



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 27 Meitheamh 2019

Thursday, 27 June 2019

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Eugene Murphy) i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): It would be remiss of me not to congratulate Deputy Kelleher, who is due to ask the first question, on his election to the European Parliament. We will miss him in the House, although I am sure we will hear him from afar. He may put his first question, or should I say, one of his last questions.

IDA Ireland Site Visits

1. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the position regarding regional IDA site visits per county; the position regarding vacant IDA properties nationwide; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27203/19]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I thank the Acting Chairman. I might ask for some indulgence at the time of my last question, if possible.

What is the position regarding regional IDA Ireland site visits per county and vacant IDA Ireland properties nationwide? It was brought home to me while campaigning in the recent European Parliament elections that many provincial towns are really struggling. Their commercial hearts are dying and there needs to be a radical review of regional, spatial and industrial policy in terms of delivering for the regions.

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to congratulate Deputy Kelleher on his election to the European Parliament. It has been a pleasure to work with him in a very constructive way since I took up this position. I wish him

the very best in the European Parliament. I have no doubt he will make a significant contribution there also.

Regional development remains a key priority for me and my Department. We understand the importance of achieving the best possible spread of employment and investment across the country and my Department and its agencies have been working hard towards that goal. Significant progress has been made. For example, 58% of all IDA Ireland client-supported employment is now situated outside Dublin. This figure represents the highest level of regional employment in the history of the agency. Last year, IDA Ireland secured 113 regional investments. This strong level of performance in attracting foreign direct investment to Ireland is being maintained. Last week, I announced IDA Ireland's mid-year results for 2019, which included 13,500 new jobs approved across the country, representing an increase of 19% on the equivalent period last year. Indications are that further strong employment and investment growth will be achieved over the latter half of the year, which will lead to more economic opportunities across regional Ireland.

As I previously made clear, the availability of marketable serviced land and buildings in advance of demand is a key element in IDA Ireland's ability to compete for mobile foreign direct investment. Not only does such a supply of properties help the agency to secure high-quality jobs, it also allows projects to begin at an earlier date by diminishing difficulties associated with land acquisition, planning and construction. For that reason, it remains an important means by which IDA Ireland can encourage and attract new investors to Ireland.

IDA Ireland owns 29 properties across Ireland. Of these, 14 are occupied by agency clients, with the remainder available for prospective or existing investors. It is important that IDA Ireland has such a supply of properties in order that it can better compete with other jurisdictions for job-rich investment and secure new projects for Ireland.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I accept that it is very difficult for a Minister to instruct industry or commerce to locate in a certain area. If a multinational company comes to this country, we are happy to have it, but it is very difficult to direct it to a specific area. There needs to be a broader-based policy underpinning regional development. The vast majority of IDA Ireland sites that are lying idle are located in the places that most need job creation and investment and which are very much struggling to attract multinational foreign direct investment, such as the Border region, the midlands and parts of the south east. It is evident that this is having a direct impact on the commercial life of towns across the country. In some towns, there are more shops boarded up than there are operating commercially. There needs to be a refocusing and re-energising of investment in the regions and IDA Ireland plays a key role in that regard. We must consistently advocate for the regions. There would be a double gain as Dublin is bursting at the seams and under significant pressure while the regions are struggling.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I have a very strong focus on the regions. Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland have increased the number of jobs created outside Dublin. A couple of months ago, I launched nine regional enterprise plans, which are focused on supporting enterprise and driving job creation in the regions. As part of that programme of launches, I visited places such as the Hive in Carrick-on-Shannon, Drumshanbo food hub, Cootehill enterprise and technology centre, the Ludgate hub in County Cork and the Lisheen mines bioeconomy project in County Tipperary. All those projects have been supported by Government funding and are achieving fantastic things in terms of creating jobs in rural locations.

I too am aware of towns where the retail sector is suffering. We are living in a changed environment, however, as the shopping habits of young people have changed. Many are shopping online, which is having an impact on retailers in towns and villages across the country. That said, there has been significant investment in the town and village renewal scheme.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I accept much of what the Minister stated in regard to changing shopping habits and money leaving regions as a result of people shopping online or in larger outlets, etc. I wish to return to the issue of IDA Ireland. Kilbarry industrial estate in my constituency of Cork North Central is less than a mile and a half from St. Patrick's Bridge in Cork city. It comprises 56 ha of prime land but the only things on it are fields of barley. Every year, barley is grown on the site. If the IDA does not want to do something with it, something else should be done with it. Can we not take note of the idle properties that the IDA has? If it is not going to use them to some benefit for itself in job creation and industrial development, this 56 ha should not be growing barley, a mile and a half from Cork city centre. I have consistently raised this with the IDA and I am quite disgusted that after all of these years, we are still going barley on an IDA site a mile and half from Patrick's bridge.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I cannot comment on that specific site but I will raise it with the IDA.

If there were no available properties in the region, IDA-owned or otherwise, this would significantly diminish the agency's capacity to attract and win new investments. The IDA has just had its half year results which are the best ever. The IDA has been doing great work and we know that it punches above its weight on an international level in winning investment on a global basis.

Overseas firms need to know that there are suitable sites and facilities in an area before they commit to an investment. The suggestion that some of these IDA-owned properties are intentionally being left idle or vacant is wrong and misleading. I take the Deputy's point and will raise that particular site with the IDA.

Housing Provision

2. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if IDA Ireland considers the shortage of housing in a given area when consulting with multinational firms looking for a location to open or expand here; her views on whether recent announcements of multinational jobs in Dublin in particular will put further pressure on an already overstretched housing market; her position and plans in relation to the issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27412/19]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I start by joining in the congratulations to Deputy Kelleher and we wish him all of the best in his trip to Europe and I hope he does a good job out there. He will be missed from the committee.

I ask the Minister whether the IDA considers if there is a shortage of housing in a given area when it is consulting multinational firms and looking for locations in which to open or expand here. There have been numerous major job announcements, particularly for the Dublin area recently, which are of course all very welcome. Many people are asking where these people are going to live considering that there is not an affordable house to be had anywhere in the capital.

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Pat Breen): I am taking this question. I thank Deputy Quinlivan for raising this issue.

Global competition for foreign direct investment, FDI, is as intense as ever. We compete against many other countries and big cities from all over the world when it comes to securing new job-rich FDI from overseas. That is why the IDA's main priority in its efforts is first of all win the projects, and to ensure that Ireland is selected by the firm in question.

Once that is achieved, which is a big achievement, the agency does everything it can to encourage companies to locate or expand into regional locations. This is consistent with both the IDA's current policy, which has targeted an ambitious increase in regional investment by the end of 2019, and the Government's wider approach of strengthening enterprise all over Ireland. This joint focus on the regions is yielding significant results, as was evident again from the IDA's mid-year jobs and investment figures for 2019, with 50% of jobs now located outside of Dublin.

The Government also wants our principal cities to remain highly attractive to multinational firms. Dublin, in particular, with its international profile and track record as a home to many successful overseas companies, will continue to be a favoured destination for many investors, as evidenced again by recent job announcements. That is very much a positive that we have a strong capital city to generate investment in the country as a whole. It is also the case that our cities and regions are competing against the rest of the world, rather than against one another, for investment projects.

As regards the housing market, and in particular in increasing supply, that is well documented. It is important to make clear that these difficulties are not attributable to multinational firms and the jobs they have created, whether in Dublin or elsewhere. The root causes of our housing market difficulties are much more complicated than that, as the Deputy is aware.

The Government's focus has been on addressing those housing problems and delivering fair and sustainable solutions over the short, medium and long term. That is why we are implementing the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan which includes financing measures, new construction and rental sector improvements. As of the first quarter of 2019, there have been almost 19,000 new houses completed, an increase of 25% compared to the same time last year. Dwellings in the Dublin and mid-east region account for over 60% of these completed properties. This is a welcome development given that demand for housing is at its highest in this part of the country.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Overseas firms operating in Ireland are aware of the housing challenges we are facing. But they understand too how much of a priority this is for Government and what has been done to increase supply. It is important to remember as well that many of the countries Ireland competes against for FDI have difficulties of their own when it comes to residential housing. That does not diminish our own housing challenges, which we remain determined to address, but it does serve as a reminder that these are problems that many others are also wrestling with.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am not suggesting for a minute to the Minister of State that the IDA is causing or contributing to the housing crisis but there is a problem around housing. Unfortunately the Government has completely failed to stabilise the housing market or to build enough social and affordable housing to meet the needs of the people. That is the problem I am raising. It is a sad state of affairs that due to the shambolic housing policy of the Government

we have to be concerned about not having enough dwellings to house new workers and their families for the jobs that are being created here. I understand that we are competing with the rest of the world for jobs and as I stated in my initial contribution I welcome every single job that is approved, whether that is for Dublin or for the regions. I am not objecting whatsoever to the FDI job announcements as they provide excellent opportunities for people here but there is a concern that there will be no places for people to work.

In addition, many of these FDI jobs are very well paid, which again is great news. This means, however, that these workers can outbid other low paid workers for the few houses that are available to rent, putting further pressures on low income families. It is crazy that the Government has allowed this to escalate to such a point. What interactions have the Minister's Department had with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government about this specific issue? Have business and the IDA concerns about the lack of housing for workers? Is there any incentive in that regard?

Deputy Pat Breen: I thank Deputy Quinlivan.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I travel on trade missions around the globe and this is not a problem that is just confined to Ireland. I was in Seattle last year, which is the home of Amazon and Microsoft, and I met the mayor there. The big problem there is shortage of housing for companies as well. This is a problem that is being addressed all over the place.

We have seen how successful we were in that area with the action plan for jobs. Rebuilding Ireland will be successful as well. Planning permissions were granted last year for nearly 29,000 new homes up to the end of the first quarter of 2019. That is up 21% from the previous year. In Dublin alone nearly 9,000 homes were granted planning permission. This is an increase again on the previous year. It is happening. Houses are being built.

The IDA has an important role when a company comes to Ireland in first of all ensuring that it comes. These companies bring their own estates people to look at where they want to locate first and in what regions they want to build. They select where they eventually want to go. They take all of that into account, namely, the housing and services in the area, the schools, universities and all of that. In recent times, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, announced 800 jobs in LinkedIn last week and jobs with Facebook, amounting to a couple of thousand jobs, and all of these considerations are taken into account. The companies know they can get houses for their employees.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response but we need much more work to be done in this area.

Is the Minister of State considering offering IDA client companies better incentives to locate in rural or Gaeltacht areas, for example. This would bring much needed employment in those areas and reduce also the pressure on the housing market in urban areas. We appreciate and have stated already that it is the decision of a client company at the end of the day as to where it wants to locate. It would be much better to have a fairer spread of FDI investment. Has the Minister held any discussions about this with the IDA and have business representative groups expressed concern to him about the shortage of housing for workers?

Deputy Pat Breen: There are no incentives for locating in Dublin.

