northern Ireland: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I am glad to commence the statements on Northern Ireland this evening on behalf of the Government and in place of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, who is participating in the talks at Stormont as we commence this debate. It is of course very important that we all take account of this ongoing process in our contributions this evening and refrain from making comments on very specific issues on which the two Governments are working with the parties to seek, in a very short timeframe, fair and workable compromises to secure an agreement to get the devolved institutions and the North-South Ministerial Council operating again.

The absence of these vital institutions of the Good Friday Agreement since the collapse of the Executive in January 2017 is of grave concern to the Government, as it is to the British Government. As the House is aware, since the Assembly election of March 2017 the Govern-
ment has, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement with the British Government, worked through successive phases of talks in a number of different formats to seek to support the political parties in Northern Ireland in reaching an agreement to operate the devolved institutions again. Unfortunately, earlier phases of talks did not produce the necessary agreement between the parties, and the people of Northern Ireland have had no devolved institutions to represent their interests and to make decisions on issues that are of importance to people’s lives and livelihoods across the range of areas of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

While there is no Executive in place, the North-South Ministerial Council also cannot meet and deliver on its vital role under the Good Friday Agreement to oversee and develop North-South co-operation on matters of mutual interest on the island of Ireland. The challenges raised by the UK decision to exit from the European Union have made the absence of the devolved institutions and the North-South Ministerial Council even more serious, leaving Northern Ireland without a formal voice to represent the interests of all sections of the community there on this most fundamental and difficult issue. The Government has continually sought to support engagement and a way forward between the political parties in Northern Ireland on the outstanding issues that need to be resolved to get all of the institutions of the agreement working again, as they must.

In addition to the successive phases of talks, in July last year, the Government and the UK Government convened again the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference as the institution of the agreement that serves to promote bilateral co-operation on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments. The conference has met on three occasions - in July and October last year and again last month - with participation for the Government by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Minister for Justice and Equality. The conference is a valuable setting for the two Governments to discuss supporting political stability in Northern Ireland and other issues within the framework of the Good Friday Agreement including east-west co-operation, security matters, rights and citizenship issues, and legacy issues, and it has been agreed that it will meet again in the coming months.

Specifically on the issue of dealing with the legacy of the past, I confirm to the House the Government’s continuing commitment to getting the comprehensive framework provided for under the Stormont House Agreement implemented as soon as possible. Victims and survivors have waited for far too long already for a system that is fit for purpose and that can meet their legitimate needs and expectations. The Tánaiste has emphasised to the Secretary of State the urgency of definitively moving ahead to legislating to get the Stormont House bodies established and up and running. Legislation will also be required in this jurisdiction to provide for co-operation with the legacy bodies. The drafting of legislative proposals for consideration by the Government and Oireachtas is advancing, led by the Minister for Justice and Equality.

In April, the talented young journalist Lyra McKee was callously killed as she was going about her work in Derry. I take this opportunity to acknowledge, on behalf of the Government, the life and career of Lyra McKee, whose life was cut short so brutally and needlessly. Our thoughts remain with Lyra’s partner, Sara Canning, her family and friends, and those who dearly loved her. Lyra was a brave, bright and brilliant person who exemplified the spirit we need today. Her ambition to change her society for the better through her career, through telling her story and supporting others to do the same must be the example and the inspiration that political leaders call on in the days ahead in Northern Ireland so that we can collectively implement again the principles and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.
Unfortunately, we also saw last week the attempted murder of an off-duty PSNI officer in Belfast, with responsibility claimed by a tiny number of people who would seek to drag us back to the violence of the past. The police investigation into this attempted murder is ongoing and will receive the full support and co-operation of An Garda Síochána. Like the awful killing of Lyra McKee, this attack on the PSNI was an attack on the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement itself which has been endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South. Such mindless violence has been repeatedly rejected by the people of this island. That is why it is so incumbent on all political leaders in Northern Ireland to ensure that the mandate they have been given to operate the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement is implemented in accordance with the principles of partnership, mutual respect and parity of esteem at the core of the agreement.

The outpouring of public feeling that rightly followed Lyra McKee’s death saw a very clear demand from people in Northern Ireland for their political representatives to engage and get the political institutions working again. On 26 April, to try again to secure a way forward, the Taoiseach and the UK Prime Minister announced a new phase of political talks in Northern Ireland, involving the five main parties, together with the British and Irish Governments. On 7 May, the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Karen Bradley, convened these talks in Belfast. This is a short process, focused on the key issues that are central to restoring the institutions and with the aim of achieving rapid progress.

During May, a series of working groups were convened to discuss in detail the key issues central to making progress: the programme for government for a new Executive; greater transparency and accountability in the institutions; the reform of the petition of concern; measures to increase the sustainability and stability of the institutions; and issues of rights, language and identity. The work of these groups was steered through leadership-level round-table discussions, with the participation of the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste on behalf of the two governments.

There has been constructive engagement by political parties in the process since it commenced and it is clear that all of the parties want to see the institutions of the agreement operating again on a sustainable basis. There has been broad consensus on some issues, but key issues still remain to be resolved. The Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland believe that there is a genuine but narrow window of opportunity to reach agreement in the period immediately ahead and that it is essential to continue and intensify talks to this end.

In a further joint statement on 2 June, the Taoiseach and the UK Prime Minister welcomed the constructive engagement in the process so far and underlined that it is imperative that the parties move without delay to engaging substantively on the shape of a final agreement. Accordingly, the two governments last week supported an intensification of the talks and there was direct engagement on outstanding issues by the leaders of the five political parties. The Tánaiste and Secretary of State, Ms Bradley, are intensively engaging on behalf of the two governments in the talks at Stormont again this week and as I speak are encouraging the party leaders to move towards a final agreement.

People want to see real progress made. There is no patience for anything except urgent and determined progress and openness to new thinking. Ultimately, it will be for the parties to rise to the challenge of finding an agreement. This will be difficult, but the two governments believe that this can and must be achieved in the period immediately ahead to get the devolved, power-sharing Assembly and Executive and the North-South Ministerial Council functioning again.
The Government will continue to do everything in its power, in accordance with its responsibilities as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions. I look forward to hearing the views of colleagues in the House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Minister of State for his contribution. With no disrespect I say it is regrettable that the Taoiseach could not have made it into the House this evening to discuss this important issue with the other party leaders. We do not often get an opportunity to get even a short debate like this on such an important issue.

That said, everybody who wishes Northern Ireland well wants the current talks to succeed. Fundamentally the price of failure would be further to undermine decades of progress and leave Northern Ireland exposed during a new period of chaos and uncertainty in London.

The biggest problem in these talks is the extent to which parties appear reluctant to back away from positions they have adopted over time and the reluctance to be seen to have compromised. The unwillingness to admit error or to reconsider strategies is always at the core of deadlock and, as always, flexibility the only way to break free from the deadlock.

The issues involved are serious and the lack of basic trust between the two main parties which have created this impasse cannot be underestimated. However, these issues are nothing compared to those which we overcame in the past. Only if we can return to the way these negotiations were handled in the past will we have a chance of moving forward.

There have been many blockages and suspensions in the past, but this one has been unique in a number of ways. Most importantly the cause of the deadlock bears no relationship to the fundamental parts of the peace process and the reluctance of the governments to act with either urgency or ambition has been regrettable. There have been many claims of urgency but little evidence of it having any impact.

Exactly 883 days ago the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland were collapsed because of a heating scheme. No amount of revisionism and holding up the importance of other issues can take away from the cold hard fact that the people of Northern Ireland have been deprived of a voice on Brexit, on budget cuts, on equality issues and on the future of health and education because of a heating scheme which appears to have lost nowhere near the amount of money first claimed. Rather than wait for an independent review to gather all evidence, and in light of an electoral opportunity, it was decided that representative institutions were to be sidelined.

For most of the past two and a half years there has been an inexplicable reluctance to show genuine urgency and the issues and political circumstances to be addressed have continually changed. During most of this time my party’s position has been based on the need to convene genuinely inclusive talks which respect the full range of political views in Northern Ireland and which see the governments accept their responsibility to lead the process. Unfortunately, the decision not to try anything new until after the planned Brexit date of 31 March has meant that we are today at a moment of great uncertainty, with the return of stability or basic commitment to Northern Ireland in London at very best uncertain.

The current talks are very welcome. It appears that by ending the complete dominance of the talks by the chief antagonists there has at least been space for the dissatisfied majority in Northern Ireland to have its voice heard. The destructive cycle of bilateral exchanges has thankfully been abandoned and there is an opportunity for new ideas to be tabled and for the largest parties to be challenged.
The issues which are today stated as being the reason for the largest parties failing to agree are absolutely important. Equality is not something which should be negotiated; it should simply be delivered.

The DUP’s reluctance to allow the people of Northern Ireland to have the same rights as are enjoyed by people in every other part of these islands undermines its core position on most other issues. Equally its use of the petition of concern in order to block equality measures is an absolute abuse of a measure intended to protect minorities against discrimination.

What has poisoned relations on these issues has been the perception that they have stopped being cross-community issues and have started to be presented as party issues. When Deputy Adams described the equality agenda as “the Trojan horse of the republican movement” he caused immense damage and so too has been the way in which these issues have been brought in and out of the agenda depending on what suits one party at a particular moment. The fact that these issues that were irrelevant to the collapse of the institutions are now presented as the only reason for the collapse is widely understood as party tactics rather than a sincere commitment to the issues themselves.

On the other hand, the childish and profoundly insulting approach of some within the DUP to cultural and linguistic diversity has caused real damage, which remains in spite of a welcome apology by the DUP leader and, indeed, the strong heritage, particularly of Church of Ireland clergy, mainly Presbyterian academics, in terms of the preservation of the Irish language in an earlier era. It would mark a major step forward if the largest parties were candidly to admit their roles in the deadlock and to accept that some of their actions have caused real hurt and division.

Fundamentally, these talks cannot succeed if the largest parties are motivated by wanting either to claim a win or to avoid admitting to changing anything in their positions. Last week’s so-called intensification of talks lasted 25 minutes and apparently simply heard reasons there would be no flexibility. We have to break this cycle of entrenched positions and regular breakdowns, and the only way to do this is for those parties to be willing to take a risk on a new approach. The fact is that a simple restoration of the Assembly and Executive would, even if for a limited period, at a minimum allow the democratic voice of the people to be heard. Let the Assembly majority have a voice against Brexit, against cutbacks to schools and health services and in favour of equality and diversity. How could this possibly do anything other than mark a positive development? It requires other moves before legal measures can be implemented, but the democratic legitimacy behind these policies would be a powerful demonstration of the will to move forward.

The contest for leadership of the Tory party and of the British Government is a new obstacle to progress. With the sole exception of the comments of one candidate, who apparently has little or no chance, the comments of leadership contenders relating to Ireland have been in equal parts superficial and ill informed. They have yet to address the fact that their policy priority of Brexit has real consequences for this island, consequences that cannot be wished away “by closing your eyes, picking up some magic beans and believing in Britain”, as the British Home Secretary put it yesterday.

We cannot allow the next few months to be lost because of a London-derived paralysis. It falls to our Government to insist on genuine urgency in the meetings and on the discussion of alternative strategies and policies, and that parties be obliged to address the scale of public disquiet concerning budget cuts and decisions imposed by British Ministers. These talks must
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not be suspended. They must be kept going and the public must be given honest accounts of what has been considered. We need an end to the system of duelling briefings from the largest parties, which have been the only sources of information on discussions.

It is necessary, unfortunately, to reply to the constant harping which has been heard here from one party seeking to silence others in the Dáil by claiming that we have no right to speak about the North. Leaving aside the twisted mindset that this involves, we have every right to speak here about these issues. In the face of incredible provocation, over many years we showed our determination to work for peace and development. We were not told to butt out when one party here was constantly calling and asking us to intervene. I do not remember being told to stay quiet when I was co-chairing all-party talks in Northern Ireland and when I was delivering sustained progress in those and other talks.

The problem in this House is that, over the past eight years, a habit has developed of talking about the North only when there is a crisis, such as the appalling murder of Lyra McKee, which the Minister of State correctly addressed in his speech. The issue is not that people should butt out, it is that it falls to everyone here to challenge the right of others to control the debate on Northern Ireland.

Enormous damage has been caused by the absence of democratic institutions in Northern Ireland since January 2017. It is long past time that the people elected to serve in democratic institutions were allowed to get to work.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on these statements on the North in the Dáil. Far from suggesting anybody should butt out, be quiet or be reticent in our discussion on the North, on the contrary, it is incredibly important that the Oireachtas has ongoing engagement on progress, dilemmas and politics in the North. I only wish debates on matters in the North were more regular. I have said before that I await the day when every political party is truly national and stands for democratic election right across the island, including in the Six Counties.

It is true to say we face many immediate challenges, with the chaos in Westminster, an impending Brexit deadline and talks to re-establish the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement in what can only be described as very challenging political circumstances. There is an onus on all of us in short, medium and longer terms to make political progress and transformation all across the island, including in the North, a core part of our political programme. There is an onus on all parties and all of us to plan, strategise and build for Irish unity in all its dimensions. It is incumbent on the Irish Government to lead on these matters. While the island remains partitioned, Irish citizens in the North nonetheless demand and expect exactly the same respect and rights as their co-citizens living in these parts.

It should make no difference if one lives in Newry or Dundalk, or in Derry or Naas. People are people and rights are rights. British citizens in the North are due the same equality and respect as all others, for that is the cornerstone of the Good Friday Agreement. Whether one is British or Irish, or both, or neither, one is due equal treatment and respect with the equivalence of rights, North and South. That is hardwired into the agreement. The vast majority of people, North and South, endorsed the agreement in 1998, and a generation has grown up since then.

Lyra McKee was one of that generation, a generation for whom conflict was in the past and for whom the expectations of inclusion, prosperity and equality are the norm. Lyra McKee was
killed by those who oppose the Good Friday Agreement and offer nothing but injury, death, imprisonment and heartache. They cannot and must not succeed. It is the responsibility of us all - Deputies, parties and members of the Government - to realise the potential and promise of the Good Friday Agreement for that new generation. That work must be above party politics. It is the people’s agreement, the people’s peace process, and it is our duty to protect it and deliver on it.