The one thing that attracts many FDI investor-companies into Ireland and into the regions

- as a Limerick person the Deputy has seen good investment in recent times in the Limerick region and city - is quality of life. Quality of life is very important for many companies in the whole area of wellness for their employees living in an environment where they can produce more and be more competitive. The regions are doing well. I ask the Deputy to look at how well the medical technologies and the pharma sectors are doing in Limerick currently. Companies tend to follow other companies and clusters seem to grow all of the time. As I have already said in my answer, nearly 50% of new jobs last year were outside of Dublin. The same thing can be said about Enterprise Ireland jobs, which is higher again at 60% plus. There is a lot happening around all of the regions where jobs growth has been significant in the last number of years. We are happy with that. That is why Future Jobs Ireland 2019 and the regional action plans will contribute to ensure that we can promote jobs in the regions and we are doing that.

Brexit Supports

3. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of SMEs that have been sanctioned funding and received loan funds under the €300 million SME working capital loan scheme and the future growth Brexit loan scheme. [27204/19]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Will the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation give the total number of small and medium enterprises, SMEs, that have been sanctioned funding and received loan funds under the €300 million SME working capital loan scheme and the future growth Brexit loan scheme?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The €300 million Brexit loan scheme provides relatively short-term working capital of one to three years for eligible businesses with up to 499 employees to help them to innovate, change or adapt to mitigate their Brexit challenges. Businesses can confirm their eligibility with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, and, if deemed eligible, can apply to one of the participating finance providers for a loan under the scheme. In terms of the number of applicants for the Brexit loan scheme, the latest data available to my Department show that, at close of business on 21 June, 656 eligibility applications were received by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, of which 596 were deemed eligible by it. Of the 596 eligible applicants, 144 have progressed to sanction with their banks. The value of the sanctioned loans from banks on 21 June was €31.73 million. While data for actual funding received by applicants as of 21 June are not available, we know that there is a high conversion from sanctioned loans to drawdown, as SBCI data for the end of March indicate that 88% of the total value of loans sanctioned by banks had been drawn down by businesses.

In addition to the Brexit loan scheme, my Department, together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Finance and with the support of the European Investment Bank guarantee, has developed the future growth loan scheme. The scheme is making up to €300 million worth of loans available with a term of eight to ten years and is open to eligible Irish businesses, as well as the primary agriculture and seafood sectors, to support strategic long-term investment. Finance provided under the scheme is competitively priced and has favourable terms, for example, no security is required for loans up to €500,000. The scheme opened for eligibility applications on 17 April since when the SBCI has received 365 eligibility applications and issued 340 eligibility letters. With Brexit on the horizon, the availability of both the Brexit loan scheme and the future growth loan scheme means that qualifying Irish businesses will have access to low cost capital without delay. It forms part of the supports

in place for Irish business to cope with potential Brexit challenges.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: These are loans which must be repaid. As the Minister says, cheap capital will be available. I worry that there have only been 656 applications out of the huge total of small and medium-sized businesses. I accept that not everybody will be impacted on as directly by Brexit as others, but given the potential impact the United Kingdom leaving could have on companies, particularly if there is a hard Brexit, we must ask why only 10% of the overall funding is being made available. Is it a cumbersome programme? Is there too much red tape and bureaucracy? These issues must be analysed in advance. We now know that companies are going through an application process, but we also know that only 10% of the overall funding available has been loan sanctioned. I urge the Minister to undertake a quick review and audit of the scheme to ensure that, if it is cumbersome and there is a lot of red tape, or if businesses are discouraged from making an application in the first place, these issues will be addressed now rather than after the event.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As the Deputy knows, we have a wide range of supports in place across Departments and agencies to help businesses to prepare, but, ultimately, they have to decide for themselves whether they want or need to avail of these supports. In the case of the Brexit loan scheme, it is important to remember that it is a loan which, as the Deputy said, businesses have to pay back. Understandably, there is a natural reluctance on the part of businesses to take on debt until the full details of the Brexit challenge become clearer. It is important, however, that the loan scheme be in place in order that businesses can avail of it when needed. They should submit their applications regardless and have the loan approved in case they need to draw it down at a later stage. I engage with and meet businesses and their representative groups on a regular basis and have been getting positive feedback on the suite of supports in place. If Deputies have specific examples of companies that have been unable to access the Brexit loan scheme, I ask them to bring them to my attention in order that I can follow up on them. I have looked at the scheme and, as far as I can see, the process is transparent. I have not been made aware of any obstacle in either the process or under the scheme. However, if there is anything specific, I ask people to, please, bring it to my attention.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I do not doubt the Minister that understands this and the potential impact a no-deal or hard Brexit could have on many companies, more than anybody else, coming from a Border constituency. Anything that could assist companies, even in making applications to Enterprise Ireland and so on, should be made available to them. Banks still lack the capacity to address and understand business plans in some areas, as they are still in recovery mode. There is a potential lack of professional expertise available to companies to assist them. Therefore, every effort should be made, wherever there is red tape, bureaucracy, or a shortage of skilled personnel, to address these issues to assist companies in making a case or an application. In the context of state aid rules, up to €200,000 was made available to businesses to deal with the effects of the financial crisis. That figure was increased during the crisis, but it has subsequently come back down. Will the Minister make a formal application to the Commissioner for Competition in the European Commission on state aid rules in advance of Brexit?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I have not received any complaint about the Brexit loan scheme. I have met the heads of the three pillar banks and explained to them how important the scheme is. They are rolling it out through their own offices. Again, if there are issues with the scheme, I ask Deputies to bring them to my attention.

There is a €200,000 rescue and restructuring scheme available. I have met the Commis-

sioner for Competition, Commissioner Vestager. My officials are in constant contact with her about the technical working group that was set up to deal with Brexit and she has said she stands ready with a rapid response team to help Ireland in whatever Brexit scenario may unfold. The Minister for Finance made it very clear in the summer economic statement that we were taking prudent decisions in the context of Brexit and that there was a need to support industry in the event that there was a hard Brexit.

Climate Change Adaptation Plans

4. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to take the actions identified in the recently published Climate Action Plan 2019 required to be taken by her Department and in which it is a key stakeholder; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27290/19]

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I join others in congratulating Deputy Kelleher on becoming a Member of the European Parliament. It is interesting that he is going to be an MEP for almost everyone in the Chamber, apart from the Acting Chairman and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. The rest of us are all in the constituency of Ireland South and look forward to working with him.

My question relates to the climate action plan, an important Government plan in which we all want to participate. However, there are specific actions identified in the document on which the Minister's Department leads or in which it is a key stakeholder. Therefore, I want to find out what it is doing about them.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I welcomed the publication last week of the Climate Action Plan 2019. The plan was published following intensive engagement between my officials and officials from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment on the actions proposed for delivery by 11 o'clock enterprise and my Department. I also met the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment during the development of the plan, under which the enterprise sector is being tasked with reducing greenhouse gas, GHG, emissions by between 10% and 15% by 2030. Enterprises will also contribute to the more ambitious targets for buildings by reducing their emissions by 20% to 25% by 2030 and transport which will be reduced by 45% to 50% by 2030 through actions to improve their building energy performance and replace their fleets with electric vehicles over time.

My Department and its agencies are fully committed to the implementation of the actions identified in the plan. We have been given lead or key stakeholder responsibility for several actions in the plan ranging from engagement with the food and cement sectors, supporting increased abatement and undertaking a review of the current offerings by the enterprise agencies with a view to promoting environmental supports to a larger cohort of client companies.

While many enterprises will face challenges in adjusting to more sustainable processes and business models the transition towards more sustainable enterprise will promote resilience and innovation in Ireland's indigenous companies. The plan closely aligns with many of the objectives announced as part of the future jobs Ireland framework, which is being delivered across Government and is led by my Department and the Department of the Taoiseach. In particular, the Department is overseeing the transition to a low-carbon economy pillar of the framework.

Future jobs Ireland is a medium-term framework that, as it is developed over time, aims to complement the relevant objectives in the climate action plan.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister. I will allow her back in to finish.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Several of the actions are for 2019. Most of the actions the Department is leading on are for 2019 or 2020. I have a question on one action in particular. Action 41 aims to promote climate consideration in business operations through the work of the corporate social responsibility stakeholder forum. Is it convened regularly? Is it likely to be convened in the near future? One function of the plan is to encourage businesses to implement resource efficiencies and the Department is leading on that. When these initiatives start to happen is a matter of urgency. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland fall under the remit of the Department. They are leading on integrating decarbonisation objectives. I am keen to get a sense of what specific actions are being taken to make these happen as quickly as possible.

I am keen to hear a response from the Minister on one point about buildings. If I travel along the quays in Dublin, I see vast numbers of lights on in large commercial buildings. They seem to be left on all night. Many of these are occupied by banks, which are not under the remit of the Department. People who are around there in the winter time can see it. It may be a simple question, but is there some way the Minister or the Government can tell them to turn off their lights?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: This morning I launched the corporate social responsibility check for 2019, Towards Responsible Business: Ireland's National Plan on Corporate Social Responsibility 2017-2020. There is a major focus on climate change now and how companies can embrace it. It is also attractive for companies that have a good corporate social responsibility set-up because. These companies find that people who want to work with them want to be assured that the company is committed to the environment. They want assurance that the company they are going to work with has a positive environmental record. We find that businesses want to know that other businesses with which they do business have a good environmental record.

We had a good launch earlier in Smock Alley Theatre. There was a gathering from across the sectors, including representatives from private industry, State agencies and the various people who are involved in corporate social responsibility. I expect we will hear more about it. Companies that have engaged in corporate social responsibility are more profitable and it is better for them. That is becoming clearer as well.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am hesitant about interrupting but I have to keep the show going. I know Members are all trying to make their points. We will go back to Deputy O'Sullivan for a final minute.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Acting Chairman does not interrupt; he intervenes.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will bring this back to my local area. People coming into Limerick will see a nice wind turbine belonging to Vistakon, a division of Johnson & Johnson. That is an example of an international company that has supplied its own energy through a sustainable model. Are there other examples where the Minister will encourage that? Cork Harbour is another example. Clusters of wind turbines can be seen. I assume they are connected to businesses there. This is one area where the Minister could encourage something that would

be useful.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Many of the companies I visit are conscious of their carbon footprint and are continually taking measures to improve. The Deputy about Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland. They have committed to upgrading their environmental offerings and to helping companies make the transition. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland provides the excellence in energy efficiency design programme for retrofitting and energy efficiency. Science Foundation Ireland has a strong focus on cutting edge research on climate change. We have been funding that sector as well. This is good for everyone.

I am happy that we will play our part in helping companies. There are challenges and there is no point in saying otherwise. It is a question of how we can work our way through those challenges. However, there are many opportunities in terms of what companies can do to provide new products and new ways of doing business.

Enterprise Support Schemes

5. Deputy Billy Kelleher asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to set out by county the number of payments issued to date for successful applications made under the disruptive technologies innovation fund, DTIF; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27394/19]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Will the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation set out by county the number of payments issued to date for successful applications made under the DTIF? Will she make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The DTIF is a €500 million fund established under Project Ireland 2040 and forms a key part in the delivery of the pillar 1 goal of future jobs Ireland to embrace innovation and technological change.