The institutions of the agreement are interlocking and interdependent. The success of one is dependent on the success of others. These institutions should be re-established and delivering prosperity, equality and public services for all citizens. That is beyond doubt. It is the expressed desire of both Governments and all parties to re-establish the institutions and have them working.

On 2 June, the Taoiseach said in a joint statement made with the British Prime Minister: “The Secretary of State and the Tánaiste believe that there is a genuine but narrow window of opportunity to reach agreement in the immediate period ahead and that it is essential to continue and intensify talks to this end.” The window is indeed narrow. Last Friday, Ms Theresa May stood down as leader of the Tory party and remains in a caretaker capacity until the election of her successor at the end of July. The British Government remains in power only with the support of the DUP. We have the Brexit deadline of 31 October looming on the horizon. Therefore, the window for reaching agreement is indeed narrow and the political circumstances are considerably complex. With determination and generosity among all, however, we can succeed. Sinn Féin is committed to reaching agreement and those who have met us in recent weeks and months are aware of that. Functioning, stable, all-party, inclusive institutions delivering for all in society are the only way forward.

Most of the issues are already matters of agreement and simply require implementation. An Irish language Act was agreed 13 years ago at St Andrews. I remember it because I was there. It was an agreement between the British and Irish Governments. It was explicit and obliged the British Government to, “introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language”. That was 13 years ago.

Gaels in the North, after decades of being treated as second-class citizens, rightly expected the British Government to deliver on that promise. It is both symbolic and practical. It is required to protect the Irish language, particularly for Gaeilgeoirí, but it is about much more than that. This is about identity. Gaels in the North trusted successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments to stand over that commitment but it has not been delivered. The Taoiseach said that Irish citizens in the North would no longer be left behind. Irish citizens in the North expect the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and all of us to make good on that promise. The refusal by the British Government, at the behest of a section of unionists, to honour the agreement is a calculated and deliberate put-down to those who value the Irish language and culture and an undermining of the political process. It provides a cover to those in unionism who opposed, and still oppose, the Good Friday Agreement.

Confidence in the political process has been further eroded by the British Government’s refusal to put in place the agreed mechanisms to support victims of conflict in their search for truth and justice. Instead, elements of the British Government are seeking an amnesty for the actions of their forces including the killings in Ballymurphy and on Bloody Sunday. They continue to refuse to hand over all information relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings.
11 June 2019

We now have a system of unequal rights. Marriage equality is a right enjoyed by Irish citizens in the rest of Ireland and by British citizens in Britain, but is blocked and has been blocked consistently in the North. The petition of concern was introduced to safeguard the rights of a minority. It is an essential element of the checks and balances of the Good Friday Agreement but it has been abused to block equality and that is wrong.

We cannot waste time reopening agreements already made; this process must be about delivery. Progress is possible and necessary. It will be found in implementing existing agreements, respecting the equality of all and recognising that rights for one section of the community do not diminish the rights of others. Success must be felt by all in society. This is not about winners and losers, victory or defeat. It is true to say that we have faced greater challenges in the past and that with generosity and imagination we have found a way forward. Sinn Féin’s negotiating team has engaged fully and will move to the next phase with a determination to resolve outstanding issues.

The Irish Government is not just a referee or arbitrator in this process. Members of the Government are signatories, sponsors and the co-equal guarantors of the agreements and the rights of citizens. It is not a case of determining which rights are upheld or what parts of the agreements are set aside. In this State we have the protections of the Bunreacht na hÉireann. In the North, it is the Good Friday Agreement and the 1998 Act that provide the constitutional protections and status of the North at this time. It is about securing rights and the implementation of agreements. That is the basis for re-establishing the institutions.

The window of opportunity is narrow. The chaos in Westminster, the fact that the British Prime Minister is stepping down and the renewal of a deal between the DUP and the Tories make the process of reaching agreement difficult but not impossible. At the end of this process we must have an agreement that will deliver sustainable institutions, operating to the highest standard and delivering for all. Failure is not and cannot be an option. Undermining previous agreements is not an option either and refusing citizens’ rights can never be an option. One either honours agreements or does not. Rights are either safeguarded or denied. If this phase of the talks cannot resolve outstanding issues, then both Governments must act to make good their commitments; it is as simple as that. The Government must act to remove the issues of difference and provide the route back to the institutions in line with the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements. Sinn Féin will do all in its power to reach an agreement. All parties and both Governments must do likewise, for that is what we owe the Good Friday Agreement generation and ourselves. We all must demonstrate that politics works, that agreements made must be honoured and that the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement can and will deliver peace, prosperity and equality for all.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I welcome the fact that parties in Northern Ireland are meeting as part of a sincere effort to get the Assembly up and running again. People in Northern Ireland need political leadership to fill the vacuum on Brexit, but also for day-to-day public administration in health, education, housing, transport and other services. It is now 866 days since the Assembly last met. In the same period of time, our own Parliament has overseen a referendum on the eighth amendment and passed legislation to permit abortion. Dáil Éireann passed 100 new laws in this period of time, including a crucial law to prepare Ireland for Brexit, the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act, protections to tenants in the rental sector, the creation of technological universities, improved law on domestic violence and so much more. Stormont, however, has been dormant. New laws and ministerial decisions in Northern Ireland have not happened, leaving public needs unmet. It is time for all parties to put aside any and all conditions and to
simply get the Assembly up and running again.

Beyond the bread-and-butter issues of good governance, Northern Ireland also needs political leadership on the constitutional issue. A leading unionist commentator, Mr. Alex Kane, has argued that unionists need to prepare for an inevitable Border poll. That does not only apply to unionists. As I said last year, we all need to engage seriously with this possibility. Underpinning Mr. Kane’s logic is the stark reality, as pointed out by Mr. Matthew O’Toole, a former Downing Street official, that unionists have not had a majority of the vote in Northern Ireland since 2005. However, the absence of a unionist majority at European, Assembly or local government level in Northern Ireland does not automatically mean that it has been replaced by a nationalist majority. As Mr. O’Toole argues, a large and growing number of people identify with neither of these labels. For the first time, people in Northern Ireland are being required to weigh up the benefits of remaining in a changing British Union versus remaining in the European Union.

It is in that context that a Border poll represents a very uncertain prospect for unionists. Mr. Kane seeks answers to several pertinent questions. Unlike the Brexit debacle, would an Irish Border poll be preceded by a detailed proposal on what would be the result of a “Yes” or “No” vote? Would there be a transition period or financial contributions from the United Kingdom? Would a vote for a united Ireland revoke and replace the Good Friday Agreement? What would happen to the National Health Service and other much-loved institutions in Northern Ireland? We cannot answer all of his questions today but the issues raised show why it is vital that we have much more dialogue and public debate now, rather than on the eve of a Border poll, or, more worryingly, the morning after.

For some time, I have called for the re-establishment of an all-Ireland forum to discuss what a unitary Irish State might look like. Any such forum should be constituted in a way that does not imply any consent for Irish unity, but which provides a space in which unionist perspectives can be heard unconditionally.

7 o’clock

I agree with Mr. Seamus Mallon that nationalists must aim for reconciliation within Northern Ireland, working with unionists to build what he calls a shared home place. However, in my view, that shared home space must be for the whole of the island. Our challenge is to imagine all of Ireland as a shared home space for everyone living here, including the many people from minorities and new communities.

A 50.1% in favour of or against unity would be decisive. That is the nature of voting systems. However, a much larger majority in favour of unity would be greatly desirable, which is why we must prepare and why dialogue and detailed analysis is important now. One such detailed analysis carried out by the trade union economist Dr. Tom Healy makes an important observation about the standard of living enjoyed in Northern Ireland compared to that in the Republic. Dr. Healy concludes that there is a rough parity of living standards on the island of Ireland. I will provide the economic underpinning for that conclusion. It is an important consideration for anyone who wishes to make the economic case for a united Ireland. Stronger public services are an important part of the equation that explains how living standards in Northern Ireland are kept at a level similar to those in the Republic. Northern Ireland has a stronger welfare state than in the Republic in terms of public housing, public transport and, of course, the National Health Service. This is why we need to be able to guarantee the contin-
ued existence of the NHS in Northern Ireland. That means universal healthcare free of charge at the point of need and based on medical need rather than privileged access to private health insurance. However, running a parallel system of healthcare on part of the island would be a ludicrous concept in a unitary Irish State. The only logical response would be the establishment of a universal healthcare system for the whole country. Sadly, that is far from being achieved, given Fine Gaels reluctance to make serious progress outlined on a cross-party basis in the Sláintecare report. However, it is not just the NHS. All functions of government must be considered. Northern Ireland has different policies in education, housing, environmental protection, commerce and social welfare, as well as very different military and policing traditions. Local government in Northern Ireland is not organised on a county basis and we cannot automatically impose that upon people.

Unifying Ireland is a far more complex undertaking than simply the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from Northern Ireland. Trying to unify Irish laws and institutions against the resistance of a large unionist minority would be very difficult to put it mildly, and completely unacceptable in my view. I do not agree with the premise of a question posed by Mr. Alex Kane, who asked whether there will be a mandatory power-sharing provision to protect and promote British and unionist identity. This question makes the mistake of assuming that everyone in the Republic of Ireland is automatically nationalist in a comparable sense to Northern Ireland. On the contrary, there have always been “others” across Ireland, including socialists, who do not agree with the ideology of ethnic nationalism. There are many versions of Irish identity and Irish patriotism, including Ireland’s Anglo Irish and west British identities. There is no longer any risk of Northern Ireland being subsumed into a one-dimensional Catholic nationalist Ireland. Our culture and identity is much more complex and nuanced and now recognised as such. We should rightly celebrate our age-old institutions and traditions and we should teach all dimensions of Irish history, culture and language in our schools, including Northern Ireland’s traditions.

What should bring us together is a common interest in our island’s environment, society and economy. We are all in this together. By recognising everyone’s fundamental equality, we can be work towards uniting the people. Why not create an all-island and all-party forum to have this dialogue in a respectful, patient and non-coercive way to build greater understanding between all strands of political thinking on the island? I do not expect Mrs. Arlene Foster ever to vote for a united Ireland, but I believe we can create an Irish state that honours all traditions on this island. In an agreed Ireland, our citizens would never belong to one ethnic group or nationality. We would embrace a new vision of inclusiveness and diversity. One in nine people living in Northern Ireland and one in eight in Ireland was born elsewhere. Our island’s population is a vibrant mix of people from around the world. By embracing this diversity and recognising everyone’s fundamental equality we can be united as a single people, as are Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders. We must forge an agreed Ireland which recognises the complexity and diversity of modern society and which acknowledges the role of immigration and emigration in shaping this. We must evaluate and acknowledge the positive contributions of the deep British influence on Ireland in terms of our way of life, legal system, architecture and, of course, language. Working together, we can imagine a confident, prosperous island at peace with Britain and secure as part of Europe. That is an offer we should make to everybody on this island.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The killing of Lyra McKee in April sent a shockwave across Northern Ireland. Lyra was one the so-called ceasefire babies, promised a life free from sec-
tarianism and violence. Instead, since the ceasefires there has been an institutionalisation of sectarianism and what a British Secretary of State termed “an acceptable level of violence”. Between 2006 and 2015 there were 1,100 bombings and shootings and 787 paramilitary-style punishment attacks. Some 160 people have died in the violence since 1998.

The tragic death of Lyra McKee showed something else: it showed that ordinary people - Protestants, Catholics and others - will not tolerate an attempt to drive society back to the conflict of the Troubles. Protests and vigils initiated by the National Union of Journalists, local trades councils and Lyra’s friends and family took place in Derry, Belfast, Omagh, Enniskillen, Strabane, Cookstown, Newry, Dungannon, Dublin, Glasgow, London and elsewhere in the aftermath of her death. These were very important events for giving expression to the widespread anger and revulsion over her death. Had the Irish Congress of Trade Unions acted to co-ordinate and develop this movement against sectarianism by calling lunchtime protests, it is likely that we would have seen protests in every major town and city in the North, demanding that there be “no going back”, which became the slogan of the time. Unfortunately, that involvement did not happen.

Those who killed Lyra McKee were on the streets carrying guns because the agreement has not brought the promised peace dividend. Instead, they live in poverty and, in many cases, are exposed to regular harassment by the PSNI. As Lyra stated, “We were the Good Friday Agreement generation, destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us.” Derry in particular has high levels of long-term unemployment and child poverty. Some 95% of its young people stated that they saw no future for themselves in the city and could not envisage remaining there long term. This is what allows paramilitary organisations to find their small base of support. Of course, they offer no way out of poverty, but only increased sectarianism.

The main story of the local and European elections in the North was the rise in support for the Alliance Party and others. This is a reflection of the desire for a break with the politics of sectarianism. There is also very clearly huge demand and a desire for social progress in the North. Lyra was an LGBT activist, an advocate for better mental health and someone who would support the growing demand for abortion rights. So many people have commented on what is happening in the US, but Northern Ireland is still an episode from The Handmaid’s Tale. The Alliance Party, of course, advocates the same type of neoliberal policies that mean poverty for working-class communities, and the party is not a solution. Alongside the DUP and Sinn Féin, it supported the introduction of Tory welfare reform which has left working-class families about €2,000 worse off each. At the same time, important jobs in the North are at risk. Bombardier’s global bosses have announced their intention to sell operations in Northern Ireland. Bombardier accounts for almost 5% of the entire labour force of Northern Ireland and 10% of manufacturing GDP. The remaining 3,600 jobs are a drastically reduced figure, representing less than half the workforce of the 1990s. The Socialist Party agrees with the strong motion passed by Unite the Union at its recent conference, which stated:

Our union will do whatever it takes to defend jobs and skills at Bombardier ... We will continue to raise the idea and fight for the re-nationalisation of this company if that’s the only way to protect our members and defend local communities. We will do whatever it takes to prevent a ‘vulture’ company swooping in to pick [only what it wants] while leaving the rest to waste.