In December 2018, a total of 27 collaborative projects were approved for funding under the first call of the fund. The DTIF will result in investment in the research, development and deployment of disruptive technologies and applications on a commercial basis. The successful projects come from the health, food, ICT and manufacturing sectors in Ireland. There are 104 organisations involved in the 27 projects that will receive funding. These include large enterprises, SMEs, colleges and public research bodies. Several colleges and public research bodies are involved in multiple projects.

A total of 18 successful projects involve partners based outside Dublin. They are located in Limerick, Cork, Galway, Kildare, Monaghan, Waterford, Louth and Tipperary. As indicated in December 2018, the 27 projects involve a request for DTIF funding of approximately €75 million, of which €20 million is due to be drawn down during 2019.

The DTIF is being administered by Enterprise Ireland on behalf of my Department. Contracts are now being finalised by Enterprise Ireland in respect of each of the 27 projects and grant drawdown will commence shortly. With this fund, as with typical grant funding programmes, most recipients will have to incur up to six months of costs before grant payments will issue. A proportion of the funding can be provided in advance to the higher education institutes involved in the projects and, in certain circumstances, to small firms with fewer than 50 employees.

In September 2019, the first payments of DTIF call 1 will have been made and I will be in a position to provide information by county at that point. I expect it will be late in 2019 before I can report on the full 2019 drawdown of DTIF funding. Pending this, the details of each of the successful projects, including the partners involved in each, a brief description of each project and the value of funding approved, is available on my Department website. I will be officially launching the second call of the disruptive technologies innovation fund in early July. As part of this event, an information session on the fund will be held for potential applicants.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I welcome the fund. We welcomed the announcement of the fund at the time as part of Project Ireland 2040. However, we are now one year on. Applications were sought and made and funding was approved, yet no payments have been made to date. Sometimes this diminishes Government announcements. That is not a criticism but an observation at this stage. It diminishes Government announcements that utterances are made but action is slow to follow.

Disruptive technologies, by their nature, are aggressive exciting, changing and dynamic, yet the fund underpinning the assessment of these technologies and the impact they will have on industry and broader society does not have these characteristics. We seem to be slow, lethargic and incapable of making the assessments and payments quickly. I would welcome the Minister's observations on those points.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: When I announce funding, I want it spent. In this case, this is a new fund. Ireland is one of the first countries in the world to have a fund like this in place. This makes Ireland an innovation leader globally. There is a great deal of collaboration on the projects between colleges, multinationals, SMEs and public research bodies. There is a lot of money at play, with €75 million available in the first call. Naturally, it will take time to finalise the contracts. As this is taxpayers' money, we need to ensure that everything is done right and in accordance with the public spending code. Drawdown of funding is expected to commence in September. It is important to remember that these projects are being carried out over a three-year timeframe. The sum of €20 million is provided in my Department's baseline for the DTIF in 2019. I have been assured by Enterprise Ireland, which is administering the scheme on behalf of the Government, that the full €20 million will be drawn down by the end of the year. There is significant demand for this scheme. I will officially launch the second call in July.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I thank the Minister.

I beg the indulgence of the Acting Chairman and the House for 30 seconds. As this is the final opportunity I will have to speak in this Parliament, I thank the Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl, and those who previously held that position, the Acting Chairman, all of my colleagues in the Fianna Fáil Party, my family, friends and everybody who helped me on my amazing journey. I thank the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas, current and past, for their courtesy and professionalism over the many years during my time in this House. To the people of Cork North-Central, it has been an honour and a privilege to serve them. I hope I never took that honour and privilege for granted.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Well done.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Well done.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am sure everybody here will join me in wishing Deputy Kelleher well. When I was elected in 2016, I came to this House not knowing

much.

The Deputy went out of his way to help me and all new Deputies. It was always a privilege to sit with him at parliamentary meetings and in this Chamber. I know the Deputy has a special friendship with Roscommon. Hopefully, that will continue. I wish him well in Europe and I thank him for the valuable contribution he has made, and will continue to make, in Europe, not alone on behalf of the south of Ireland but all of Ireland.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Job Creation

6. Deputy James Browne asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to address the quality of jobs and the need for further investment in the south east; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26954/19]

Deputy James Browne: I ask the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to address the quality of jobs, and the need for further investment, in the south east.

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Pat Breen): Before I respond to Deputy Browne's question, I would also like to pay tribute to Deputy Kelleher, with whom I have served in this House for the past 17 years. Deputy Kelleher previously served in my office as Minister of State with responsibility for commerce and trade, where I know he was very popular with all of the staff. I understand some of my staff worked with him during his tenure as Minister of State. I wish the Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation well in his new role. It is an important role. Our future emanates from Europe and our MEPs have a lot of important work to do over the next five years. The Deputy's experience in this House will stand to him as he takes on his new role in the European Parliament. I wish him well.

In regard to Deputy Browne's question, enterprise development and sustainable job creation in the regions is a key priority of the Government. A total of 18,300 more people in the south east are in employment in quarter 1 2019 than there were in quarter 1 2015 when the regional action plan for jobs initiative was launched. Unemployment has reduced from 11.7% to 6.7% in the same period. The State average figure at quarter 1 2019 is 4.8%.

While we have had great success through the Action Plan for Jobs in reducing unemployment, in the context of Brexit and other global challenges, it is important that we move our focus to the creation of quality and sustainable jobs. In this context, the Deputy has raised an important question. Future Jobs Ireland is our plan to meet these challenges. Launched last March, it includes ambitious targets and actions to drive the transformation of our economy.

In the south east, there were 15,580 people employed across 76 IDA Ireland client companies in 2018, an increase of almost 7% on 2017. The IDA will continue to work with its clients to identify opportunities for new investment or expansion in the south east, promoting the region's strengths, including its ports and existing concentrations of financial services, IT and

high-value manufacturing activities.

In 2018, there were 25,214 people employed in Enterprise Ireland, EI, supported companies in the south east, an increase of 5% over 2017. Earlier this week, the Minister launched Enterprise Ireland's new regional plan, Powering the Regions, which sets out the focus of its activities in each region, including the south east.

The Government remains committed to achieving an overall jobs uplift of between 10% and 15% in each region by the end 2020, from quarter 1 2015, and to bring and/or maintain unemployment levels in each region to within at least one percentage point of the State average. To this end, we recently launched nine new regional enterprise plans to 2020, which build on the strong progress made on employment creation under the Regional Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017. Last March, we launched the south east plan, which covers counties Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford in Waterford, with strategic objectives focused on building enterprise resilience, marketing the region, a regional engagement strategy on key infrastructure priorities, ensuring the south east is a learning region, and tourism growth.

Deputy James Browne: I do not get the sense that the Minister, the Minister of State, or the Government understand the position in the south east. The region consistently has the highest rate of unemployment in the country, which I have raised continuously in this House since my election three years ago. There does not appear to be any focus on address of unemployment and the quality of employment in the south east. Numerous towns in the south east are consistently ranked among the lowest in terms of average incomes. Wexford, in particular, is on the doorstep of Dublin. It is linked by motorways, it has a significant population but it is not being serviced. The south east also has one of the lowest numbers of IDA jobs. There is no focus on address of the situation in the south east. As mentioned by the Minister of State, it has natural strengths such as the ports, but this has never been highlighted to any our colleagues in the UK in the context of the Brexit negotiations. Rosslare Europort should be booming. It should be a driver. We still do not have a university in the south east, which is another key issue. The quality of the jobs in the south east is unacceptable and it needs to be addressed. The south east is consistently one of the worst regions, and one of the failures of this Government, in terms of job creation targets.

Deputy Pat Breen: There are 19 IDA companies in Wexford, which employ more than 3,139 people. The south east has many strengths, including its ports and existing cluster of financial services. The IDA continues to engage with companies in Wexford. Last March, GrandPad, which produces tablets for seniors, located its European headquarters in Gorey. In July 2018, INDOS Financial located in Enniscorthy. There is a lot of job creation happening in the south east. In terms of focus, I refer the Deputy to the future jobs Ireland framework, which is of major importance to the country. It is about innovation.

The Deputy referred to quality jobs. There is a lot of innovative and technological change taking place in Ireland. We also have to increase SME productivity in the country. SMEs are important to the south east, including Wexford. Approximately 98% of enterprises in the country are SMEs that employ 70% of the population. It is also important that we invest in upskilling people as job roles change. The figures I outlined in my initial reply are positive. As stated by IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland in their end of year reports, job creation outside of the greater Dublin region is strong.

Deputy James Browne: Unemployment decreased in May but 200 fewer people were un-

employed in the south east. It appears that the unemployment rate is going down solely on the basis that people are retiring from or leaving the employment market.

The south-east region is consistently missing both the Government's Action Plan for Jobs targets of bringing regional unemployment to within 1% of the State average and the Government's proposed target of creating 25,000 new jobs. IDA Ireland has virtually no land in County Wexford. Wexford has 3.3% of the national population and we want 3.3% of IDA Ireland jobs. That is reflected across the entirety of the south east.

Yesterday, it was announced that Enniscorthy town has the second lowest average income in the county. According to Pobal, the south east has the highest number of socioeconomic black spots.

There is a lack of focus on targeting this in the south east. There are many generalities. The figures the Minister of State gave are national figures. There is a lack of focus on the south east. The strengths are there but they are not being taken advantage of.

Deputy Pat Breen: The figures I gave on the south east are positive figures. I stated that in the south east, 15,580 people were employed across 76 IDA Ireland companies in 2018. That is positive.

The Deputy is lucky to have the financial services down in that area as well. I wish we had more of them in my area. This is an area where we are getting many new companies in as a result of Brexit and where many of our trade missions are focusing as well. Wexford's own Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, is in charge of that area and he has done many trade missions in that area of financial technology, FinTech, services.

Deputy Browne talked about the region. Regions, for us, are really important. Only last Monday, in Cavan, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, launched a new round worth €45 million for the regional enterprise development scheme. It is a very important scheme. In the south east alone, €10 million was secured under the two completed calls, which involved €60 million in total. This is the way the south east needs to move forward here.

It is not all about IDA Ireland jobs. It is all about indigenous jobs, microenterprise jobs.

Deputy James Browne: We will take any jobs.

Deputy Pat Breen: There is a local enterprise office in Wexford. All these are playing a significant role in increasing employment in the regions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I need to move on.

Deputy Pat Breen: As Deputy Browne will be aware-----

Deputy James Browne: I gave the Minister of State figures and he is giving me generalities.

Deputy Pat Breen: -----unemployment has decreased in all the regions around the country.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We are way over time.

Deputy Pat Breen: We will continue to do so in the future with the prudent management of the economy-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I need to move on.

Deputy Pat Breen: -----and the initiatives that we have brought in in our Department.

Brexit Issues

7. Deputy Brendan Howlin asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the percentage of goods and services imported from the United Kingdom; the percentage of goods and services exported to the United Kingdom; the extent to which this has changed since the Brexit referendum in June 2016; and her views on whether businesses here have been able to find new markets outside of Britain. [25219/19]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 7 is in the name of Deputy Howlin. I will allow Deputy Jan O'Sullivan to put the question. I am sure everybody else is happy with that.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It seems more likely now that we may face a hard Brexit with the change of Prime Minister in the United Kingdom. The question is around the percentage of goods and services imported from the United Kingdom and exported from Ireland to the United Kingdom, and how that has changed since the Brexit referendum in 2016.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue.

The long-term response to Brexit is for companies across all sectors to become more competitive, more innovative and to diversify their export footprint into more international markets. The agencies under my Department have a wide range of supports available to enable companies to consolidate market share within the UK, and to become more resilient by broadening their sales to other international markets. These include a €300 million Brexit loan scheme for eligible businesses with up to 499 employees and the future growth loan scheme, which will make a fund of up to €300 million available to SMEs for terms of eight to ten years.

CSO trade data show that in 2015, 14% or €31 billion of the total value of goods and services imported into Ireland was from the UK. In 2018, this percentage remained at 14%, although the value increased to €39 billion. The total value of goods and services imported into Ireland increased from €223.1 billion in 2015 to €275.9 billion in 2018.

In 2015, 16% or €37.1 billion of the value of total goods and services exports was to the UK. In 2018, this reduced to 14% or €43.8 billion. Even though the value went up, the percentage came down. In the period 2015 to 2018, the value of total exports from Ireland increased by €77.6 billion or 33%, to a record level of €316 billion.

In 2018, the dependency on the UK as a destination for Enterprise Ireland client company exports reduced to 33%, down from 44% in 2007. While the UK is, and will remain, a major market for Irish companies, expanding the Irish export footprint in markets beyond the UK is a key priority. Against the backdrop of Brexit uncertainty, Enterprise Ireland client companies achieved record levels of exports in 2018 of €23.8 billion. The eurozone region saw growth of 7.6% to €4.8 billion, with Germany, France and the Netherlands each exceeding €1 billion in exports. Exports to North America increased from €3.87 billion in 2017 to €4.08 billion in 2018, an increase of 5.5%.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Ministerial-led trade missions support the Government's major drive towards market diversification. These missions are taking place to regions which represent the strongest growth opportunities for Irish exporters. Their focus is on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive offerings of Irish companies to international buyers in sectors including internationally traded services, FinTech, high-tech construction, engineering, ICT and life sciences.

As well as the global efforts supported by our agencies, key to our success has been our commitment to trade liberalisation in order to open new markets for our indigenous sectors. With a small domestic market, further expansion in other markets is essential to our continued economic growth and, in this regard, Ireland will continue to support the EU's ambitious programme of negotiating new free trade agreements, opening new markets for Irish companies and increasing export and investment opportunities.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister for the information. There is some encouragement, in so far as there is growth in exports to the European market and the US market.

There is concern, and maybe the Minister can respond to this, that the level of imports is much the same as it was in 2015 and while the percentage level of exports to the UK has gone down, their value has gone up. Clearly, we are still very dependent on that market and we face, possibly, a hard Brexit. Can the Minister let me know what is being done to ensure that our dependence on the UK market does not continue to be as high as it is?

Later, in one of my own questions, I refer to research that was done by the ESRI and the Department on imports and exports. The research states that food products are particularly exposed in a relatively high dependence on the UK market because there may be tariffs as high as 18% in a hard Brexit scenario. Much of the foodstuff does not come under Deputy Humphreys' Department but a good lot of it, such as processed food, does. Is there a particular focus on food products, which are at risk in terms of the possibility of a hard Brexit?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Deputy Jan O'Sullivan is correct that food products form a significant part of our exports to the UK. Enterprise Ireland has been working closely with the food companies in terms of looking at new markets for their products, improving their processes and new products. For example, mozzarella cheese is something that is being developed in Carbery. That is a new product to get away from the reliance on cheddar, which, of course, is mainly consumed in the UK market.

Of course, the UK will remain a major market for Ireland, and for Irish companies, because it is our nearest and closest trading partner but we have been expanding the Irish export footprint in markets beyond the UK. That is a key priority for us. Our enterprise agencies are now opening new offices around the world to support our companies in competing and thriving in global markets.

Enterprise Ireland's strategy is to support Irish exporters to be more innovative, more competitive and more market diversified. We have had quite a number of ministerial-led trade missions. The Minister of State, Deputy Breen, and I have been in many different countries promoting Irish companies. I have just returned from a trade mission to New Zealand with a team of Irish agricultural technology, agtech, companies looking at how we can increase our market share there. Moreover, there has been a specific emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. We have visited China, Hong Kong and Singapore trying to increase our market share there.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: In relation to food, the closer markets are more important in the sense that one does not want to be sending food thousands of miles across the world for all sorts of reasons. Will there be a step-up in efforts to get a greater extent of the market in the European Union and European countries generally?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We are concentrating on increasing our market share in Europe. There is a number of trade missions organised. A number have taken place in Europe but we are also doing more into Europe.

I visited Singapore a couple of months ago, for example, with a company in my own county. We see considerable potential to increase our market share in Singapore because they are particularly interested in food. One company is exporting in the region of 20,000 ducks per week to Singapore. There are many more opportunities in that market. I was delighted when I was there to be able to open a chain of restaurants called Duckland for this businessman. He has a very successful company. He is focusing particularly on Irish produce and is using his Duckland restaurant chain to sell Irish products because he is very impressed with their quality. We need to continue to look for new markets because they are out there. At the same time, we will continue to trade with the UK. Only recently, I was on a trade mission to Manchester and Birmingham. We need to work more closely than ever before with our trading partners in the UK.

National Broadband Plan

8. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the estimated impact the national broadband plan will have in implementing strategies such as Future Jobs Ireland 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27105/19]

Deputy Joe Carey: I wish to ask the Minister the estimated impact the national broadband plan will have in implementing strategies such as Future Jobs Ireland 2019, and if she will make a statement on the matter. I tabled this question to establish her Department's progress in developing a remote working policy as put forward in the Future Jobs Ireland 2019 strategy.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The national broadband plan is a key commitment in the programme for Government and is a core component of Project Ireland 2040. The national broadband plan will be a key enabler for the delivery of strategies such as Future Jobs Ireland as we prepare for the next stage of our economic development. Future Jobs Ireland is a new medium-term economic framework aimed at ensuring our economy is resilient enough to withstand shocks in the future and agile enough to take advantage of opportunities when they arise. The national broadband plan will support Future Jobs Ireland in helping our workers and businesses succeed in the digital, low-carbon economy of the future.

Digitalisation can drive substantial increases in productivity, innovation, social improvements and connections, and economic growth and jobs. To maximise the benefits from digitalisation we will need a strategic approach. Future Jobs Ireland 2019 sets out how we will begin to implement this strategic approach through the development of a national digital strategy, an industry 4.0 strategy and a national artificial intelligence strategy. The roll-out of the national broadband plan is critical for the use of advanced digital technologies core to all of these strategies.

Fundamentally, a driving goal of Government policy is to increase the living standards of our people. Increasing productivity levels is key to achieving this goal. Through Future Jobs Ireland, we hope to adopt measures to increase the productivity of indigenous SMEs over time. Therefore, I welcome the potential for significant productivity benefits for the almost 44,000 small and microbusinesses in the areas where high-speed broadband will operate under the national broadband plan and the potential for them to link to new markets and develop a global footprint. In line with Future Jobs Ireland aspirations, and complementing several Government strategies, delivery of the national broadband plan will help enhance the potential of the regions in terms of economic development by building regional economic drivers and reinforcing opportunities to diversify and strengthen the rural economy, and to leverage the potential of regional locations and communities. I look forward to an Ireland in which geography no longer disadvantages regional and rural communities in exploiting digital opportunities and digital commerce. The national broadband plan will be a key enabler as officials in my Department work with colleagues in the Department of the Taoiseach, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, on the development of new deliverables for inclusion in Future Jobs Ireland 2019 and beyond.

Deputy Joe Carey: Over the past months, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development, which I chair, has had a number of hearings on remote working. I was particularly impressed by an organisation called Grow Remote. It is a voluntary organisation set up to promote and drive this new working practice. It has had great success across the country. The Minister has engaged with Grow Remote directly herself. Flexible working offers the individual great benefits. They do not have to drive to and from work. We can get rid of the long commutes, which is good for the environment and the people, as well as for the employer because one will have a happier, more productive workforce. However, we need a more strategic approach to the development of co-working spaces and remote working. The Future Jobs Ireland strategy outlines that there will be a need for a national policy and I welcome the fact that the Minister has referred to the national digital strategy. I would like to see remote working forming a cornerstone of that policy and would like to hear the Minister's views on it.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I wish to compliment the Deputy, who is a very strong advocate for remote working and has championed it as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. The way we are working is changing and this trend is only going to get stronger in the future with the pace of technological change. A key focus of Future Jobs Ireland is on flexible and remote working. We are at full employment and the labour market is tightening. We need to consider how we can make sure that everybody who wants to work has the opportunity. There is a cohort of women who can benefit from remote working. Flexible working can not only bring tangible benefits to employers and employees but can also support a more creative and inclusive society. For the employer, benefits include the greater attraction of workers from a larger pool of talent, which is especially valuable in a tight labour market; staff retention; a more motivated workforce; fewer sick days; and greater productivity. For the employee, flexible working offers the potential for a better work-life balance and can provide solutions for those who would otherwise take unpaid parental leave but cannot afford to do so.

Deputy Joe Carey: The Minister is taking this on and I welcome that. A key element is to encourage employers and companies to see offering remote working as an opportunity for themselves. It is very hard to attract and retain talent but it could be advantageous to offer the opportunity to work remotely, as the work-life balance aspect could be a serious factor. A person could live and work in and contribute to a local community. Has the Minister any ideas or

policies in respect of encouraging companies to take on remote workers?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: This is a major focus of Future Jobs Ireland; pillar 4 is focusing on participation. I will host a major stakeholder consultation forum on remote working on 18 July in the Cavan Digital Hub. We will have companies that offer remote working along on the day, such as Amazon, to talk about their experience. We have also invited the National Women's Council. I also want to hear from organisations like Abodoo and Grow Remote, whose representatives I have also met, that match jobs to remote workers' skill sets.

Broadband is going to be a game changer for rural Ireland; there is no doubt about that. I was in New Zealand on a trade mission recently and met one of the Maori leaders. He said broadband has changed the rural face of New Zealand. They are in the second or third year of the roll-out of a national broadband plan very similar to what we plan to do here in terms of those who are not connected. He said it has made such a difference. Broadband in rural and regional areas is the game changer.

Departmental Priorities

9. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which she expects innovation to play a major role in Ireland's internal trade in addition to maximising export opportunities from the island of Ireland, particularly in the aftermath of Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27180/19]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which innovation is to become an integral part of developing trade in this country and within the island of Ireland while at the same time allowing us to utilise all opportunities for increased exports abroad.

Deputy Pat Breen: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I talk about all the time as we travel around the country. Embracing innovation is essential in ensuring that we build a resilient enterprise base and support a sustainable economy that can withstand significant challenges such as those posed by Brexit. Innovation drives productivity - as we all know - through new, higher value-added products and services and more efficient business processes. Ireland continues to perform strongly in terms of innovation. The annual European innovation scoreboard, published this month by the European Commission, shows that amid increased innovation performance across the EU, Ireland remains a strong innovator and, in tenth place, remains one of the most innovative member states, above the EU average.