The trade union movement as a whole must come to the assistance of the Bombardier work-
At the same time, in the public sector in the North, workers are fed up with years of below-inflation pay offers. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, NIPSA, which is the biggest union in the public sector, has begun an important ballot to reject a derisory 1.25% pay offer and changes to terms and conditions for its members. These struggles are not only essential to defend working-class people, but they also point to how people can be brought together in common struggle.

Of huge assistance in this would be the development of a party that can genuinely unite people across the sectarian divide, including dealing with issues that divide working-class people, in the spirit of solidarity and genuine brotherhood. The election of a Socialist Party member, Donal O’Cofaigh, as part of Cross-Community Labour Alternative in Enniskillen, was also a breakthrough for this type of anti-sectarian working-class politics, as was the success of other parties and candidates of the left. Socialist Party members will work with trade unionists and other activists to help ensure that a socialist alternative for working-class people is built to challenge the dead end of sectarianism and capitalism.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on Northern Ireland and its structures. This debate arises from the attempt in the past week or two to get the institutions back up and running and the discussions held in Belfast with the various parties to try to do so. Ultimately, the institutions must be got going again, and the Irish Government will have to be very strong in arguing for their reinstatement. Ultimately, the flaw in the Good Friday Agreement is that the British are seen as being neutral, when all their recent actions, including the DUP’s support of the Government in Westminster, show they are not neutral and never have been neutral. That is the crux of the problem at all stages in the North as we now see it. The only way to get around this and defeat it is to get the structures and the assembly back up and running. Perhaps through the outworkings of that at some stage in the future we will see a future for politics in the Six Counties and a way forward might be shown. Our Government must be very strong in arguing with the British Government and putting its responsibilities straight on the line. It is part of the problem. It must be part of the solution. It must live up to the agreements, including international agreements, it has made. That is vitally important.

A number of speakers have mentioned the tragic murder of Lyra McKee during the disturbances in Derry some time ago as being very difficult. The sad part about it is that the getting together again of the institutions will not, very quickly anyway, resolve any of the reasons she was killed. This is tragic, but the only option left open to the Governments is to ensure that the institutions are got up and running. The only thing we can do is to ensure that the parties we can influence here are on board to get the institutions going again. As a House we must be sure that our Government is strong in forcing the British Government to act in this regard. That is the key to this. If our Government can force the British Government to face up to its responsibilities, we might see the institutions up and running again and then - unfortunately, a very long way down the road - the causes of the conflict reduced somewhat. Ultimately, however, the only way we can reduce the cause of the conflict is by getting the British out entirely of the Six Counties. Then we can deal with the issues as they relate to ourselves and a 32-county Ireland. That is ultimately the only way in which this will be resolved once and for all.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I very much welcome these statements at this critical time. It has been more than 850 days since the Assembly last met in Stormont, and while Stormont lies silent, the political vacuum this creates is certainly not helpful. The Acting Chairman is
a very active member of the Committee on European Union Affairs, which deals an awful lot with Brexit issues. He has seen first-hand in recent years the way in which we in our own small way are doing our best to try to ensure that the fallout from Brexit is minimised, whether for our farming community or any other community, whether tourism related or business related, that the lot of the people is protected, and that the negative impact Brexit would have is minimised. I see the vacuum created by Stormont’s lying silent as not helpful to us. In the past a major point was proven in politics working.

I do not wish to pick out particular people but it would be remiss of me in a debate about Northern Ireland not to mention people such as the late Martin McGuinness, who, using political means and alongside many others, achieved so much in ensuring that the journey we were on in Ireland led us to a peaceful solution. This was achieved by using the political process. We saw first-hand the way in which at a critical time he was able to get on with people such as the late Ian Paisley. They got on for the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland and our part of Ireland. To this day we are reaping the benefits of the political work that was done by a great many people. I do not care whether they came from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or Sinn Féin or were non-party or from the religious communities. These people all soldiered together to ensure that the bombings, the murder and the mayhem stopped, to a great degree anyway, and that could only be welcomed.

When I see what is happening in the North now and the fact that the Assembly is not working or performing, it is not welcome. Looking at legislation and the strident moves that politicians are making not just in Dáil Éireann but throughout Europe, the political vacuum in the North is not helpful. I ask the Government to do everything it can through the respective ministerial roles to ensure we can assist in putting the Assembly together. Politicians should do what people want them to do; it is about them doing their work. I do not care what levels politicians are at, whether it is at local, national or international level, as all people want is politicians to perform their duties. It is not happening the way it should be at Stormont. I say strongly to the Government to put its shoulder to the wheel. We must all do our level best to ensure we get the Assembly up and running again, putting politicians back to work and doing what they should do and were elected to do in the first instance. They should be having debates like this one and hearing every person’s view is very important.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute on this important matter. We speak about the North of Ireland, going back to our ancestors and history, and it should be a full part of our country. One objective that I share with many others is that we would again be one country under one all-Ireland government. In the context of Brexit, there are many possibilities that could have adverse effects on our Twenty-six Counties, and it is in that light that so many people are so concerned right around the Republic of Ireland. For the past six months nobody can understand why cattle are €200 per head dearer in the North of Ireland than they are in the South. We appreciate when buyers come from the North of Ireland for our cattle because at least it gives us a vital export market. When we see what factories are doing to farmers, particularly beef farmers around the country, live exports become very important for the farmers in our neck of the woods. They greatly appreciate buyers, whether they are taking cattle up to the North or across to Great Britain.

The great imponderable matter is what will happen if the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. We can consider how unfair this would be, as the people in the North of Ireland voted overwhelmingly to stay in the European Union. Brexit would affect small employers and exporters, as well as those involved in manufacturing. I have been told by employers in
Castleisland, Killarney and mid-Kerry that if there is a hard border with tariffs, there would be severe job losses in parts of Kerry as well as every other part of the country.

We are very grateful for the cross-border directive initiative, which allows us to take patients who would not otherwise be seen here in the South of Ireland to the North. Patients in Cork and Tralee hospitals were put on waiting lists for a simple cataract procedure and have to wait four to six years to have this done, perhaps losing their sight in the meantime. I am glad that almost two years ago Deputy Michael Collins and I started using buses to bring people for treatment in the North of Ireland. We have brought so many people on those buses. A man who went on the first bus had been waiting for a cataract procedure for six years. In the early 1960s, his grandfather had that simple procedure done in Tralee general hospital. People would like to think Ireland has moved on and improved but we have gone backwards as we have to take people who are aged 90, 92 or 94 to the North for treatment. One man with failing sight went because the doctor would not sign the application to renew his driver’s licence. He had his cataracts removed in Kingsbridge Private Hospital and got his licence a few days later. These are important issues for people and we are failing in that regard. It is great that we have the opportunity to restore people’s eyesight rather than have them lose it.

There is an 82-year-old man getting his hip done today. He would have otherwise had to wait in pain for years for the procedure but tomorrow he will go to a hospital in Kerry to recuperate. It is desperate but there is an opportunity to treat those people who would otherwise be in pain. It would be disastrous to lose that option and we hope the cross-border initiative, under which people can be reimbursed for the cost of the procedure, will continue. As we all know, the Health Service Executive has let us down badly and many people are saying it fails people in every regard. We can see the problems with waiting lists and people on trolleys. No matter how much money is being pumped into the executive, it is not having the desired effect. The cross-border initiative is the one good thing about it.

Many of us desire for the Six Counties to be united with the Twenty-six Counties. We almost had that with the Good Friday Agreement. If anything should happen leading to a hard border between us and the people in the North of Ireland, it would be a pure disaster. I appeal to the Minister of State, as part of the Government, to ensure he does everything to prevent Brexit from happening. People right around the country are so fed up by what is going on and the indecisiveness of those people in England. They cannot make up their minds as to whether they are coming or going. If we were in their position, the whole world would laugh because of what is being done. Their actions are disastrous. They do not know what they want or how they will achieve it. They have said they are leaving and not leaving. They are seeking different conditions. There are people hopeful of becoming the next British Prime Minister and they are trying to sell the story that the European Union will give them new concessions or a better deal. They will not get it and the European Union will not change just because there is a new person in the British Prime Minister’s seat.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I thank colleagues for their contributions. There was positive engagement across the House in this timely discussion on Northern Ireland. There was a shared commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and to supporting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. That common concern and agreed foundation for all of our engagement on Northern Ireland is hugely important. In that context, this debate will continue to inform the approach of the Government. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste will continue to work with their counterparts in the British Government and do everything possible to ensure the ongoing process in Stormont has every chance of suc-
ceeding in the period immediately ahead.

As I noted in my earlier contribution, the Tánaiste is in Stormont again today, as he has been on numerous days over the past number of weeks, working with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Karen Bradley, to encourage the political parties to reach honourable compromises on the issues that need to be resolved and to get the devolved institutions up and running and delivering again for the people of Northern Ireland, as well as the North-South Ministerial Council to deliver on North-South co-operation as mentioned by all Members.

The Government’s commitment to achieving this is absolute and while three key issues remain to be addressed in the ongoing talks, we believe that a resolution between the parties is possible and must be achieved. This cannot be a drawn-out process. The demand for a local representative power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland is more pressing now than it has ever been previously. Decisions need to be taken by the new Executive and the issues that need to be dealt with by the Assembly are many, varied and urgent. There will never be a perfect time for an agreement on the issues in the current process. They will not be any easier in the future than now and could well be more difficult.

Members referred to the complexities of the issues that need to be addressed. The current talks are a genuine opportunity to get all of the institutions of the agreement working once again. I believe this opportunity must be taken. The Government has always supported and worked for the full implementation of the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements. We will continue to offer that support. That is the basis on which the peace process moves forward with the task of reconciliation for all people on this island.

Similarly, the legacy of the Troubles must be addressed in a way that can meet the legitimate needs of victims through the establishment of the comprehensive framework provided for under the Stormont House Agreement in 2014. The current system is not working for victims and families nor is it supporting the broader societal reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The Government will keep working with the British Government to get the Stormont House framework established without any further delay. We see that as a vital part of the peace process.

For the days immediately ahead, the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State will remain intensively engaged on behalf of the two Governments in the talks at Stormont to encourage the party leaders to move towards a final agreement and to get the devolved power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland and the North-South Ministerial Council operating again. This will not be easy but the two Governments are committed and believe that this can and must be achieved.

Many issues were raised by Members from all sides of the House. One of the biggest issues we are facing is Brexit. We cannot allow Brexit to get in the way of ensuring we get the Northern Ireland Assembly up and running again. There was widespread support for that from all Members who contributed.

I thank the Members for their contributions, which I welcome. I will bring their concerns to the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Sitting suspended at 7.35 p.m. and resumed at 7.38 p.m.
Bill entitled an Act to amend and extend the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012; for that purpose to make fresh provision concerning the means by which an award’s status, with reference to the National Framework of Qualifications, may be established and, to that end, to provide for the establishment of a category of awarding bodies, exclusive of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland or certain other persons, which shall be known as “listed awarding bodies”; to provide, as a condition precedent for provisions of that Act to be invoked by a relevant provider (or an intending relevant provider), for a requirement that criteria specified in regulations, to be made by the Minister for Education and Skills, must be met, including criteria for the purpose of affording a reasonable assurance to the foregoing Authority that a foregoing provider has the capacity and capability to provide programmes of education and training consistent with the requirements of that Act; to provide for the establishment of a fund which shall be known as “Protection of Enrolled Learners Fund”, into which an annual charge by certain providers must be paid and from which moneys may, in cases of default in delivery of certain programmes, be paid so to enable enrolled learners complete the programme concerned or so as to be used for certain other purposes; to make further provision regarding authorisation to use the international education mark; and to provide for related matters.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O’Connor): I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O’Connor): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to bring the Bill before the House. It will amend the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, which established Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, the national agency with responsibility for external quality assurance and qualifications across the further and higher education sectors.

The main purpose of this Bill is to further empower QQI as a regulator of quality and to strengthen the agency’s role in ensuring high standards across Ireland’s education system.

This important legislation will enable QQI to realise its potential, facilitate the introduction of deferred policies and clarify, strengthen and make the operation of existing policies more efficient.

I would like to highlight seven key provisions, in particular. The first is the listing of awarding bodies. This Bill will enable the expansion of the range of awards included in the National Framework of Qualifications, NFQ, by giving QQI explicit authority to list awarding bodies and to include their qualifications in the framework. Qualifications, such as those awarded by professional and international awarding bodies, are offered by providers in Ireland but are cur-
Currently unable to access the NFQ. The Bill addresses this issue by establishing a pathway for awarding bodies and their associated providers to engage with QQI and to have their awards included in the framework while also ensuring that the quality standards of the NFQ are upheld.

The second key provision is the examination of the bona fides and financial capacity of providers. As part of strengthening QQI’s quality assurance procedures, this Bill will provide a legal basis for QQI to examine the bona fides and financial capacity of the providers with which it engages. This will enable QQI to assess a provider’s capacity and capability to provide programmes of education and training consistent with the quality assurance processes and procedures required by the 2012 Act. To conduct this assessment, QQI will be further empowered by means of a statutory instrument to establish criteria addressing key issues such as the legal personality, ownership and corporate governance arrangements of providers in addition to examining that adequate financial resources are in place to ensure the viability of these businesses.

The third key measure to be introduced upon enactment of this Bill is the international education mark, IEM. The IEM forms part of Ireland’s international education strategy which aims to foster and strengthen Ireland’s reputation as a destination of choice for international students. The IEM will serve as a crucial tool for Ireland’s educational providers in underpinning the quality of our educational offerings. To obtain the IEM, providers will have to demonstrate compliance with key criteria and practices surrounding the protection of enrolled learners, recruitment and admission, information provision, student welfare, cultural awareness, and academic support provisions. Once in place, only providers authorised to use the IEM will be eligible to recruit international students. The Bill provides for variants of the IEM to reflect and respond to the demands of different types of educational provision. At its outset, there will be two initial forms of the IEM, one which will apply to the higher education sector and one for English language education.