I am particularly pleased with Ireland's success in converting our research, development and innovation efforts into high quality jobs, sales and exports, as demonstrated by our position on the European innovation scoreboard for employment and sales impacts. Under the Future Jobs Ireland strategy which was launched in March, the Government will build a framework to ensure Irish enterprises are prepared for all future challenges and opportunities. Pillar 1, embracing innovation and technological change, calls out measures to promote indigenous entrepreneurship and encourage clustering and stronger links between domestic and foreign-owned firms.

Through its agencies, the Department drives and supports greater engagement in research, development and innovation by Irish and foreign-owned enterprises, small and medium en-

terprises, SMEs, and large-scale enterprises. Our research shows that companies investing in research, development and innovation have 3.6 times the exports and almost double the employment of companies that do not invest. Enterprise Ireland provides a wide range of supports for companies to support innovation, competitiveness and market diversification, while Science Foundation Ireland leads major elements of Ireland's innovation agenda. Examples of the initiatives being taken include building large-scale centre investments that leverage significant non-Exchequer funding, challenge-based funding and support for talent and training in important areas such as artificial intelligence, digital, collaborative partnerships, recruiting outstanding researchers to Ireland, cross-Border collaboration and enhancing international engagement as part of building Ireland's global footprint.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Does the Minister of State expect to see greater opportunities and greater urgency to engage in innovation in national and international trade with beneficial consequences for the country? Have objectives or targets been set, particularly in the European Union? Notwithstanding the fact that Ireland ranks tenth among the EU 27, can we improve our performance?

Deputy Pat Breen: The Government is conscious of the need for innovation, particularly in respect of the various schemes that have been put in place. When I travel around the country, I tell companies that if they do not innovate, they will evaporate such is the level of competition. If we want to create good, sustainable jobs, we have to encourage all small businesses to innovate, grow and be competitive on the world stage. Companies that are not competitive will not succeed, as can be seen in Enterprise Ireland's annual business results. The survey shows that companies which invest in innovation are higher performing in creating employment. That is what we are trying to achieve. The same is true of export sales. In Enterprise Ireland's export results for the first half of the year the exports of indigenous companies throughout the world are growing, with growth of 7.6% in exports to the eurozone area. Despite the United Kingdom's issues, exports to the United Kingdom have risen by 4%. Similarly, exports to the United States and elsewhere in North America have increased by 6.6%. It is by encouraging innovation and ensuring agencies equip companies in this way that we can continue to grow on the global stage.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To what extent does the Minister of State foresee opportunities for the development of an all-island economy, notwithstanding Brexit, and to what extent can innovation be used in that context?

Deputy Pat Breen: A whole-of-government approach is taken. There is collaboration between the North and the South such as between universities and research centres. InterTrade Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the local enterprise offices, LEOs, work together, which is important in the context of Brexit. Much is happening in the area and I expect this to continue. In Future Jobs Ireland, innovation is an important factor, not least in respect of the digital and technological changes expected, given that the pace of change will be faster in the next five years than in the past 20. That is why innovation is the key. We must ensure we upskill the workforce and that innovation centres attached to universities and other third level institutions will continue to play a primary role in creating the types of job that are important on the world stage, in conjunction with the jobs we are attracting through foreign direct investment.

Brexit Issues

10. Deputy Jan O’Sullivan asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures taken following research published in July 2018 by her Department and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI which indicated that Irish firms sourced over half of their supply chain materials from the UK in the context of growing concerns that a hard Brexit may occur later in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26925/19]

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: My question follows on from Question No. 7. It relates to the report from which I quoted. It was published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the ESRI and concerns the reliance on exports to the United Kingdom, particularly in respect of the supply chain. Will the Minister outline what measures are being taken to address the issue?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: While many businesses have plans in place to mitigate the impacts of Brexit, I am conscious that some have delayed their Brexit planning owing to the degree of uncertainty in the United Kingdom surrounding Brexit. I urge all businesses to prepare, make all necessary decisions and complete all required administrative actions. My Department and its agencies have consistently advised businesses that it is crucial they check their supply chains for vulnerabilities to Brexit impacts. They should also contact their UK suppliers, service providers, logistics companies, wholesalers or distributors to seek assurances about the continuity of goods and services on which they rely to do business and assess whether it would make business sense to find an alternative supplier in the European Union.

It is important that businesses understand supports and advice are available to help them to prepare for Brexit. Companies in all sectors need to become more competitive, more innovative and diversify their export footprint into more international markets in response to Brexit. Enterprise Ireland and the 31 LEOs throughout the country have a wide range of supports available to enable companies to consolidate market share within the United Kingdom and also to become more resilient by broadening their sales to other international markets. The LEOs are the first stop shop for advice on starting and growing a business locally. Enterprise Ireland has a broad range of supports to help companies to prepare for Brexit, including the Brexit scorecard, the Be Prepared grant, advisory clinics, the agile innovation fund, the operational excellence offer, the market discovery fund, online customs training and the Act On Initiative consultancy. In addition, the LEOs recently launched their customs training offering, which is available to all companies.

In my engagements with businesses throughout the country, I have consistently emphasised the importance of firms putting all elements of their supply chains under the microscope, in particular, to assess the vulnerabilities of important goods and services inputs in the event that there is a hard Brexit. This is good business planning and it is only through working with suppliers and getting the necessary assurances as to continuity of supply in all potential Brexit scenarios that businesses can ensure their own resilience to shocks. Enterprise Ireland, the LEOs and InterTradeIreland, ITI, have a range of supports to help businesses through this assessment and planning process. My Department and the agencies are continuing to roll out regional advisory clinics throughout the country.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Brexit is coming down the tracks very quickly, if 31 October is to be the date on which it will happen. I am somewhat worried that the Minister is concerned about the delay on the part of many companies that the Department seems to have identified,

despite the advice they have been given. The Minister referred to regional advice clinics in various places. How exactly is the Department informing all firms? The report indicates that Irish-owned firms are most affected because foreign-owned firms in Ireland are less likely to source their inputs from the United Kingdom. It goes on to state Irish-owned firms rely heavily on the United Kingdom as the source of intermediate inputs, that is, goods used to produce a final product. There is urgency attached to the issue. While the Minister has outlined the various schemes available, has the Department engaged with firms to ensure they will take the advice and the necessary actions?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There has been an increase in the number of companies availing of Brexit supports, although figures show that not all companies have engaged. Enterprise Ireland has contacted all of its clients and held Brexit events throughout the country. I will not list all the locations, but they have been held in every part of the country. There have been Getting Ireland Brexit Ready events, while in October and November, more than 2,500 people attended public outreach events in counties Cork, Galway, Monaghan, Dublin and Limerick, as well as in Letterkenny. There was strong participation by the business community in those events. We have the local enterprise office, LEO, Brexit events. To date, 34 custom workshops have been run with a total of 468 participants. Six workshops are planned in the short-term. I want to try to make contact with as many businesses as we can. We tell them to look at their supply chains, where their goods are coming from and how they can make sure that this will not stop in the event of Brexit.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is a pilot scheme in Cavan and Monaghan, Border counties which will be impacted by Brexit.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I will have another event on Thursday, 4 July in Cavan. I have asked the accountancy bodies to come on board and to bring their clients because everybody has an accountant.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am trying to get two or three questions in. I ask everybody to co-operate. If we always go over time, those people will not get their questions answered.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Sorry.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I previously raised a question about the medical technology sector and the standardisation done in Britain. There is an issue related to that which may not have been resolved where, if Britain leaves, medical technology companies may not be able to use that standardisation.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am working with the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, to ensure that companies know about the certification of what they are importing, to make sure that it meets EU standards and that they have continuity of supply. It is important that companies which are sourcing products from the UK engage with the NSAI. It is there to help them. There are many supports and if businesses still have not done anything about Brexit, I suggest that they do so. The Government is here to help. I ask businesses to use the range of supports available.

Industrial Development

11. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of the regional enterprise plans; the way in which the plans will benefit County Limerick; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27100/19]

Deputy Tom Neville: I want to ask the Minister about the status of the regional enterprise plans, the way in which the plans will benefit County Limerick and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Pat Breen: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this issue about the mid-west region, which he frequently raises at the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I am interested in it too. During February and March, we launched nine new regional enterprise plans covering the period from 2018 to 2020, which build on the strong progress made on employment creation under the regional action plan for jobs for 2015 to 2017. These nine new plans take into account new and emerging opportunities and challenges including Brexit. I am pleased to say that implementation has commenced in all nine regions. Shaped from the bottom up by regional stakeholders, which is important to point out, and overseen by my Department, the new plans complement national level policies and programmes emanating from the top down and there is strong alignment with Ireland's national enterprise policy, Enterprise 2025 Renewed and with the Government's Project Ireland 2040 and the Future Jobs Ireland initiatives.

We launched the regional enterprise plan for the mid-west region, which covers Limerick, Clare and Tipperary, on 20 February at the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation site at Lisheen, County Tipperary. The plan for the mid-west is focused on achieving impacts across five strategic objectives including developing the digital and innovation economy, progressing towards a low carbon economy, developing workforce skills, developing the capacity for economic growth and building a co-ordinated regional brand. Each of the five objectives involves a focus on County Limerick as part of the mid-west region. Initiatives to be pursued under the plan of significance for Limerick city and county include the development of an autonomous mobility testbed, the positioning of Limerick and the mid-west as a national centre for advanced manufacturing and the development of a sports technology cluster, building on the initial study by Limerick City and County Council.

The strategic objectives and actions in the mid-west plan are set out alongside, and add value to, the enterprise agencies' activities, including Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, and the LEOs' core activities in County Limerick and the wider mid-west region, including the recently launched Enterprise Ireland regional strategy, Powering the Regions.

Deputy Tom Neville: I thank the Minister of State. The key issue is creating regional clusters. People are thinking regionally, especially about the development of roads around Limerick, such as the southern ring road and the tunnel that brings one right out to Shannon. In my time in Limerick in recruiting people to American multinationals during the boom in the 2000s, Limerick was hurt by the fact that it was involved in the electronic subcontracting and manufacturing sector which took a hit between 2007 and 2009 and many of those jobs went east. It is prudent and innovative to move into those different clusters and not have a region be seen for just one specific cluster. Limerick has diversified more into financial services since then and into medical devices, as well as the clusters the Minister of State has described. I ask that it be made as easy as possible for companies to get through the bureaucracy to avail of this

regional enterprise fund.

Deputy Pat Breen: The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, launched another round of the regional enterprise development fund last Monday in Cavan. It is worth €45 million. As we did in the past, I encourage more companies in the mid-west to apply for that funding. We have seen the success of it with the Emerald Aero Group, when Clare companies and Limerick companies got together to pool their engineering skills so that they could bid with companies such as Bombardier and Boeing. The Deputy is right that clusters are important. We have seen the success of some in the medical technology sector recently. Edwards Lifesciences created nearly 600 jobs. Johnson & Johnson added to its company in Limerick, increasing its complement there by 100 jobs. That facility in Limerick is the biggest contact lens facility in the world. We should be proud of those achievements. In the Deputy's area, we have seen Croom Precision Medical increase the number of jobs. Much is happening in the mid-west region and it will continue into the future with the focus on innovation and ensuring that we upskill people.

Deputy Tom Neville: To add to that, there are more jobs with companies such as Design-Pro in Rathkeale and ABS Engineering in Castlelands Business Park, where the Minister of State visited us. There is no doubt that there has been a significant increase in employment in Limerick in the last years. In the Kilmallock region alone, there has been a 67% decrease in unemployment. In the Newcastle West region, there has been a 73% decrease in unemployment since 2011. There were approximately 5,000 Enterprise Ireland-supported jobs in Limerick in 2011 and there were nearly 10,000 in 2018. There were 6,642 IDA Ireland-supported jobs in Limerick in 2011 and there are now nearly 12,000. That is a substantial increase in employment. It is very welcome and long may it continue.

Deputy Pat Breen: I agree with that. We also have to pay tribute to the universities and third level institutions which are working hand-in-hand not just with the multinational companies but with the indigenous companies. The Deputy mentioned ABS Engineering in his area. That has won many awards and new contracts in Mexico, India and other places. It is a sign that a company such as ABS can be a major player globally. I hope that we can ensure that more of those companies grow in the future and can be located in the regions. Our policy is to ensure that we grow the regions by 10% to 15% each year and we have reached our targets. Our target is 200,000 jobs and 135,000 of those jobs are outside the Dublin area. All the regions have experienced growth recently and they will continue to do so.

Brexit Preparations

12. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which she and her officials continue to interact with the business community in order to maximise opportunities at home and abroad with particular reference to import substitution in the aftermath of Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27179/19]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will forgo my opening statement and hear the reply.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy's question relates mainly to import substitution in the aftermath of Brexit. I have a written reply that will go on the record of the House and that will be available to the Deputy. He is right that companies need to look at where they source their goods. I recently met a company that imports oranges for jam-making. It always imported the oranges from the UK. With the support of Enterprise Ireland, it decided to look at

new sources. It now sources its oranges from Spain. They are cheaper, better quality and make better jam. Companies should look at their supply chain, where they can source different products and look to Europe where companies are guaranteed there will be no tariffs or disruption when importing from across the EU. I thank Deputy Durkan for raising the issue.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In my role as Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation I have met with many businesses throughout the country, in all regions, and across a variety of sectors. I have been impressed with the levels of ambition, talent and creativity that I have seen in our companies. I am committed, through my Department and my work with ministerial colleagues across Government, to helping these businesses to maximise their opportunities, to succeed in both domestic and international markets and fulfil their potential.

While we had great success through the Action Plan for Jobs in reducing unemployment from 16% to 4.4% today, we recognise the need to move our focus beyond numbers of jobs created to quality sustainable jobs and to building resilience in the enterprise base.

Future Jobs Ireland is our plan to meet all these challenges. It includes ambitious targets and actions to drive this transformation of our economy and it was developed based on extensive consultation with the business sector and other stakeholders. In the context of Brexit preparedness, I also continue to chair a number of stakeholder groupings, including the retail consultation forum, which has had a specific focus on Brexit over the last year and my Department's trade and investment stakeholder group, which meets roughly every six weeks.

Regarding import substitution, I have been consistently urging businesses of all sizes to put their supply chains under the microscope to check for risks and vulnerabilities to the UK. Businesses could very well be exposed through their supply chain upstream, such as those who import ingredients, materials or components from the UK. They may be impacted with tariffs or delays at the port, which could impact on cashflow and that is why we have put in place the Brexit Loan Scheme to help businesses to prepare. Once businesses have assessed their supply chain's exposure there are a range of supports on offer from Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland and the 31 local enterprise offices and information on what actions to take.

An important element of this commitment is my Department's annual global sourcing initiative, helping EI clients to develop relationships with Irish based multinationals, through sales, partnership, R&D collaboration and innovation. This year there were more than 400 meetings with 96 Ireland-based multinational companies and 188 Irish suppliers.

Another key priority for businesses looking to succeed is to focus on diversification. Diversification is not just about markets, it is also about diversifying into new products, new sectors and new methods of working. It is, therefore, vital that Irish companies increase their levels of investment in innovation and R&D.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: As we gather in the Chamber our thoughts are very much in St. Columba's Church in Glenswilly as the funeral mass gets under way for the late Councillor Manus Kelly. I join my party and all of us in sending our thoughts this morning, in particular, to its family and friends as we gather.

The issues surrounding the national children's hospital and the overrun are not going away. This morning, in *The Irish Times* Martin Wall reported on a letter sent in April by the acting director general of the HSE, Anne O'Connor, who is still a very senior official within the executive, outlining her concerns about the construction of the HSE's capital plan and the difficulties that the overrun in the children's hospital were having on this.

We are now at the end of June and we still do not have the HSE's capital plan for 2019. The executive has still not outlined a plan. Will the Tánaiste comment on why we still do not have a capital plan? I want him to give a commitment to the House that the plan will be published before 11 July when the House goes into recess for the summer. The letter in the article this

morning outlined a number of concerns of HSE management and the officials in charge of implementing the plan. There is one line in it that sums everything up,

which is "The additional impact now of the national children's hospital overrun over the years 2020/2021/2022 has made what was a very difficult situation almost impossible." This is from the horse's mouth. This is from the people in charge of the programme whose job it is to implement it. However, the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Harris, continue to act as if there is no problem and continue to state there is nothing to see here and that they will manage the cost overruns and spread them out. The Government published a list of projects that would be re-profiled.

The people on the ground and in charge of implementing this project have sent up a flag this morning. What is the Tánaiste's reaction to this? The only political oversight of the national children's hospital during its inception related to the PR opportunities involved, and the photographs would happen at the right time. There was oversight of yellow jackets, hard hats and cameras. Meanwhile, the overspend continued to mount and now it will hit communities throughout the country. This has been proven by the letter this morning.

The capital plan means new buildings, new facilities and new ambulances. It is the essence of what is important in redesigning our health programme in line with the aspirations of Sláintecare. The then acting director general called it out for what it is. As we speak, the director general and the Secretary General of the Department of Health are before the Committee of Public Accounts outlining the ongoing charges to the health budget. This overspend has happened on the Government's watch. Will he comment on the letter and commit to the publication of the HSE's capital plan for 2019? It is unbelievable that we still do not have it at the end of June 2019. I want the Tánaiste to commit to the publication of that plan and a discussion on it in the Chamber before we go to recess.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. As he knows, in respect of financing the children's hospital project, €150 million has been included in the 2019 capital profiles for the project. Based on the outcome of the guaranteed maximum price, GMP, process in December 2018, an additional €100 million was required to fund the project this year. The Government decided that €24 million of this additional requirement would be provided from the health capital allocation. The balance for 2019 of €75 million will be met by rescheduling capital al-

locations in other Departments, which has been the subject of discussion in the Chamber many times. This is out of a total proposed capital allocation in the State of €7.33 billion in 2019. It is important to note that this is an increase of €1.33 billion, or 22%, on the 2018 allocation.

The new children's hospital is a vital and much needed project and the Government has examined the funding pressures associated with delivering this important project. In meeting these funding pressures, the Government examined all projects and programmes throughout government and has made adjustments to ensure the much needed new children's hospital will be delivered and will be facilitated as part of the overall capital investment programme. Projects in construction and contractually committed projects will not be affected, as the Minister has said many times. With regard to meeting the additional funding requirements for the project in future years, the Department of Health is engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform announced the State is speeding up reforms to our public procurement processes, and certainly lessons will be learned from this project. As the Deputy said, the HSE is finalising the capital plan for this year. The requirements of the new children's hospital and other health capital projects at various stages of development are being considered as part of this process. The capital allocation for health in 2019 is €642 million for the construction and equipping of health services. When that work is finalised, of course it will be subject to debate in the House. When the HSE has it ready, it will present it to the Minister.

Deputy Dara Calleary: This is the same response we have been getting month after month - that everything is fine and not to worry. In fairness, how can the Tánaiste stand up on 27 June and with a straight face state the capital plan for the year is being finalised? Six months have gone by and we still have not seen the capital plan but he has still made that reply. The report in today's edition of *The Irish Times* states an additional €107 million will be required in 2020, an additional €120 million in 2021 and an additional €150 million in 2022. It is not just about 2019. The consequences of the lack of oversight and lack of control in this project will continue to be felt. I again ask the Tánaiste to commit to publishing that plan before we go into recess in order that we can have a debate on it. What is the Tánaiste's comment on the fact that the then acting director general of the HSE stated the additional impact of the national children's hospital has made a very difficult situation almost impossible? How does he respond to this?

The Tánaiste: Allocating capital resources in healthcare is always challenging. What the Minister for Health, the Taoiseach and I have committed to over and over again is that projects under way, which we have contracted to deliver, are proceeding. When we consider the €7.33 billion of capital expenditure, it puts into context the challenge we have to overcome from a healthcare perspective of finding €24 million of the extra money required for 2019, with regard to the projects being delivered and, where possible, re-profiling. That work is continuing. As soon as it is done it will be presented the Minister and I am sure he will present it to the House. I cannot make a commitment on behalf of the Minister this afternoon. However, we will conclude the work as soon as we can and it will be debated transparently in the House when it is done.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I want to raise the same topic. In January, the Taoiseach stated no capital project would be delayed or cut as a result of the cost overrun in the children's hospital. Only last Thursday, in the very seat in which the Tánaiste is sitting, the Minister for Finance reiterated this position during Question Time. He stated no project would be cut or delayed as a result of the cost overruns in the children's hospital. In February, a draft capital

plan by the HSE was discussed and it was almost ready to be signed off. However, as a result of the information then given to the HSE on the cost overruns on the national children's hospital project, the capital plan had to be revisited. We are coming up to 1 July and the plan has still not been published. It is not possible for the Government to have it both ways. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance cannot state there is no impact on the capital projects which have been announced as a result of the cost overruns. That is because this morning at the Committee of Public Accounts, leaving aside what the interim director general of the HSE, Ms O'Connor, said, the director general who is in the job some six weeks stated the very reason we did not have a capital plan published by the HSE was the direct result and consequences of the cost overruns on the national children's hospital project. The HSE is still in negotiations with the Department of Health to see what impact the overruns will have on capital projects in 2020, 2021 and 2022. We have been trying to get the capital plan published for six months. We are being told that there is no issue when it comes to capital projects and that there are no cuts or delays for budgetary reasons. If that is the case, what has the HSE and the Department of Health been discussing for the past five to six months regarding the capital plan? Why has it not been published? It does not add up. What the Tánaiste is stating is not credible. The overruns either have an impact and we are still trying to figure what it will be, which is why the plan has not been published, or there is politics going on and an attempt to pull the wool over people's eyes. The overruns will either have an impact or they will not. Which is it?

The Tánaiste: I stand over what I, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health have said many times. The HSE is finalising how capital will be spent this year.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is years ago.

The Tánaiste: It needs to take into account the fact that additional funding of €24 million has to be catered for within the allocation. That is in the context of spending nearly €700 million overall. Work is ongoing to ensure the commitments we have made in this House-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Unrelated.

The Tánaiste: -----and projects that have been committed to and are under way will be completed.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government-----

The Tánaiste: Deputies will note that when €7 billion is being spent-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The capital plan for this year should be published this year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste must be allowed to speak without interruption, please.