Following its passage through the Seanad, the provisions governing the IEM have been strengthened to reflect concerns emerging during debates relating to the employment terms and conditions of education and teaching staff working in the English language education sector. Following a number of amendments agreed with Senators, providers who seek authorisation to use the IEM will be subject to additional requirements and oversight. First is that QQI’s powers when assessing a provider’s corporate fitness have been broadened to enable checks of compliance with employment law. This assessment is the first step that a provider must undertake when seeking authorisation to use the IEM. Second, through the code of practice for the IEM, providers will be required to establish policies and procedures that address specific areas surrounding the employment of their education and teaching staff. This will include key matters such as recruitment, training and the cessation of employment of staff.

QQI will be empowered to withdraw the IEM from those providers that are found to be in breach of employment law. The withdrawal of the IEM is a serious sanction which QQI could impose on providers. This approach utilises the IEM as a further incentive for providers to comply with their obligations under employment law. In addition to these measures, in January 2019, I appointed Mr. Patrick King as mediator to work with stakeholders in the English language education sector. Since his appointment, Mr. King has been engaging with employer and employee representative bodies to seek to secure agreement on a set of minimum employment standards that could be agreed for the sector. This work has been ongoing with extensive engagement on all sides.

These discussions have included the potential for a set of appropriate employment standards
to take the form of an agreement or order, such as an employment regulation order, under the Industrial Relations Acts, 1946 to 2015. I wish to inform the House that should this process result in such an agreement or order, it would become part of employment law. Consequently, compliance with such an agreement or order would also become an automatic requirement of the IEM via the provisions now contained in this Bill without the need for any further legislative action. I encourage all sides to continue their engagement in the mediation process with the aim of reaching a comprehensive agreement that will benefit this sector in both the short and long term.

This Bill will also provide for a more robust national scheme for the protection of enrolled learners, PEL. PEL comes into effect in circumstances where a provider ceases to offer a programme or ceases to trade. It is intended to ensure that learners who commence a programme can be confident that they will be facilitated in completing that programme, or as a lesser alternative, in receiving a refund of fees paid should such an event occur. The current arrangements for PEL as required under the 2012 Act have fallen short of their objective and are no longer fit for purpose. The Bill proposes to replace these existing measures with the establishment of a learner protection fund. This fund will provide QQI with the necessary resources to manage PEL events. Should a provider cease to provide a programme, the fund would, where necessary, be used by QQI to fund the teaching out of the original programme where possible, fund the payment of fees for the transfer of an enrolled learner onto a similar programme of another provider, or where the circumstances dictate, provide for the refund of fees to the learner. Those providers whose programmes are covered by this fund would be required to pay an annual charge to QQI for PEL. The fund will be fully resourced by these charges. The level of the fee is intended to be as affordable as possible to avoid any undue imposition on providers and students while also avoiding any risk transfer to the Exchequer. The precise detail will be agreed following further consultation with stakeholders.

The Bill will provide QQI with powers to prosecute the provision or advertising of essay mills and other forms of academic cheating. Essay mills are services which supply to learners, in whole or in part, assignments that are required to be completed as part of a programme of education and training. These services are principally advertised online and have been a growing phenomenon in recent years. These services present a challenge to the academic integrity of those programmes and awards under the remit of QQI. The creation of offences for the provision and advertisement of these services will serve to prohibit the practice and make these services more difficult to access.

The next provision relates to awarding powers for institutes of technology. Currently, all of the institutes of technology, with the exception of the Dublin Institute of Technology, DIT, have delegated authority from QQI to make awards from levels 6 to 9 on the NFQ. In contrast the universities as well as the DIT and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI, are designated awarding bodies. This means that they are self-awarding bodies. There is, therefore, a legislative difference in the relationship between QQI and the universities and the institutes of technology. The Bill addresses this legislative difference by providing for amendments to the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992 to grant award-making powers, with the exception of doctoral awards, to all of the institutes of technology. This will put them on an equal footing with the designated awarding bodies with which they are expected to establish regional and thematic clusters, as per the goals of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. It will create a single coherent quality assurance and qualifications framework among public higher education institutions.
The next provisions relate to the use of the title of “university”. The Bill contains an amendment to the Universities Act 1997, which establishes a pathway for higher education institutions whose primary source of income does not derive from the Exchequer to access and use the title of “university”. This amendment establishes a process whereby such an institution may apply for authorisation to describe itself as a university and provide evidence that it meets the high standards associated with this title. This process will allow an institution, such as RCSI, to seek the designation “university” while ensuring that the existing regulatory and governance framework operating in the higher education sector remains intact.

Having set out the policy context underpinning the development of the Bill, I turn to the specific provisions. The Bill comprises 38 sections and is divided into three Parts. Part 1 comprises sections 1 and 2. It contains standard provisions on the Short Title and commencement and provides definitions for use in the Act.

Part 2 comprises sections 3 to 34, inclusive, and amends the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, which is the principal Act. Section 3 provides for amendments to section 2 of the principal Act. It introduces new, and revises existing, definitions within the 2012 Act.

Section 4 amends the functions of QQI and includes specific statutory functions for the inclusion of awards within the national framework of qualifications and the listing of awarding bodies.

Section 5 amends section 13 of the principal Act to make listed awarding bodies subject to the requirements of the section. Section 13 requires that providers facilitate and assist QQI in the performance of its functions insofar as those functions relate to the functions of that provider.

Section 6 provides for a specific legislative function for QQI to share relevant information with other state bodies, including the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and SOLAS.

Section 7 amends section 27 of the principal Act to provide for the periodic review and updating by QQI of quality assurance guidelines and for the issuance of different guidelines for different types of programmes including for the new category of listed awarding bodies.

Section 8 amends section 28 of the principal Act and contains provisions to clarify the scope of quality assurance procedures established by providers having regard to the guidelines issued by QQI.

Section 9 provides QQI with statutory powers to evaluate the bona fides and financial capacity of providers.

Section 10 contains provisions to allow QQI to impose certain conditions on an education and training provider whose quality assurance procedures it has approved.

Sections 11, 13 and 24 provide for QQI to consult with SOLAS when conducting reviews of further education and training providers. This parallels existing provisions in the 2012 Act for consultation with the HEA in respect of higher education institutions.

Sections 12 and 18 provide for certain occasions when QQI can withdraw approval of quality assurance procedures and programme validation, respectively, without conducting a review.
Section 14 amends section 43 of the principal Act to provide a legal basis for the inclusion of awards made by designated awarding bodies, that is to say, the seven universities, DIT and RCSI, in the NFQ. It further provides for QQI to establish policies and criteria for awards to be included within the framework and for the establishment of different policies and criteria for different awards and different awarding bodies.

Section 15 provides QQI with powers to prosecute the provision or advertising of essay mills and other forms of academic cheating.

Section 16 provides necessary amendments to facilitate the extension of the awarding powers of institutes of technology to include awards up to level 9 on the NFQ. As a result, institutes of technology will be required to apply for QQI validation for doctoral degree level awards only.

Sections 17 and 35 amend sections 45 and 84, respectively, of the principal Act to provide that QQI validation for all education and training programmes is time limited.

Sections 19 and 23 authorise QQI to list awarding bodies and include their qualifications in the NFQ. Section 19 provides for a transitional period of five years to facilitate existing arrangements between certain providers, such as institutes of technology and education and training boards, and awarding bodies other than QQI.

Section 20 provides a technical clarification to the effect that learners seeking access to recognition of prior learning processes should apply in the first instance to an education and training provider rather than to QQI.

Section 21 provides for QQI to examine the suitability of a provider’s quality assurance procedures in the context of determining a provider’s request for delegated authority to make awards. It also provides for QQI to define a class of programmes for the purposes of delegating authority to enable a more focused approach to delegating authority where it is warranted.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to interrupt the Minister of State. Her time has expired. Coincidentally, we have to move to Private Members’ business at 8 p.m.

Debate adjourned.

8 o’clock

National Development Plan: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— Project Ireland 2040 combines the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the ten year National Development Plan (NDP) 2018-2027;

— Project Ireland 2040 was published in February 2018;
— the NDP sets out the investment priorities that will underpin the successful implementation of Ireland’s infrastructural commitments in the NPF;

— the NDP commits to €116 billion capital spending in the period from 2018 to 2027, with Exchequer funding allocated for public capital investment over the period amounting to €91 billion;

— a fundamental purpose of the NDP is ensuring that public capital investment is clearly aligned to the delivery of the objectives and priorities detailed in the NPF;

— since the publication of Project Ireland 2040, there have been significant cost overruns on two key projects listed in the NDP – the National Broadband Plan and the National Children’s Hospital;

— these cost overruns have a significant knock-on impact on the funding available to other planned-for projects listed in the plan;

— the ten year NDP is fundamentally undermined by the significant cost overruns of these two major construction projects;

— many of the projects listed in the plan will not have the required funding available to them for completion as a result of significant cost overruns on other projects; and

— since the publication of Project Ireland 2040, a climate emergency has been declared by this House and, as a result, significant revisions of the plan are required in order to deliver on this declaration; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately identify which planned-for projects in the NDP will be delayed or cancelled as a result of lack of funding;

— recognise that the declaration of a climate emergency by the House requires significant revision of the NPF and NDP in order to deliver meaningful action on climate change; and

— urgently revise the NDP and NPF to properly reflect the current spending on listed projects and the impact on the €116 billion overall budget and its allocation across projects.

We all recall the fanfare and staging that accompanied the launching of Project Ireland 2040. There was quite a bit of commentary about the costs involved with the advertising campaign, including cinema advertisements and controversial regional newspaper pieces that were made to look like editorial copy. That coincided with the establishment of the spin unit which was subsequently dismantled. However, behind the spin, the actual reality, where there are a lot of ballpark figures, made very clear that many projects in the plan were aspirational at best and had no real chance of being delivered in a timely way. One cannot pin down absolutely the cost of
everything but there are an awful lot of ballpark figures and guesstimates. Having the national planning framework and national development plan in tandem is absolutely the right approach and I have been critical of that not happening in the past. We are seeing very substantial plans for increases in population on the east coast. I can see it in my own area, as well as in Fingal and other areas. It cannot happen without balancing those communities with the infrastructure they require. That is critically important if we are going to build sustainable communities. If we are to get to a regional balance, we cannot count populations twice and three times. We will only grow our population by a certain amount. If we are to do that and get balanced regional development, there has to be a way of doing it without compromising communities, or having plenty of housing - I hope there will be plenty of housing - but very little of the other infrastructure that is required.

Notwithstanding the original plan and its possible unviability, the overruns, particularly with the national children’s hospital and the national broadband plan, have come into stark focus. While no figure was put on the national broadband plan, there was no expectation that it would be many times the amount that had been talked about. The cost of the national children’s hospital project had been estimated at €790 million. We then discovered that that was not a nailed down figure and know from the tendering process that the final cost will now be somewhere around €1.7 billion, when the technology that has to accompany the building has been factored in. That is not an absolute final figure and we were told at the Committee of Public Accounts that containing the cost to that amount will be a challenge. In the national development plan a total of €11 billion was set aside for the entire portfolio of health projects. However, here we are just one year into the lifetime of the plan and we have already committed almost €2 billion of that to just one project. It was originally supposed to be about getting the very best outcome for newborn babies and was to be developed side-by-side with a maternity hospital. Making that happen on or near that site is going to be enormously challenging. It does not even have the provision to land a helicopter, for example, which could be a means of transport. It is surely self-evident that other things provided for within the €11 billion health budget will now suffer as a result and things like acute services, emergency department upgrades, or primary care units, for example, may well be compromised as a consequence. We need to hear from the Government about how that is going to be handled.

Similarly, a huge plank of Government fanfare surrounding the national broadband plan was about appealing to rural Ireland. It is not so rural and I must say that within my own constituency there are locations where the broadband quality is less than it is required to be. There was no expectation that it would run to a subsidy of up to about €3 billion. However, due to the chaos and mishandling of this Government’s approach to both the tendering process and the deal itself, we have seen the cost of delivering the national broadband plan escalate. When it was first announced by the then Minister, Pat Rabbitte, it was somewhere in the region of €350 million. That was way off the mark, but €3 billion is not something any of us expected. There have been many ballpark figures and guesstimates. If we are going to have strategic planning, it has to be based in some semblance of reality. The whole idea of the national development plan was to give comfort and assurance that a long-term strategic vision could be delivered on. For example, there are a number of fairly significant things on the horizon on the income side of things. One of those is Brexit and the other is the corporate tax area, which the G20 is discussing. We were told by the Taoiseach not that long ago that if there was a hard Brexit, there would probably be no money for a national broadband plan. However, the preferred bidder has been announced and the timeframe for signing a contract is during the ploughing championships. Does the Minister have any idea of the optics that is putting out? We are locked into a contract
that the Taoiseach himself has said that, in the context of a hard Brexit, we possibly would not have the money to deliver on. The reality is that what it says on paper regarding the long-term outcomes planned for is belied by short-term decisions and actions which are systematically exposing the budgetary flaws at the heart of the national development plan. The Government would like us to believe that it is no big deal and that future budgeting arrangements can accommodate the changes, but when I have money in my hand, I can spend it once. I cannot spend it twice or three times on different things. The national finances are the same and the Minister will probably argue that choices have to be made. It is a big deal that these overruns are there and it is taking us for fools to say it is not going to impact on other things and other very important projects.

Since the publication of the national development plan, this House has also declared a climate emergency. We had an all-party committee that did very good work and the House debated it and declared a climate emergency. That cannot be a tokenistic declaration. We have to adjust our behaviour as a consequence of making that declaration. There has to be meaningful action and it is not just about how we spend money but about when we spend it. I can give an example. The electrification of the train line in my constituency up to Celbridge and Maynooth is going to be a really important project. The line is electrified as far as Celbridge, and the train comes into town and terminates at Heuston. What happens then? There is a capacity issue with the Luas, because the critically important DART underground, or interconnector, for example, has not been factored in. That seems to be off sometime into the future. Transport is one of the three key elements regarding climate change and one must factor in the big ticket items that are going to make that difference. They are going to be in cities. That is one of the issues and it is self-evident that that needs to be done. It was self-evident decades ago and other Governments in the past can equally be criticised for not spending money when it was available to undertake that kind of a project. We have long since advocated the spend and save approach. We fundamentally believe spending strategically on the right things at the right time does not mean continuing to waste money on trying to backfill problems when they emerge. It is positive that a large amount of new rolling stock has been purchased. I had been seeking same, but there must be an integrated network to make it viable. I would have expected that to be the approach taken to this issue.

Due to successive Governments consistently failing to address climate and environmental issues adequately and to spend accordingly, we are facing into hefty fines for missing our 2020 targets. Missing them will make it even more difficult to meet the 2030 targets, as we will already be on a slippery slope. I introduced legislation on energy security and climate change in 2012 that was debated a year or so later. It would have set targets and indicated how to meet them. The then Minister, Commissioner Phil Hogan, introduced legislation a week or two later without targets. He is now critical of us for being laggards even though he had the opportunity to introduce legislation with targets and did not do so. This requires difficult choices. It is a question of timetabling and deciding where to make a difference.

The Government’s amendment to the motion talks of transitioning to renewable energy as being a key priority. It also refers to the impending publication of an all-of-government action plan that will use funding available under the NDP to help achieve targets. From the amendment in the names of Deputies Eamon Ryan and Catherine Martin of the Green Party, however, we can see that we would still have a shortfall in emissions reductions by 2030 of approximately 70% even if every initiative in the NDP was implemented. This shows that there is even an issue with our ambitions.
Put simply, the NDP is not fit for purpose where strategic actions to address meaningfully the climate and environmental emergency are concerned. In terms of the reality of delivering on projects listed in the NDP, the Government believes it is feasible to brush off the impact of cost overruns on two major projects in the face of the level of spending that is required to address the climate emergency adequately is just more smoke and mirrors. The Government has a *laissez-faire* approach and is relying on future budgetary adjustments as a fallback when there are overruns.

In its report today, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council identified some of the risks, including our over-reliance on corporate taxes. This takes us back to the early 2000s, when concerns were constantly raised about the reliance on a transient tax. I do not entirely agree with the council on what should be done, as we believe the State should spend to save. DART underground is such an example.

The G20 countries are seeking to make significant amendments to corporate taxation. If there was a significant shortfall like the last one in future budgets, not only would it influence what we could spend under the NDP, but it would also radically change our debt-to-GDP ratio. In turn, that would impact on our annual budget and ability to fund services, as we would have to service that debt. That point cannot be ignored in how we deal with the NDP.

I knocked on quite a number of doors in many places during the recent local elections and there were serious concerns raised about the cost overruns and the Government’s ability to get a grip on the delivery of capital projects in a way that was cost effective and prudent. The Minister must have heard the same thing, as people were not just deciding to say this to Opposition canvassers who arrived at the door.

Long-term strategic planning is welcome and the NDP and national planning framework constitute the right approach, but they have been undermined by a number of events already and will be further undermined by others, not least the question of how Brexit will play out. The long-term plan must be deliverable and prioritise sustainability in all its forms, both economic and environmental. We are paying a price for the glaring mistakes of the early 2000s when, for example, the opportunity to build sizable numbers of local authority houses was not taken. Would we have the same housing crisis now had it been taken? We could have delivered a decent public transport system, meaning that we would not now be playing catch-up. We could have retrofitted the built environment, or at least commenced it. That all of these tasks needed to be done was evident. Imagine the very different society that we would be living in now had all of that happened and had we prioritised spending. While I realise that was prior to the Minister’s involvement in government, we would not now be living through the housing emergency in its current manifestation.

This is being described as one of the slowest moving cities in Europe. In the early 1990s when the Luas received European funding, the argument made at the time was that the public transport system needed to be funded because Dublin had become uncompetitive owing to traffic chaos. Now, Dublin is at least as bad as it was then, if not worse. I include in that the city’s fringes and counties like mine. We have prioritised the car over investment in public transport. Some of that predates the Minister’s time in office, but if we do not make choices now, people in ten years’ time will be asking who was in office and why they did not decide to take the approach that was necessary to address what was evident at the time, namely, that a flawed budget was underpinning the NDP and we were not paying anything like the attention to issues such as climate change that we needed to.
Dáil Éireann

The three main areas are housing, transport and agriculture. We can do something in respect of each and must be ambitious in that regard. Unless we tackle them, the problem will grow larger for us from 2020 onwards. If we do not meet our 2020 targets, it will become much more difficult to meet our 2030 targets. This Government will be viewed as not having dealt with the decision on the requisite major investments and the strategy for same as it should have. I urge the House to revisit the NDP for those purposes.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move amendment No. 2:

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

“notes:

— the significant progress made in implementing the National Development Plan (NDP) as detailed in the first Project Ireland 2040 Annual Report published on 2nd May, 2019;

— that climate action and the transition to renewable energy is already a key priority in the NDP with circa €30 billion dedicated to this over the period of the plan, and in addition, the Government will shortly publish a new all-of-Government Climate Action Plan which will set ambitious targets for decarbonisation over the coming decades, using the funding available in the NDP to the maximum potential to help achieve these targets; and

— that the approach to remaining funding requirements will be clarified in the Summer Economic Statement and the Mid-Year Expenditure Report.”

I agree with many of the points made by Deputy Catherine Murphy. She articulated the need for capital investment in an economy that has a young society and is growing quickly. We are all aware of the many intense needs in the economy in areas like housing and public transport, as acknowledged by the Deputy. She made the point that if we are going to increase capital investment, we must do so in a strategic way that is integrated with the national development plan. I differ from the Deputy insofar as I suggest we already have a plan, Ireland 2040, that looks to meet many of the objectives she mentioned. I accept that there are challenges and appreciate that there are things we should have done better. We have acknowledged the mistakes that have been made in the case of the national children’s hospital. This plan seeks to provide for a significant increase in capital investment and to respond to the challenges that have been mentioned.

I would like to make two points in response to what the Deputy said about the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council’s fiscal sustainability report which was published earlier today. First, I have debated these matters in this Chamber and elsewhere during my three years as Minister with responsibility for handling this issue and not once during that time has a Deputy called on me to spend less or to run a larger surplus. That has not yet happened to me. Even in the debates that have happened since the council’s report was published earlier today, calls for such policy action have not been part of the narrative. Second, I would like to respond to the Deputy’s point about corporation tax by reminding her that we decided in last year’s budget to change the rate of VAT that applies in the hospitality sector. Of course, the increase in corporation tax is making a large contribution to the funding of the various capital projects we are debating this evening and has already enabled a great deal of progress to be made under Ireland 2040. If we
When Ireland 2040 was being launched last year, I faced Opposition claims that the plan did not exist. Those who made such claims last year are claiming now that Ireland 2040 is being undermined. I suggest this change can be attributed to the progress the plan has already made and the difference it is already making in communities. Eighteen primary care centres were opened last year, with a further 11 centres due to open this year. Ireland 2040 is enabling the delivery of more homes, including the social and public housing that is needed. In the area of higher and further education, new investments are under way at Technological University Dublin. In the area of arts and heritage, 47 new projects moved ahead in 2018 due to funding enabled by Ireland 2040. That is what is happening. Of course, there are areas we need to challenge and improve. Of course, we have learned from things that have been done with the national children’s hospital project. We need to ensure those things are done better in the future. In acknowledging what has gone wrong and what could have been done differently in the case of the national children’s hospital, I will not lose sight of the argument that many other things that are happening under Ireland 2040 are making a real difference to the lives of citizens and can make a difference to the lives of more citizens.

If there was ever a point in time when capital expenditure needed to increase by 24%, which is what we are doing this year, surely this point in time, when we are approaching Brexit, is it. This year, capital investment in the economy will move beyond €7 billion. As the Deputy correctly said, many of the challenges we are facing have resulted from the unevenness of our investment in the so-called capital of the country, which is code for people’s homes and the buses and trains they can get on, over the years. Such investment has tended to surge and plummet. Ireland 2040 is seeking to increase investment quickly in the medium term before sustaining it in the longer term. The existence of such plans is one of the reasons the economy has grown in the way we have seen in recent years and one of the reasons we have seen changes in projects like those to which I have referred. In addition, a number of processes are in place to track where projects stand and where we are overall. We have launched the investment projects and programme tracker, which is publicly available. We have launched an online mapping tool to help citizens to understand where key projects stand. We are putting in place the Land Development Agency to deal with the issue of how to create public land banks in cities in a way that enables and incentivises the delivery of more homes by landowners.

Climate change is one of the main areas in which outcomes are called for in Ireland 2040 and one of the biggest recipients of funding in the plan. Almost €30 billion has been allocated against funding choices that can make a difference to climate change. The objective of the contested public transport projects under the plan is to get more of our citizens onto high-speed public transport. The retrofitting of existing homes is another priority under the plan. We want to do some work on renewable heat. All of this is being put in place by Ireland 2040 and by the priority that is being placed against climate change as a result. It is understandable there has been much debate about funding allocations in this context. The strength of those allocations is that they are multi-annual. When we have got to points of strength in the economy in the past, we have usually increased capital investment up to the point at which we can no longer afford it. We look to increase public investment and then have to cut it back at a time when we need it the most. In this plan, we are looking to increase capital investment over time before holding it steady to respond to many of the challenges that are debated in this House day after day, particularly in the context of motions like this one.

I accept many of the arguments that have been made by Deputy Catherine Murphy about
things that are needed. I differ from her on the progress that has been made under Ireland 2040 in seeking to address the issues she has identified. The amendment I have proposed refers to the progress that has been made, acknowledges what has been done with regard to climate change and mentions that the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, will publish an all-of-government climate action plan. By seeking to manage how we fund projects over many years, as opposed to doing it year to year, we will have the resources we need to respond to the issues that have been raised by the Deputy. I contend that one of the best responses to the many challenges facing us involves managing and funding capital investment in the economy in a way that delivers better homes, better universities and better public transport at a time when citizens are most in need of such services.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I would like to share time with Deputies Cassells, Murphy O’Mahony, Cahill, Lisa Chambers, Ó Cuív and Eugene Murphy.

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

Deputy Barry Cowen: I welcome the opportunity presented by this Private Members’ motion which asks the Dáil to direct the Government to review the national development plan. We support the motion and will vote for it. We also support the amendment that has been tabled by the Green Party which seeks to provide for a climate impact assessment and audit of the plan to be carried out and we will vote for it too. Given that the Dáil has declared an emergency in this area, as we have heard, it is right and proper that we avail of the opportunity when it arises to review the benefit and gain that may accrue from infrastructural expenditure such as this. I note what the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, said about the climate action programme that is to be brought forward by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, and others. The Taoiseach has been quoted today as saying the Government supports climate action that does not make the country poorer and does not cost jobs. Does he know that Bord na Mona is shedding between 450 and 600 jobs, as it accelerates its decarbonisation programme? I take it he does not know that and it is very unfortunate that he would make such comment. It is also very unfortunate that he has not put in place, with the available carbon tax revenue, direct funding and assistance for a transition group that has been put in place for the region. Then again, neither the Taoiseach nor his Government saw fit to ensure the EU would include the peatlands in the coal mining districts-in-transition fund set up for such areas throughout Europe. It will take an application to the new European Commission for that to be rectified but that signifies, in a small way, that the intent is not there on the part of the Government to address areas that understand what is expected of them but get no compensation, help or assistance to ensure the transition is meaningful and can be beneficial rather than detrimental.

I also believe it is necessary for this Dáil to instruct the Government to cater for a review because of the issue of overspending. The national development plan is not long in vogue and, as Deputy Catherine Murphy said, great fanfare greeted its initiation and there were many pages of print across local newspapers, thanks to the national spin unit, which was dismantled thereafter because of the obvious efforts it made to create the impression it was something that it is not. Simply put, the national children’s hospital and the national broadband plan will accommodate an overspend in the region of €2.56 billion. What impact will that have? Will it mean that projects announced for different parts of the country in housing, education, health and primary care, among others, will be forgone? That is the advice that was given to the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform by his own Secretary General. It is also the advice given in the independent assessment by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council published today. The council points out that the ceilings set by many Departments have been exceeded over a number of years. The
The council’s report also notes that the structural deficit impinges on the targets set by the EU in the context of the fiscal rules. The contention that has been around this House for many years that Fine Gael is the only party that can manage the public finances has been blown to shreds in recent weeks alone.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform said on the “Six One News” on 8 May last - I will check my dates - that no project of any shape or form within the national development plan would be impacted on by the overruns related the national broadband plan or the national children’s hospital but he cannot give such a guarantee. He said the overruns would be catered for through revenue resources. However, these are the same revenue resources and projects contained within the Government figures and projections that the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has said are “not credible” and are “irresponsible”. The report published today is damning. I put it to members of the council at a committee meeting earlier today that the Government’s figures are based on volatile corporate tax receipts. The Minister has acknowledged this and has said he has catered for it in this year’s budget by not including an expectation of a similar amount as that collected last year. However, I am sure corporate tax receipts will be used to cater for the overspend that will inevitably happen in the Department of Health, among others. The Government’s figures are also based on a soft Brexit and the implications of same. Various reports have looked at the alternative which could have a far greater impact on the economy and the national development plan. The bottom line is that in order to cater for the overspend at this early stage, the Government must either increase taxes, borrow more, cut projects within the plan or cut current expenditure. That is a fact. The Minister and his party often accuse others in this House of engaging in fairy economics but he gave a lesson in fairy economics recently when he claimed that the overspend would not impact on any planned project.