The Tánaiste: Of all people, Deputy Howlin knows how capital plans are put together and changed and adapted during the year.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Tánaiste should be allowed to speak.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Publish them.

The Tánaiste: The HSE has to carry out the difficult task of ensuring the commitments that

have been made will be fully followed through and that the cost underestimates on the national children's hospital that have been corrected will actually be catered for.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is new one.

The Tánaiste: It is not a cost overrun where the money has not yet even been spent.

Deputy Dara Calleary: A "cost underestimate".

The Tánaiste: It was an underestimate. That is the reality.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: George Orwell would be proud. It is newspeak.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: The Deputies know that is true.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Tánaiste is correct. It was an underestimate.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Tánaiste has said the HSE has a very difficult job to do. That difficult job has now become impossible. They are not my words but the words of Ms O'Connor, the interim director general of the HSE. It has become impossible because of the cost overruns associated with the national children's hospital. Somebody needs to get the story straight. As far back as January and right up to last Thursday, the Taoiseach was telling us that the cost overruns had had no impact on capital projects. If that is the case, why did the director general of the HSE tell us this morning at the Committee of Public Accounts that the very reason the plan had not yet been published was the HSE was still trying to ascertain what impact the cost overruns would have on capital projects, not just this year but next year, 2021 and 2022? There cannot be one story from the Government, while the very people responsible for implementing the plan are telling us something completely different. What have the HSE and the Department of Health been discussing for the past five or six months if there is no issue? Come on.

The Tánaiste: The service plan for the HSE for this year also took time to put together.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Publish them.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Jonathan O'Brien is stating someone needs to get the story straight. As a Government, we have been consistent on this issue.

Deputy Joan Burton: It has been----

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The people who are implementing the plan are telling the Government that that is not correct.

The Tánaiste: We have said----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy O'Brien. There are no supplementaries to a supplementary question.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: They are supplementary questions.

The Tánaiste: We have consistently stated----

(*Interruptions*).

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Tánaiste should be allowed to speak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry, I am chairing this session. I want to ensure the Tánaiste will receive the same treatment as any other Deputy. Perhaps that is the suggestion the Minister, Deputy Madigan, is making. I will, however, chair the session and give the Tánaiste the same treatment as any other Deputy. I do not have to be reminded. The Tánaiste to continue, without interruption.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

The Tánaiste: They are not unreasonable questions. The House wants to know how we are going to accommodate the increased cost of the national children's hospital. I hope the Opposition is not suggesting we abandon moving ahead with the project.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We are not.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are not.

(*Interruptions*).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

The Tánaiste: What we have said is that the Government, via the HSE, will accommodate the increased cost this year without stalling or preventing the investment in other projects that has been committed to.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The HSE disagrees.

The Tánaiste: We are looking to accommodate a sum of €24 million in of a spend of nearly €700 million in the context of the health capital programme this year.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is magic money.

The Tánaiste: It is not magic money.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: From where is it coming?

The Tánaiste: Of all people, Deputy Howlin should know how the profiling changes for capital projects throughout the year.

(*Interruptions*).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to desist. He might not like the reply.

The Tánaiste: We are endeavouring to ensure the capital plan will be presented to the Minister and, presumably, this House before the summer recess.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. We move on to the Rural Independent Group. Its leader today is Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to raise again the matter of the proposed Killarney bypass. There were two parts to the project when it was first put before

the members of Kerry County Council. The first part runs from Lissivigeen to beyond Farranfore on the N22. It is to run from Lissivigeen to Castlelough on the Muckross road on the N70. It is a vital project which will reduce pressure and the number of accidents from Lissivigeen to beyond Farranfore. There have been many fatalities at Coolcaslagh, Ballycasheen, the top of Lewis road, Madam's Hill and the Four Roads junction in Farranfore village. At the last count, on the current bypass which is not sufficient, an estimated 18,600 vehicles passed by daily. It is probably higher now. The road links the Ring of Kerry, the Killorglin road and the Cork to Tralee road.

The other leg will run from Lissivigeen to Castlelough to avoid the need for traffic from Kenmare and the Ring of Kerry to pass through the heart of Killarney town. All of the traffic heading to other parts of the country would not have to use the Muckross road. It would also mean that all of the traffic, the thousands of cars heading to Muckross House and Gardens and the national park would not have to pass through Killarney town and clog it up. The Muckross road, the town, Mission road and Dr. Hans Liebherr Road become parking lots at certain times of the day because traffic cannot move. On the one hand, it is good that we have this traffic into Killarney town which is the tourist capital of Ireland and where the tourism operators are second to none. However, they need assistance at this stage to ensure their product will not be diminished by visitors complaining about being held up in traffic. This project was first put in front of us in 2004. In 2017 I raised it and we got €50,000 just to dust down the files. We got €500,000 this year to carry out further studies and preparatory work. I am asking the Tánaiste to commit to ensuring this project is included in the coming year's capital investment programme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste understands the question.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We have a Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, in Kerry and I am asking him to put his shoulder to the wheel on this project.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should not invite interruptions from Deputy Griffin.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am very sorry.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I am not sure that in reality raising it in Leaders' Questions is the best way to move this project forward, but I will certainly give an update on the situation as I understand it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It might not be appropriate but Deputies can raise anything in Leader's Questions.

The Tánaiste: I know they can but it might not be the most effective way to get this project moving forward. The Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, is pushing this project as well. The scheme consists of 27 km of road improvements between Farranfore and Killarney along the N22. I presume that is the scheme about which the Deputy is asking. The scheme provides for a bypass of Farranfore village, a new realigned N22, including a link into Killarney town, and an outer bypass of Killarney town. The current status of the project is that the project appraisal plan was approved by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport late last December. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, approval has now been issued to Kerry County Council to commence the procurement of technical advisers. A defined route corridor already has been selected. The project was suspended in 2010 or 2011 when there was no money. The project appraisal plan was prepared in 2018 and it is now moving forward. I am glad to say that we

now have a national development plan with potential funding for the development of projects like this. I suggest that the Deputy pursues it, both with Kerry County Council and directly with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, which will be able to provide him with detailed briefs.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Councillor Maura Healy-Rae has raised it with Kerry County Council. As the Tánaiste said, the scheme was suspended in 2011 and both parts of the scheme were suspended at that time. TII's appraisal, however, has left out the very important stretch from Lissivigeen to Castlelough. It only mentions the part from Lissivigeen to beyond Farranfore, which is not adequate and will not help Killarney town at all. I ask the Tánaiste to ensure the second leg is added to the project, because that is what we were told we would get back in 2004. That was 15 years ago. Killarney and Kerry have waited 15 years and that is long enough. Time is running out for the Tánaiste and the Government of which he is a part. I am asking the Government, of which the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin is part, to ensure that the two parts of the 2004 proposal are included in this year's capital investment programme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, Deputy

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Tánaiste suggests that other avenues are open to me. I am asking him in the Chamber of Dáil Éireann to progress this very worthwhile project in this year's capital investment plan. I am very sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is a bit late now.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy knows only too well that I will not make a funding decision like that on the hoof during Leaders' Questions. I suggest that he should work with the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, who well understands the importance of this project.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Where is he?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Anseo.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I am here.

The Tánaiste: He is in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and believe me, he is delivering for Kerry as well as he is for many other parts of the country in respect of tourism and transport infrastructure. There are processes by which projects are like this are prioritised, funded and delivered which must be gone through and the Deputy understands that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I would like to allow the Minister of State to comment but Standing Orders do not allow it.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I am probably safer not getting involved.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Our thoughts are with the family of Councillor Manus Kelly as he is buried today. It is a tragic loss.

Tomorrow our thoughts should also be with the friends and family of Ivan Cooper, and on how we need men like Ivan Cooper today. Coming from a working-class Protestant tradition, he ended up managing a shirt factory. Championing the cause of the Catholic workers in his factory, he led the parades in 1968 and the famous Bloody Sunday parade in 1972, the source of so much of our Troubles. We are in trouble again.

After the murder of Lyra McKee almost two and a half months ago, Fr. Martin McGill asked why it had taken the death of a 29 year old woman for the parties of the North to come together again and commit to doing what they could to see a restoration of the Executive and the assembly in the North. It was hoped that this would be concluded by the end of June. I cannot see any sign of that eventuality whatsoever. I presume that such hopes will be put aside with the marching season. The difficulty is that when we return in September, we are likely to be in a most complex and fraught negotiating position with the UK Government over what is happening with Brexit. It is highly unlikely that restoration could be carried out in such circumstances. Then we will hit October. As the Taoiseach said yesterday in the national economic dialogue, a no-deal Brexit is now highly likely.

In advance of the first deadline in March, Mr. David Penman, the general secretary of the trade union representing public servants in the North, said that civil servants could not take the kind of decisions that would need to be taken in such a scenario. The British Prime Minister, Theresa May, said in the House of Commons that some direct application of powers would have to be put in place in those circumstances. We would be back to direct rule. The Good Friday Agreement would be in tatters and the environment which created the conditions for it would be gone. We would face a no-deal scenario with many differences between the jurisdictions in the North and South. We would have to manage that directly with Westminster Ministers with whom we would probably be in a very uncomfortable relationship. We have a big problem with the Brexit issue but we have an even bigger problem with our immediate relations in the North. As Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, this is the Tánaiste's responsibility. What in the scenario I have just set out is likely to change? How can we avoid ending up with direct rule in three or four months? What can we do about it? Will we slowly sleepwalk into an incredible political crisis on this island, as well as between this island and the neighbouring one? Is there any hope of restoration at all?

The Tánaiste: I would like to associate the Government and myself with the condolences on the death of the late Councillor Manus Kelly that have been outlined by others. I also pay tribute to and recognise the extraordinary contribution of Ivan Cooper, a civil rights campaigner who was an inspiration to many people in the work he did and the causes he fought for.

A process is currently under way to create a platform that all parties in Northern Ireland can buy into to re-establish devolved institutions and a functioning Executive and assembly. I have been deliberately low-key over the past eight weeks in relation to this process and I will remain low-key today. I will be in Stormont again this afternoon. On average I have been there three or four days a week, every week for the last eight weeks. It is important to maintain North-South and east-west relationships in the context of big and difficult questions around Brexit. However, working together and compromising with each other to create the conditions for devolved institutions not only to be re-established but to survive, function and be sustained in a way that is consistent with the Good Friday Agreement is not straightforward. We are working hard to provide a basis for it and it would not be helpful if I were to make predictions or comment on the input or role of the different parties at this stage. There are sincere efforts being made on all sides and by all parties to make it work. We are very conscious of the narrowing window available to us before 12 July and what will follow from it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I recognise that in the diplomatic world it is sometimes right to play things low key. However, I fear that we could be sitting here in three or four months' time, at which point it would certainly cease to be low key. It would be elevated to a political crisis, not only in the economic order but also in respect of the constitutional fabric of our agreements. In

a no-deal scenario where direct rule returns and there is no prospect of that changing, the Good Friday Agreement will be gone. We could sleepwalk ourselves into it if we simply accept that people find it difficult to cross identity barriers. That is where some of the biggest issues seem to be, including the Irish language, same-sex marriage and abortion rights, and it appears to be the sticking point. Is it? If so, Ivan Cooper might be a good example. He found it difficult that sometimes people would not sit beside him in his own church because he was willing to give up some of these identity divisions. The Tánaiste is right that we need to be careful and avoid adding to it. However, the political reality of where we are heading-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----is direct rule and the end of the Good Friday Agreement. That is something we cannot ignore.