It is for these reasons that I believe, especially given the numbers in this Dáil, the recent elections and the sentiments expressed to me on the doorstep, that people expect that all those elected to this House and to local authorities should be able to work together for the betterment of those that they serve. The Government rushed to announce this, as it has rushed to announce many things, but there was not a whole lot of work behind it. The Government is good on the hard hats and the high-vis jackets but is not so good when it comes to the shovel and getting the work done. I hope the Government will take note of what the House is saying and will ensure a proper review takes place. In that way, it can be straight with the public as to what will emanate and be delivered as a result.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I welcome the opportunity to debate the call for a review of the national development plan. There is no doubt that Government’s behaviour in the context of the national development plan, Project Ireland 2040 and, in particular, the national planning framework, was disgraceful and showed the contempt with which the national Parliament is held by this Government. The Parliament was bypassed in terms of a proper debate and, crucially, an actual vote on the endorsement or otherwise of the national planning framework. I have heard members of the Government claim in this House and in the media that a vote actually happened when it blatantly did not. Instead, straight after the bypassing of that vote, we had the around-Ireland roadshow, with goodies for certain constituencies and certain Deputies. A bit like the spin unit that was spinning that news, the strategic communications unit, SCU, is gone and a lot of the money needed to deliver these projects is vanishing as well, most of it into the crater at St. James’ Hospital. Now we come to the crux of the matter. A significant part of the planning framework relates to where the population will be dispersed and centred in the next 20 years but is contingent on the supporting infrastructure being in place to allow people to live in
areas that have the physical and social amenities that they need. We have seen all this before. The overarching document gives the green light to the regional and, subsequently, the county plans but with the obvious demand for new housing, sites will start to be developed. What will not keep pace is the supporting infrastructure necessary for people in these areas to live quality lives, especially on the east coast. Lest we are accused tonight of cheap political digs for a debate, the facts speak for themselves. Take the issue of education as an example. Even before the publication of the national development plan, scores of new schools were announced on the eve of the last general election. There were half a dozen announced for my own town alone but not one of those schools has been developed. We have asked questions about them in this House but there is still no sign of them. If the goodies announced prior to the last election have not been delivered, how is it credible that the projects in this plan will happen? The Minister cherry-picked a number of items in the plan and cherry-picking is what is being done in terms of deliverability.

The Green Party has tabled an amendment seeking a climate impact assessment as part of the review, which we are supporting. In my constituency there is a proposal that gets just a fleeting reference in this plan but it could assist greatly in the reduction of car emissions in a county of 200,000 people. I refer to the development of the Navan to Dublin rail line. The Government is saying that it will throw its eye over the viability of that project in a few years’ time. The Taoiseach travels that road and must see the backlog of traffic each morning at 6 a.m. He should back the rail line project which could help in terms of climate change, as well as improving the lives of the decent people of County Meath.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O’Mahony: I wish to speak about issues specifically pertaining to my constituency of Cork South-West. The national planning framework and the national development plan were launched amid much media hype. However, this has long since waned and the truth is that the Government has failed to deliver on a massive scale. I have listened to hours of spin at the health committee on the delivery of the national children’s hospital. Where are we today? We are waiting on a hospital that will cost almost €550 million extra. We are now in a position where other projects around the country will be greatly impacted on. This is inevitable no matter what the Minister tries to claim. Essential services such as respite and endoscopy units in Bantry General Hospital could now be put on the long finger.

Numerous broadband plans have come and gone, each having missed its deadline. At the end of it all, what do we actually have? We have nothing more than confirmation that it will cost six times more than the initial price. I genuinely believe some Ministers do not appreciate how detached the Government has become from rural Ireland. I know of areas in which there is no broadband coverage and no mobile phone coverage. I know of areas in which one might send an email in the hope it may be delivered 30 minutes later. How can we expect to attract investment into places like west Cork, areas which have great things going for them, if we cannot even offer basic broadband coverage?

If I may once again refer to Bantry General Hospital, its staff attempt to run high-tech equipment in the course of their daily duties but the IT infrastructure available to them does not lend itself to same. We are talking about people’s livelihoods and, in this case, people’s lives. It is simply unacceptable.

Today I heard members of Government continuously make reference to the fact that the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council is only an advisory body. If the Government is not willing to take its advice on board, is its existence surplus to the Government’s requirements? This haphazard
approach has to stop. As stated previously, it is for this reason we will be supporting this motion and the amendments.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The spin and marketing around the launch of the national planning framework and national development plan, Project Ireland 2040, demonstrated exactly how the Taoiseach and those around him view their role in government. It was, and is, an exercise in style over substance. The spend on the marketing that ran alongside the launch was truly shocking. The choreography and presentations by Ministers told us clearly what the Government’s mindset is. All the film launch was missing was canned laughter and applause.

All of this would have been fine if the country was not in the middle of an unprecedented homelessness crisis. It would have been mildly amusing if the housing crisis that grips the country was not running out of control month by month while the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government offers launch and relaunch of failed policies. It would have been amusing if our health service was not on its knees and if the Government’s handling of the national children’s hospital was not resulting in a spend overrun that will see health projects in my county delayed while patients suffer. I refer to projects such as St. Patrick’s Hospital in Cashel, where badly needed investment has been promised but where, because of ineffective government, serious doubts remain as to whether the timeframe for delivery will be met. I also refer to the acknowledged need for acute mental health beds in County Tipperary. This need has been accepted by the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, but his hands will now be tied by the lack of funding arising from this Taoiseach and his senior Ministers being more interested in their image than in bringing forward effective Government policies that would see major problems in our economy resolved.

The serious issue of proper regional development has also been lost in the fanfare. The plan tells us that regional development is a priority but the failure to deliver on rural broadband tells the real story of the Government. It is solely a matter of individuals being more important than the facts. The facts in respect of regional development and rural broadband are clear; one is impossible without the other. This important fact has been lost in this plan and by the Government.

I will make a final comment about the objective in this plan to support and develop town centres in rural counties. Again we see a clear disconnect between the plan and Government policy. In my home town of Thurles the local authority will invest millions of euro in developing Liberty Square in the coming years, but the Government has allowed a State-owned company, An Post, to abandon its central location in that same square.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I am happy to support the motion and speak in favour of it. The launch of the national planning framework and national development plan was one of the most cynical the State has ever witnessed. An unprecedented marketing campaign followed. Deputy Cassells is correct; it was like a bag of goodies being given to Deputies to take back to their constituencies as though they had delivered something enormous when they had delivered nothing at all. We look to overspends on the two biggest capital projects the State is facing into: the national broadband plan, which is seeing an overspend of €2.5 billion on its original estimate of €500 million; and the national children’s hospital, the cost of which has increased by €447 million from the spend originally announced. It is not credible to suggest that this will have no impact on funding for other capital projects. It simply does not add up.

It is not only Fianna Fáil or other Opposition parties saying this. The Irish Fiscal Advisory
Dáil Éireann

Council today released a report in which Seamus Coffey had the same message for the Government, which is that its budgetary plans for later years lack credibility - a scathing assessment if ever there was one. I cannot understand why the Minister would not want to immediately identify the projects which he cannot fund and to be honest with citizens and with this House. I cannot understand why he would not also want to identify projects that will be delayed, because it is not possible to continue on the same trajectory when his budget and resources have been significantly impacted upon. It simply does not make sense.

The council also calls for recognition of the climate emergency, a call supported by this House. Clearly the national development plan, Project Ireland 2040, does not account for this. Surely it would be prudent on the part of the Government to assess those plans to see where they stand and how they need to change, because it is obvious that they do need to change. This motion makes sense and it would be unwise not to act on it and not to look back over those plans. To suggest that projects planned for the end of 2040 will be delivered in 20 years’ time simply lacks credibility. We discussed the local property tax earlier. The suggestion that local authorities would take in the same amount of local property tax while new changes result in 80% of people paying increased taxes and only 20% paying reduced property taxes does not add up. I happily support the motion and urge the Government to act.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I will be very brief. As the Minister is probably aware, I never agreed with the approach taken in the national development plan. It is just a list of projects put down on a sheet of paper. It seems that three big problems arise in everything the Government does. The first is the total inability to make planning decisions in any coherent way. The second is the failure to deliver projects on budget. The third is the failure to deal with the housing crisis. Since I only have less than half a minute left, I would like to say I do not understand a plan that states there will be 40,000 extra people in Galway when we cannot house the people who are in the city. In fact, we are housing people in emergency accommodation outside the city because it literally does not have enough buildings for the present population. This whole plan is bizarre and should be rewritten. It was never brought to the Dáil for debate and it is non-functional.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I have no option but to be brief. I will concentrate on my constituency because I have limited time to support this motion. My colleagues have made the case in respect of the overspend on the children’s hospital and broadband, but I will tell the Minister about the type of things that are happening in my part of the world with regard to broadband. People who are trying to fill out passport applications online see their connection break down. Such occurrences have caused untold trouble for families in my region. People can be paying wages online on a Thursday evening only for the system to break down. These are the difficulties we are having.

I will also refer to health issues in my area. On many occasions I have questioned the Taoiseach regarding the absolute need for work to commence on the emergency department at Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe. It is shovel ready - if I can use that phrase - but it is not being given the go-ahead. Those projects are being deliberately held up by the Government. There is another one at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon and another in Carrick-on-Shannon. Those projects are not moving and I believe they are being deliberately held up as a result of this plan in which, I am sorry to say, I have never believed.

Deputy Jonathan O’Brien: I am not going to criticise the way in which the plan was launched. Some of those who have levelled criticism at the Government with regard to how it
was launched would have done exactly the same thing had they been in the Minister’s position. That is the reality. I am not going to play politics in that regard. What I want to get into is the plan and what the motion calls for. What it calls for is not something at which any Government should turn up its nose. Nobody is asking for the plan to be completely stopped. From my reading the Social Democrats’ motion makes three reasonable requests. It wants the Government to identify which planned-for projects in the NDP will be delayed or cancelled as a result of lack of funding. That is a very reasonable request two years into the plan. The Minister for Finance has said those cost overruns will not impact on the national development plan and that it can cater for those cost overruns through revenue. If that is the case, it is the Minister’s responsibility to show the House how he can achieve that.

The second request is for the Government to recognise that the declaration of a climate emergency by the House requires significant revision of the NPF and the NDP in order to deliver meaningful action on climate change. Again any reasonable person would recognise given where we are now on the back of the report of the climate action committee and the declaration of the climate emergency, it is prudent to revisit the NDP to ensure we can meet targets. The Minister has outlined some of the things the Government will do and the additional funding to be invested to ensure we can meet some of our targets. However, I do not see anything wrong with asking for a complete revision of the plan to ensure we can meet our targets and that we are energy efficient.

The final request is for the Government to urgently revise the NDP and the NPF to properly reflect the current spending on listed projects and the impact on the €116 billion overall budget. Again that is a very reasonable request. We accept this is an enormous capital programme going out to 2040. I understand why the NPF goes out to 2017. We need to give some direction to the construction sector. We need to ensure we can achieve all that. However, there is no harm in revising things. I do not know if there are built-in revision mechanisms between now and 2040. If there is not, I see nothing wrong with pausing and revising the plan to ensure we can achieve what the Government set out to achieve. That is a very reasonable request. For that reason we support the motion.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Many people in rural areas and the west would like to see much of the plan happen faster. That is one of the big issues. One of the aspects of the plan relates to climate change. It is about balance in the economy and balanced regional development. One of the big issues for the people living west of the Shannon is that we do not see enough infrastructure being built fast enough in order to develop an economy in that part of the world which can rebalance the economy which is probably overheating in Dublin with traffic jams and all the problems with rent, housing, etc. Part of that could be done through ensuring we have more places for people to live outside the city and in other regions around the country.

Having more places for people to live also requires more workspace development for people to work in those areas. That is one of the problems we have. Many people require workspace development to allow them to work from home or work from hubs near home. Broadband is one of the key infrastructural elements we require to make that happen and we require that as quickly as possible.

I come to the climate change aspect, particularly around how land is used. The Government is missing the big picture in respect of what we can do with climate change. Obviously land can be used to sequestrate as much carbon as possible and there is an economic opportunity to make that happen. However, if the Government simply leaves the market to deal with it, it will
not happen. That has been the experience in the past. The Government needs to be a player in this area.

In order to develop the kind of sectoral approaches we need, particularly in regard to biogas and biomass which hopefully will replace the non-renewable carbon fuels we are using to produce most of our electricity, we could go down that direction. However, doing so requires all the biomass to be grown somewhere and it has to be grown on farmland. The farmers who grow that need to know they will get a guaranteed long-term payment for it. Half a dozen farmers cannot just decide they want to grow biomass. They need to know there is a structure, a market and payment for it. Nobody will do that on the required scale unless the Government has an involvement.

One of the things missing from the development plan is the concept of the Government playing a role in developing key sectors to ensure our climate change targets are met. To do that would be a major advance. It would not add much cost to the national development plan, but it would certainly give people confidence that there will be an emphasis on ensuring our climate change targets are reached.

Housing is one of the big issues. I come from a small rural parish with a three-teacher school going down to a two-teacher school owing to lack of children because no families are living in the area. Many rural areas do not have enough people because we do not have the jobs or infrastructure. However, at the other end of the country the place is bursting. We need to place an emphasis on rebalancing the economy. That will not happen if we leave it to the market to do it and if we leave it to business to develop on its own; the Government needs to play a role.

We need an economy that creates more wealth for more people everywhere. We need more services for more people everywhere. We need more supports for more small businesses everywhere. For that to happen the Government needs to show it is prepared to put the money in place.

As my colleague has said, the motion before the House is very reasonable. It calls on the Government to state how and where it will find the funding to develop the projects promised in the plan in the context of the significant cost overruns in other areas. It is not ridiculous to ask for that. Equally it is not ridiculous for the Government to take cognisance of the impact climate change will have. There are issues across the country with developing renewable energy, particularly the solar panel business. Deputy Stanley has a Bill before the House on microgeneration so that people could generate energy on the roofs of people’s homes and businesses. So far nothing has happened with that because the Government is holding it up.

If the Government is serious about these things, it needs to be moving this aspect forward. For instance, what is happening with charging points for electric cars, particularly for people living in rural areas? People living in those rural areas have higher mileage on their vehicles than people living in urban areas. However, there is practically nowhere outside towns and cities for them to charge electric cars. Equally people living in rural areas do not have the options that people have in other places.

To make a difference we need infrastructure that will require key investment to happen fast. To do that requires turning the national development plan back to front. Many of the things planned for the last few years need to be done in the first few years. That is one of the key problems I saw when it was launched in Sligo last year with great razzmatazz. That is fine; every
Government will do that. At the end of the day the funding that has been put in place and the funding that has been promised is not being delivered for many of the communities that need to see it now.

The motion is not asking the Government to do too much. At this point the Government needs to place the emphasis where the greatest potential is. The greatest potential for the economy is outside the areas where the economy is overheating; it is out in rural areas and out in the regions which is where most investment needs to be made. At this late hour I implore the Government to ensure the infrastructure is put in place, particularly broadband and the roads infrastructure required in rural areas so that business can develop and be sustainable.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** On behalf of the Labour Party, I support the motion and the amendment to the motion. In moving the Government’s countermotion the Minister noted the significant progress made in implementing the NDP based on a report published in May.

9 o’clock This has been a Government of spin rather than substance. We have heard a considerable amount of conversation, declamation and declaration on the national development plan, the first aspect being the decision to push the timespan of the plan out from a normal one of five, seven or ten years to 22. In effect, this means that everything in the wide world can get done but maybe in year 19 or 22. Will Fine Gael still be in government then? Who knows? It will certainly be at least three to four general elections after the next general election. It is part of the craft of spinning to have a timeline that is so long that one can say one has committed to everything and will have done everything. Who will know?

On what the Minister was talking about, I would like to ask him a couple of questions about the broader Dublin area. Where in the national development plan is the electrification of the railway line from Dublin to Maynooth which runs through both of our constituencies? If the railway lines to Maynooth, Portarlington and Portlaoise were to be electrified, which should be achievable in about ten to 15 years under the plan, it would result in the transformation about which the previous speaker was talking, thereby benefiting much of rural and central Ireland. The greater Dublin area would be put on a footing with places such as London and Paris, to which it is quite reasonable to commute by train or some other very speedy mode of transport from a distance of 70 or 80 miles. It allows for much stronger towns farther out. There could be a viable, independent string of towns with both local attractions and the capacity for fast commuting. That would reduce road congestion and very long, slow commutes. Many individuals, including couples with children, are forced, because of the extraordinary price of houses in the big cities, to make extremely long commutes to and from their places of work.

Where is the Luas to Lucan and the metro to Swords? I have seen so many cost evaluations and descriptions of underground and overground options that, even though I know the route quite well, I am confused about what the Government’s real intentions are.

Fine Gael has developed a serious problem over the question of competency in managing and organising the implementation of the projects needed for the State’s normal functioning and growth. In the discussions today the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council featured again the overrun associated with the national children’s hospital and the enormous uncertainty over and considerable increase in the ticket price of broadband. We all want to see broadband extended to every home in the country. We know that rural broadband is an essential resource for most people, wherever they are living in Ireland. It allows those in politically and geographically remote areas to develop enterprise, do more work from home and run businesses from their home areas.
In many ways, however, we have a national development plan that is all things to all men and women and that has a massive timeline that almost makes one doubt whether any of it will be implemented. The opening parts of the plan, covering the years 2018, 2019 and so on, have all been inherited from the previous Government. There is very little that is different. I am glad that the Minister has referred to the further development of Grangegorman, but, as he knows, this work has been ongoing for well over ten years. Construction began during the term of the last Government. It is good that the work is continuing, but the Government did not invent the project. That is why there are such questions over competency in the case of the national children’s hospital. Where are the additional projects?

The plan is deeply disappointing when it comes to dealing with climate change. Where is the vision that will decarbonise the economy and provide transition employment for those who will be affected by decarbonisation? I refer to the workers who have been working in Bord na Móna on the bogs and perhaps the staff at the Moneypoint plant, one of the biggest polluters in Ireland. Action in that regard has been pushed out to 2027. There has been some talk about bringing the date forward by a year or two, but there is no definitive date.

In the aftermath of the Dáil declaring a climate change emergency, we should pause. All of us, including members of the Government, have something to contribute in that regard. We should sit down and work out a serious climate change plan to address the most polluting areas in the economy such as the Moneypoint plant. We should set out a coherent plan such that, within a maximum of six or seven years, we would take the polluters out of the equation and replace them with renewable energy sources that will allow us to achieve our climate change targets. I am disappointed that climate change is not really touched on.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Not only has County Donegal been left out of national infrastructure projects but it is also becoming very clear that persistent cost overruns on specific projects provided with funding under the national development plan will have a negative financial impact on smaller projects across the country, particularly in County Donegal. For County Donegal, the concerns about the national development plan include concerns about funding commitments in respect of a number of local community hospitals, including St. Joseph’s in Stranorlar and Sheil Community Hospital in Ballyshannon. The Taoiseach has denied the fact that cost overruns associated with the national children’s hospital have anything to do with this but doubts remain. There are very strong doubts in the community in County Donegal. Doubts also remain about funding for flood defences which have has been called into question by local residents, particularly in Buncrana. To date, there have been no commitments made by the Government or the local authority, suggesting future funding is uncertain. This is particularly worrying as a provisional timeline of ten years, given in the national development plan, is already ten years too late for the communities affected.

The much awaited upgrade of the A5, a vital infrastructural project and a key economic driver for the regeneration of the north west, had its funding deferred to address cost overruns at the national children’s hospital. A pattern is emerging. There is a history of cost overruns associated with pretty much every large-scale project proposed in the history of the State, including various motorways, the Luas, metro underground, the national children’s hospital and, of course, the national broadband plan. Clearly, there is a conflict of interest when Ministers announce projects for political reasons, yet ignore the financial and regulatory realities of implementing them. The evaluation of projects should not be made by people who propose them. Conflicts of interest can lead to underestimating costs. It is clear that incompetent Governments need to be stopped before crises such as the homelessness and health crises recur. This is not
to mention climate change and the need for the national development plan to address climate change issues which it completely ignores. The Government states it has factored climate change measures into some of the plan but not all of it. Much more needs to be happening at this stage and the Government needs to realise that, wake up and smell the coffee and ensure it can meet the targets necessary for all of us for the climate future.

The national development plan is out of date and needs to be revised to take into account cost overruns and climate change responsibilities. Any compensation to address the cost deficit will need to be looked at in detail in order that funding can be secured in a fair and transparent manner and to ensure that rural areas such as County Donegal, which have not benefited from any of the developments in the past, are addressed. Climate responsibility needs to be reflected in public projects, infrastructure and transport. That is what will deliver for people.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate and thank the Social Democrats for introducing this sensible motion. I cannot imagine why the Government would amend the motion and it is welcome that Fianna Fáil will support it. We are simply asking that the projects to be delayed are identified, which is the least the people of Ireland deserve. The motion asks for recognition that a climate emergency has been declared and seeks an urgent revision of the national development plan, NDP, and national planning framework, NPF, to properly reflect current spending levels. In addition, the Green Party is asking for a climate impact assessment of Project Ireland 2040.

When the Minister is finished talking, perhaps he will note that this is a serious matter and that the Deputies speaking at this time of the night are doing our best not to be negative and to come up with solutions. I realise there are many things a Minister must do but, as has been said, the NDP and the NPF began in spin, continue in spin and bear no relationship to the reality of a declared climate emergency.

The Taoiseach, in response to a question from me following the declaration of a climate emergency, said in this House that the declaration was simply symbolic. While he tried to clarify that statement afterwards, the declaration is anything but symbolic. The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, addressing the Dáil on 29 May, pointed out that we are losing biodiversity around the globe at a rate unprecedented in human history. Report after report from the United Nations and organisations in Ireland have stated we must face the climate emergency and do something about it. It would be sensible to say at this point that we need to review the NDP and the NPF for that reason. Some of the language used in the plans is good and I liked the repeated references in them to sustainability. I thought these were not bad plans when I read them first but, when I looked in more detail, I realised there is complete policy incoherence in both plans. I do not know how many sides of its mouth the Government can talk from but these incoherent policies suggest it is certainly more than two. We talk about sustainability and regional development while, at the same, promoting the unsustainable development of our cities without public transport, continuing with the type of development that is leading to more climate change and talking about investment in more fossil fuels. There is total policy incoherence in both plans.

It is time to take our leadership from the children of the country and across the world who have asked that damage to the climate is not done in their name. This is a sensible and rational motion that is asking us to stop and reflect. Let us look at where we are, given the climate change emergency and the overspend on two projects. Like my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, I sit on the Committee of Public Accounts and, to my horror, the business case for the
national children’s hospital by a private company - we await information on the cost of that and who carried it out - was deemed by another private company not to be credible. This was after the event. I will be careful because I may have the language wrong but the words used to describe that business plan were along the lines of “not credible” or “faulty”. Deputy Murphy might be able to help me with the words used.

The Minister stated nobody in this Dáil had ever asked him to reduce spending. That is true, but we have all asked him to spend more efficiently, more effectively and in a different way and to spend public money on public buildings, infrastructure and transport. We have asked the Government not to waste money on projects such as the national children’s hospital by using the distancing mechanism of setting up a board comprised ostensibly of private people with expertise. We have been left with a cost of almost €2 billion for a children’s hospital that will not have any accommodation for families and will not deal with research. We are dependent on charity and philanthropists to fund those two areas.

Something is seriously amiss with the Government’s view of the economy given the rate of child poverty in the country and the housing crisis. I was at the launch of a Simon Community campaign marking 40 years in Galway. The figures show that in the past four years average rents in Galway city and county have increased by 42% and 49%, respectively. This is in a city where rent caps are in place.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** By 2040, it is anticipated that Ireland will approach the pre-Famine population level of 8 million. In the intervening period, it is estimated that an additional 660,000 employment opportunities will be required. It is vital that we have a strategic approach to public capital investment. The national development plan has committed to a capital spend of €116 billion. This all sounds great on paper but I have big concerns about the plans of the Government and the reality that it will deliver. Since the publication of Project Ireland 2040, there have been significant cost overruns on three projects, namely, the national broadband plan, the national children’s hospital and the new metro plan. It is scary that the Government will spend €10 billion on these three projects alone. I doubt the credibility of the national development plan.

The Government must realise the impact of spending €10 billion on three projects which have all suffered cost overruns. These overrun projects have cost the average, hard-working taxpayer in more ways than one. Not only is it disgusting for a taxpayer to see his or her money being spent in a reckless fashion but these taxpayers also have to suffer the knock-on impact on funding that is available for other planned projects. That inevitably impacts on the hard-working taxpayer. Are these overruns the reason we have found out, in the past two weeks, that there is an embargo on home help hours? This embargo is causing major stress for families in west Cork whose elderly loved ones will not get a home help service. It is also a considerable test for the great home help providers in west Cork who are under great pressure to deliver a service.

I would also like to see how west Cork will do in the national development plan. What has the Government planned for us? Will it be anything like the rural regeneration programme under which 43 projects, most of them in west Cork, did not get a brown cent? What are the Government’s plans? Will west Cork be excluded again? I am calling on the Government to immediately identify which projects that were planned for in the NDP will be delayed or cancelled as a result of a lack of funding.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Social Democrats for introducing this important
motion for debate tonight. While we are talking about the national development plan, I want to remind this House that there are people providing home help in County Kerry today who are not being paid for their mileage. They have to pay for petrol for their cars to go and give home help. When we are talking about millions and billions of euro, I am thinking of those people who are going out today, giving home help and who have to pay for their own petrol because they are not being given their petrol allowance.

We have seen what the Government has done with overruns on major projects but I want to talk about projects that we are waiting for in County Kerry. We desperately need more beds to be provided in Kerry University Hospital, KUH. We desperately need more room in that hospital. We need it to be extended and investment in it. We desperately need our new community hospital to be built in the great town of Killarney. We desperately need what I call a bypass for the bypass in Killarney and a connecting road from the main Killarney-Cork road to the Muckross Road which would, in turn, service Ireland’s National Event Centre, INEC, owned by the O’Donoghue family, which has provided entertainment and much needed employment in Killarney for decades.

We must also ensure the bypass for Macroom and Ballyvourney will go ahead as scheduled. We urgently require major investment in Cahersiveen Community Hospital or for a new hospital to be built. We urgently need the Kenmare bypass to be extended and made into a proper bypass as should have been done in the first instance.

Last night at my clinics in County Kerry, I met parents who have young people with intellectual and physical disabilities and who need services. These are the type of things we need to ensure happen. We need to ensure more local authority houses are built in County Kerry, where they are as rare as hens’ teeth. The housing list in the county is getting longer and longer.

I am pleading with the Government to think about County Kerry in the context of the national development plan. The Government should think about the needs of people there, the infrastructure in need of investment and the home helps who put petrol in their own cars to be able to give care to people in their homes.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak for a couple of minutes on this very important topic. The Project Ireland 2040 plan and the millions or billions that will be spent in the meantime matter little to a particular lady who gets 20 minutes’ home help and does not have anyone to cook her dinner. She is sick and tired of sandwiches and being showered. No one has time to cook a dinner for her. That is very unfair. Another lady, who is very elderly, has €57 left for her weekly outgoings after paying for private home help to supplement the small amount of home help she gets from the HSE. This plan matters little to such people who are being cut to the bone.

On hospitals, Kenmare and Dingle hospitals are only half open. There are people on trolleys day after day and other people waiting in emergency departments.

During questions on promised legislation, I raised the issue of the lousy deal that is supposed to be given to farmers under the fair deal scheme. People are waiting 12 or 14 weeks to be assessed for the fair deal scheme and their families are trying to pay for their stay in a nursing home because they cannot be left in community hospitals.

The plan refers to climate change and all the money that will be spent on it. The current generation of farmers are doing so well for their environment and have complied with all the
regulations with which they have been asked to comply. I thank the generations of farmers who got us here, the people who came before us and looked after our land and country. Like everyone else, I appreciate our environment - rivers, lakes and mountains - and so did those farmers. They got us to where we are. There is now a new wave of people who are saying, “Save the planet and to hell with the people.” That is what is going on.

The Government is planning to spend billions between now and 2040. Where will it get that money? It will get it from the farmers and off the backs of the poor people who are trying to go to work and have only a car to take them there. The Government is talking about imposing more carbon taxes. Carbon tax matters little to those who do not have housing.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time is up.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I ask the Ceann Comhairle to allow me a little latitude. If we were to comply and become completely emissions free, that would account for only 0.13% in a worldwide context. We are talking about bringing Ireland into line and the Government is trying to paralyse people in this country, but what about those in Japan and China who cannot see their belly buttons as a result of fog and smog?

People who want to put a roof over their heads are being stopped from doing so by serial objectors, but the Government is doing nothing to stop that. What good is the 2040 plan to those people?

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to this Private Members’ motion and confirm my support for it. There is no doubt that the launch of this plan was a mix of ballyhoo, spin and marketing, as was referred to by other Members. The whole situation was bizarre. We have been talking about balanced regional development for decades, but this plan has nothing to do with it. If anything, it has to do with unbalanced regional development. Rural Ireland is the poor relation in the plan and is, therefore, at a serious disadvantage in terms of the projects and process it contains.

I support the motion and the amendment tabled to it by the Green Party. It is clear that no climate impact assessment of the national development plan was carried out before its launch. A climate emergency was recently declared by the Dáil. It is obvious that the plan requires significant revision if we are to meet that declaration, which should be a foregone conclusion.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, placed emphasis on the progress made in this plan and referred to several projects. Of course, none of those projects is in County Tipperary. The housing situation in the county is diabolical. Approximately a dozen local authority houses have been built there in the past five years and none will be built there this year. There are approximately 4,000 families on the local authority housing waiting list. Homeless clinics are held on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in the county council offices in Clonmel. One of the clinics on a recent Friday morning was attended by 49 families. There is a significant number of homeless families and individuals in bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation across the county. Indeed, the situation is such that a local Catholic priest recently found it necessary to address the subject at Sunday mass. That is an indication of how difficult is the housing situation and the plight of homeless families, particularly those who have young children.

The Minister referred to transport, which is a key element of any development plan or set of climate action measures. Public transport provision in County Tipperary has been reduced
since the plan was announced. In a county such as Tipperary, transport is hugely important for the normal day-to-day economic operation of the economy, enabling people to go to work, school or elsewhere. Far from increasing public transport provision, the public bus service in Tipperary has been reduced. There is no longer a public bus service from Clonmel to Dublin. Attempts to close the Limerick to Waterford railway line are ongoing. The line from Waterford to Rosslare has already been closed. One would have thought that the upgrading of that line would be important from a climate impact point of view, as well as economically. We need the line and the carriages that run on it to be upgraded because it is not possible to run a reasonable rail service with very old carriages and a line that has a maximum speed of approximately 40 miles per hour. Neither the Minister nor the Government was keen to improve the standard of transport in County Tipperary. Of course, the situation is very similar throughout the rest of rural Ireland.

County Tipperary was also excluded from the regional jobs plans, which are effectively part of this programme. Ten towns across the country were earmarked for development and the provision of advance factories and office facilities by IDA Ireland. Not one of these ten towns is located in County Tipperary. That is what these jobs plans mean for County Tipperary. Towns in the county are at a huge disadvantage when compared with the other ten towns that have been earmarked and with all the cities.

There is no doubt that the huge cost overruns relating to the national children’s hospital and the national broadband plan will impact on various projects across the country, including those in County Tipperary. I refer, for example, to the reopening of inpatient psychiatric beds in Tipperary that were closed by the previous Government. This is now in the balance because of these overruns. There is the phase 2 development of South Tipperary General Hospital and the construction of a 50-bed ward. There is Our Lady’s hospital in Cashel, which has had €14 million spent on it and is vacant and unopened. That project has also been put on the back-burner. We are not at all sure of the position regarding the development of the 100-bed unit at St. Patrick’s Hospital for the elderly in Cashel and there is no news at all of the development of the Dean Maxwell home in Roscrea. Many of these projects will be affected by the lack of funding because of the overruns relating to the national children’s hospital and the national broadband plan.

Bizarrely, the plan refers to promoting and improving town centres but the Government recently allowed An Post to move its post office from the square in Thurles. The local authority is going to spend something of the order of €8 million or €9 million on improving that square. The Government is allowing An Post to pull the carpet from under that development and is continuing a situation whereby there are significant retail closures and vacancies on the high streets in towns, not just in County Tipperary but across the country.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): It is worthwhile reflecting on the journey public infrastructure investment has made in recent times. The International Monetary Fund, IMF, public investment management assessment, PIMA, mission to Ireland in 2017 found that while Ireland had a reasonable stock of public capital assets, there were signs of infrastructure needs. Consequently, the Government has significantly accelerated public capital investment in line with national and international analysis, which concurs that Ireland’s public capital infrastructure needs to be substantially strengthened in order to build the resilience of the economy in response to risks such as Brexit. As stated in the national development plan, public capital investment will increase to about 4% of modified gross national income, GNI*, and will be maintained at that level for the duration of the plan.
The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform recently completed an analysis of how Exchequer capital funding has been allocated and spent in the past 15 years. Gross capital expenditure increased by over 53% between the years 2005 and 2008, peaking at €9 billion. Significant cuts were applied to capital expenditure between 2009 and 2013 as public financial constraints took hold. Capital allocations were reduced by 62%, falling to a total capital allocation of €3.4 billion in 2013. Allocations have steadily increased since the low point in 2013. The overall 2019 capital provision of €7.3 billion is over double that allocated in 2013. Capital spend exceeded 5% of GNI* from 2008 to 2010. However, this was a result of the general economy contracting rather than capital spend increasing. The proportion of national income devoted to public capital fell to 2.3% in 2015. In 2019, at 3.5%, public investment is still below the level that obtained between 2005 and 2007. Clearly, however, the recovery of spend must match the capacity of the construction sector to deliver.

Exchequer capital allocations cover a wide range of expenditure items, including infrastructure projects, infrastructure programmes and investment programmes. Capital expenditure is varied and can include items such as: the purchase of IT equipment and software for Government administration; the purchase, construction and management of buildings; the roads programme; the school building programme; the housing programme; the purchase of vehicles and grants to industry delivered through the enterprise agencies; and forestry premia. The multi-annual Exchequer capital allocations agreed under the national development plan underpin each Department’s capital planning process for a five-year period, initially from 2018 to 2022. Capital spend is concentrated in four sectors, which account for over 70% of total spend over the whole period. These are the Departments of Transport, Tourism and Sport; Housing, Planning and Local Government; Education and Skills; and Health. With the exception of transport, all the main sectors received their highest ever nominal allocations in 2019. As the overall level of capital funding is approaching an all-time high, with a commitment to further increases over the lifetime of the national development plan, the focus needs to be on efficient application of this funding and ensuring the capacity of the construction sector to deliver in respect of the increased demand.

In that regard, an important element of the progress that has been made in the past year relates to the work being undertaken to increase the capacity of the construction sector to deliver the investments under Project Ireland 2040. The Government and the construction sector group are actively working on increasing growth and productivity in the construction sector, and a number of actions have been included as part of Future Jobs Ireland. Modernising the sector through greater use of technology presents an opportunity to alleviate some of these pressures. The Office of Government Procurement has produced a strategy to increase the use of digital technology in public works projects. Building information modelling is now the norm in the private sector, particularly for foreign direct investments relating to data centres or complex manufacturing facilities. We are now focused on bringing this to the public sector. For example, the upcoming Dunkettle interchange in Cork will be delivered with building information modelling. Furthermore, the Office of Government Procurement has recently commenced the review of the capital works management framework. This has the potential to produce greater efficiencies and value for money for the taxpayer and for the industry. During the past year, engagement between the construction industry and Government assessed sectoral issues such as costs, labour supply, productivity and waste management. The group is working to secure the sustainability and vitality of the construction industry.

Various initiatives are under way to promote the capacity of the construction sector. The
Government’s expert group on future skills needs is working to assess demand in the sector and to come up with some new actions. Furthermore, the industry members of the construction sector group are working on a campaign to improve the attractiveness of construction sector careers, including selling the sector as modern, technology-centric and environmentally sustainable. In addition, we continue to drive growth in apprenticeships and changes to the work permit regime. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is leading an extensive analysis of construction sector productivity and the development of a strategy to drive improvement. This is likely to have implications for Departments and agencies as well as industry. This will also take forward actions on the development of a construction centre of excellence. These actions are being undertaken to help to ensure that the construction sector has the capacity to deliver on the ambitions of Project Ireland 2040 in a sustainable, timely and cost-effective manner.

Many Deputies referred to different projects throughout the country. Many of those projects are progressing well. The Government published nine regional updates demonstrating progress across the island of Ireland. There is also an interactive map of 500 projects available at www.gov.ie/2040 and I encourage people to look at it. The overall message from the first year of Project Ireland 2040 is a positive picture of increased investment in infrastructure that will improve the quality of life for all citizens. That is why we make the investments to which I have referred.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I thank those who contributed to the debate. I also thank the Deputies on this side of the House who indicated their support for the motion. I very much welcome the Green Party’s amendment and we are very happy to accept it.

It is very clear from the wording used in the motion that the cost overruns relating to a number of major infrastructural projects are having a major impact on planning. They need to be dealt with and the consequences must be addressed. The idea of a national development plan is to bring certainty to projects and the funding underpinning them in order that those projects can be well planned in advance and implemented without hitches. We are far away from that. The national development plan emphasises this repeatedly and stresses, in particular, the value of moving to a multi-annual funding model. It states this is intended to facilitate more systemic and structured capital investment planning by Departments. This represents a decisive shift from agreements with Departments over capital allocations on a year-to-year basis. The overruns on two particular projects have already undermined this approach to capital investment. Departments, project managers and implementers no longer have any certainty that the funding that was earmarked for various other projects can be achieved. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council published a report earlier which demonstrates the scale of the impact on projects arising from these overruns. Already, the national children’s hospital project is looking at a 94% overrun. Of course, there is a much bigger overrun - currently standing at 500% - in respect of the national broadband plan. If we take the national children’s hospital overrun and project from it a 100% overrun in respect of the major projects envisaged in the national development plan, it means that we will have €12 billion less to spend on other projects. That will happen if this level of overspend continues on the major projects. It would be like losing the money relating to the judgment handed down in the Apple case.

The report published this morning is absolutely scathing of the Government and the State’s general inability to ensure cost containment in major capital projects. It lists those projects and discusses some of the reasons for the overruns relating to them. It identifies weak leadership, a lack of expertise, constant changing of the terms of project and other factors, all of which we
have seen with the children’s hospital. If the remit, detail or specification changes, there is a hike in price every time. The report also identifies a conflict of interest in public and private funding of major infrastructural projects. This, of course, is the tendency of the Government and those which preceded it to use public private partnerships for the delivery of major projects. Such partnerships bring with them excessive costs.

The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council makes it clear that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was established for the very purpose of controlling cost overruns in respect of major projects. It was supposed to be a place for expertise to ensure that we could get value for money and we would not continue in the blank-cheque mode that characterised so many public infrastructure projects in the past. Unfortunately, this has not worked out as planned. With the national broadband plan and the children’s hospital, we have seen where there are major gaps in the expertise required. It is the kind of expertise that is employed in the main in private sector projects, with rigorous examination of a contract to ensure every last detail is nailed down before going to tender. There is also the use of fixed-price tenders and throughout the project delivery, there is very close oversight with a clear line of accountability. None of that exists in major capital projects and this leads to the major problems and overruns.

It is quite clear that the cost overruns to which I refer will have a major impact on individual projects. The Government must come clean about those projects that will lose out as a result of the failure to manage cost containment of big projects. Of course, the Government argues that none of the projects in the plan will be affected by the overruns but how can anyone believe that? I have no doubt that the biggest losers from the overruns will be the projects looked at as part of the mid-term review of the plan, or in cases where the plan is less than fully committed. These projects have been promised and were seen as more than likely to be funded. They are, of course, highly unlikely to be funded now as they were thrown in with so many pet projects from Ministers. Hopes were raised, particularly in the regions, that a number of these projects could be funded but they will be sacrificed now. These projects include the extension of the Dunboyne-M3 Parkway line to Dunshaughlin and Navan, which was earmarked for consideration under the mid-term review. Phase 2 of the western rail corridor from Athenry to Tuam is likely to be sidetracked. The Arklow wastewater treatment plant was not mentioned in the plan but Irish Water has indicated it is still open for consideration. The extension of the Luas to Bray, Finglas, Lucan and Poolbeg is under review, as is a light rail corridor for Cork. We can have all the talk we like about balanced regional development but that will not happen unless we commit to the infrastructure necessary to allow the regions to develop. If we put projects such as the Cork rail corridor on the long finger, we will never have the shift in population to the areas that could accommodate more people with the necessary infrastructure.

As the motion mentions, we have just declared a climate emergency. We should, without doubt, redraw the plan to allow for its lack of ambition in respect of environmental matters.

In just the second sentence of the national development plan the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance state: “This ambitious plan will drive Ireland’s long term economic, environmental and social progress across all parts of the country over the next decade”. On many levels but particularly in respect of the environment, that is simply not true. There is not enough in the plan to lead Ireland to a carbon neutral position. It will take a completely new plan to achieve that objective. In the meantime, this House has declared a climate emergency and if it is to mean anything at all, it behoves us to go back to the plan to ensure dealing with that emergency is a central aim of it.
The Climate Action Fund is just €500 million, while a high proportion of other environmental related funding comes from non-Exchequer sources. For example, there is more funding committed to roads than public transport. The plan for a low-carbon agriculture sector is also less than convincing. Rather than concentrating on the development of new beef markets, the Government should be concentrating on diversification in farming.

It is clear that there is not enough emphasis on public transport in the national development plan. Much of the funding earmarked for public transport will not result in new delivery but will go towards maintenance and rehabilitation. We need to cover renewal needs, while also investing extensively in new projects. At least €10.2 billion will be spent on roads under the plan, whereas the total public transport spend will be €8.6 billion. At the very least, these positions need to be reversed. We have some of the slowest moving cities in the world. This undermines our competitiveness and adds significantly to the cost base of the economy. The more we emphasise roads over public transport the worse it will become.

I reiterate the call made in the motion. Given that we accept that we have a climate emergency and that there have been such substantial cost overruns on a number of major projects, it behoves this House to insist on the Government reappraising the entire national development plan and refocusing it in a way that will ensure value for money and the protection of the environment.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 13 June.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.55 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 12 June 2019.