The Tánaiste: I am more than aware of the gravity of the decisions which may be made in the coming weeks in respect of relationships on this island and between Ireland and the United Kingdom and with regard to the protection of the Good Friday Agreement and all it has delivered in the past 21 years. In many ways I share the anxieties and frustrations the Deputy has outlined, but my job is to fix it, with others. That is what we are trying to do. My judgment is that the less I say about the detail for now, the better. However, that does not mean and the Deputy should not confuse it with an unwillingness to work to accommodate the different party positions. I note, in particular, that Sinn Féin is making significant efforts to find a balanced outcome which will allow for a restoration of devolution. I recognise this in the House. However, Sinn Féin has work to do, as do I, the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the UUP and DUP, to protect what has been created in the past 20 years, namely, a normalisation of relationships, a functioning all-island economy, North-South institutions which need to be reinvigorated and, of course, power sharing which is the basis of that balance at Stormont.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are other connections.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are well over time.

The Tánaiste: None of that is in place and we need to correct it, given the context of what is coming in the autumn. Everyone is well aware of the gravity of the situation.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtáiocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We move to questions on promised legislation. Before I call Deputy Calleary, I ask Members to reflect on the time allocated.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I beg the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's indulgence to mention that this is a significant day for five of our colleagues. For Fianna Fáil, it is particularly significant for Deputy Kelleher who marks his last day as a Member of Dáil Éireann. It is also a significant day for Deputies Fitzgerald, Clare Daly and Wallace and Senator Grace O'Sullivan. We send them every good wish as they move to the European Parliament. Like the Tánaiste, they may come back at some stage. I thank them for their contributions. In particular, I thank Deputy Kelleher for his service to my party as a Member of the House. I wish all of them well.

Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme was enormously distressing. The treatment of greyhounds was, frankly, disgraceful. Deputy Cahill, in particular, has been working on this matter for some years. While we acknowledge the strength of the new legislation on animal welfare, there is a difficulty with enforcement. There is no consistency in enforcement nationally, in particular, at local authority level. I ask the Tánaiste for his reaction to last night's programme as a former Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and that a clear signal be sent from the Government that this behaviour is not tolerable and will not be allowed to continue and that those engaged in the disgraceful and disgusting actions highlighted will be brought to justice.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to indulge me also. I congratulate the four Deputies who are heading to the European Parliament on their last official day as Members of the Dáil. I wish them well. The new European Parliament will meet for the first time on 2 July and Ireland will be well represented. I hope that if they want to come back, they will be able to do so. There is nothing wrong with gaining a little experience in the European Parliament and coming back to put it to good use here.

I have not seen the "RTÉ Investigates" programme yet, but I have seen some clips. I will watch it and expect that when I do, it will make me very angry. The Government and its predecessor have taken the issue of animal welfare very seriously. With the support of all parties in the Oireachtas, we introduced the most extensive ever animal welfare legislation. We agreed to review in detail the greyhound industry and how it was run. To that end, an Indecon report was commissioned and its recommendations were acted on. New legislation is in place on the back of it to change structures within the industry to ensure traceability can be delivered with no excuses. I promise the House, having spoken to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine this morning, that the illegality evident in last night's report will be followed up and that we will look to secure prosecutions where we can. Just under 80 prosecutions have followed the introduction of the new animal welfare legislation, but there are other things on which we need to follow up, too. If Irish greyhounds are being sent to the United Kingdom to be exported to parts of the world where we cannot guarantee their welfare, we will speak to the United Kingdom about it to try to shut it off. People expect assurances and transparency on animal welfare standards in Ireland and expect prosecutions when it is not delivered. Last night's programme was a wake-up call that all was not right, even though legislation is in place to secure prosecutions. We will follow up on it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Jonathan O'Brien, with the Ceann Comhairle, I wish to be associated with the good wishes extended to Deputies Kelleher, Fitzgerald, Clare Daly and Wallace. I am one who has been there and done that. I was, of course, homesick at the time. Both the Tánaiste and I came back. Having been there, I know that all of our MEPs will wear the Irish jersey on behalf of the people. Go n-éirí an geábh libh go léir.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I too wish the four Deputies the best of luck. Deputy Kelleher does not have to worry as Deputy Barry and I will have Cork North Central well looked after in his absence.

I refer to the cancer care programme and the Government's commitment to the provision of oncology services. The Tánaiste will be well aware of recent media reports on the number of consultant posts which remain unfilled at Cork University Hospital, CUH, and the impact

on outpatient appointment waiting lists. There are 25,000 people waiting for appointments at CUH. What movement has there been and what efforts are being made by the Government to fill consultant posts in general and, in particular, to ensure the provision of oncology services at CUH?

The Tánaiste: I have been sent a note reminding me to mention Senator Grace O'Sullivan, who is also heading to the European Parliament. I wish her well.

It is important for me to say that last week, I opened a new oncology unit in Cork University Hospital which involved an investment of €40 million. A further €25 million has been invested in mental health services in the hospital to facilitate the development of the oncology unit. We are investing heavily in cancer care. There are staffing challenges in some specialist areas. The number of additional consultants taken on in the last year is quite significant, but there are still gaps and I accept that. The HSE has assured us that it is actively pursuing a recruitment programme to fill those essential gaps as soon as it can.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I join Deputies in wishing our four departing colleagues every success in their new roles in the European Parliament. I wish our Seanad colleague, Senator Grace O'Sullivan, similar success in the important work she will now be undertaking.

Eir has claimed that it can deliver rural broadband for approximately €1 billion, one third of the Government's current cost outline. I understand from what the Taoiseach said yesterday that the Government has written to Eir to seek further information on this. The immediate reaction of the Taoiseach yesterday struck me as more about defending the current position than being fully open to exploring all options. In essence, his immediate reaction was to doubt that Eir could connect homes and businesses at an affordable cost. He also doubted that it could cover the 25-year maintenance costs. Both of these issues have been disputed by Eir. I have two direct and simple questions. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will genuinely explore alternatives to the current Government plan that will speedily, efficiently and at a lesser cost to the taxpayer provide rural broadband? Will he give the House a commitment to the House that no contract will be signed until that exploration has been fully completed?

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Deputy will be aware that in December 2015-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We need the Minister's microphone switched on.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----the terms and conditions under which state aid would be provided to bidders to provide a national broadband service that ensures 25% of the population is not left behind were published. Under that procedure, as the Deputy knows, Eir went through the pre-qualification stage and agreed to the approach and it submitted a bid of €2.7 billion. That was in accordance with state aid rules, public expenditure rules and the proper oversight and governance of how State money would be provided. Eir subsequently withdrew from the process. It has indicated in hearings this week that it believes this could be done at a much cheaper cost. However, it seems that Eir does not envisage that its approach would submit to the requirements of the state aid rules that were set out. As the Taoiseach indicated yesterday, we need to explore precisely what Eir is proposing. As the Deputy knows, we undertook a procurement process. That was done with every bidder treated in the same way. We reached a point at which a preferred bidder was appointed.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There was just one bidder at the time.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We are now entering into the period during which we will have to decide whether a contract will be signed. If we decide not to proceed with the procedure that has been put in place, we will have to start a completely new procurement procedure.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is the Government open to having a look?

Deputy Richard Bruton: No such-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The rules should be changed.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----procurement procedure under state aid rules could involve conferring an individual company, particularly a company with a substantial incumbent position, with a subsidy-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Does the Minister have a fixed view?

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----without going through a procurement process that was seen as fair and compliant with state aid rules. That is the position.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That does not sound like an openness to explore.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Of course we are open to hearing any information that comes to us that would alter our view on the contract approach we have taken.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It does not sound like it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We would have to end one procedure before we could start another.

Deputy Mick Barry: More than 200 households in Cork are hurting hard this morning. There is anger, upset and devastation. Last night's news of the closure of the Cork mail centre came as a bombshell for An Post workers. They have been told that this has to happen because the demand for letter delivery services has decreased by 7% year-on-year. However, demand for parcel delivery services has increased by 60% in the last two years. There is a real opportunity here for An Post to diversify, to grow its business and to save jobs. It is madness to sell a major valuable premises and to axe more than 200 jobs when this opportunity is facing An Post. I ask the Minister to join me in calling on An Post to put this plan to one side - on the shelf - and to allow real negotiations between representatives of the workers and the company to see what can be done to diversify, to grow the business and to save the jobs and pay packets on which many households depend.

Deputy Pat Buckley: On the same issue, I reiterate what Deputy Barry has said. I raised this in 2018 and the Government told us that nothing had been decided. From my own sources, I am worried that this was decided in 2017 when the McKinsey report was compiled. Is it possible for that report to be given to us so that we can see it? My sources say in the decisions to be made, Cork was not the priority for closure under this report. Can we get a copy of the report?

The Tánaiste: This is a very difficult day for An Post workers, their families and for the wider Cork area with confirmation that the mail centre in Little Island will have closed by March of next year. The closure will take place on a phased basis from September onwards. I assure the House that An Post and the Government will do everything possible to ensure each of the 240 individuals affected by the closure will be given every possible support. This decision was

made by An Post, not by the Government and it is important to say that. I spoke to the CEO of An Post, David McRedmond, last night or the night before to seek reassurance on the terms and conditions and to try to understand why An Post has made this choice. Understandably, many people are very unhappy about it. It is important to give some reassurance to staff. The impact on the staff will be mitigated by a strong voluntary exit package for people who want-----

Deputy Mick Barry: What about the jobs?

The Tánaiste: I will come to that.

Deputy Mick Barry: What about the jobs?

The Tánaiste: If the Deputy listens for a second, I will answer the question. It is an important issue. Many families want to have information.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste should be heard without interruption.

The Tánaiste: There is a strong voluntary exit package of six weeks' pay per year of service, up to a maximum of two years' pay. Redeployment opportunities within An Post networks in the Cork area are a real option. An Post employs over 1,000 people in Cork. Further reskilling and education grants of up to €3,000 per person are available. If people want to choose the option, there will be support and help in terms of a jobs fair and other outplacement supports. I asked the CEO the question that Deputy Barry asked. An Post is committed to investing over €15 million in parcels infrastructure in Cork over the next two to three years. I asked why the current premises could not be used to facilitate parcel delivery etc. I was told it simply is not suitable as a piece of infrastructure to do that in terms of scale and make-up. A very difficult decision has been made which was required of An Post in return for modest pay increases over the last number of years. There have been and continue to be ongoing discussions with the Communications Workers Union representing the workers. The Government will monitor closely the supports available for the workers and the redeployment opportunities within An Post, in particular, but it will insist also that An Post follows through on its commitments in terms of the investments being committed to the next number of years.

Deputy Mick Barry: What about the jobs?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No supplementary questions are allowed. I am moving on to the Independents 4 Change group.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I did not even get an answer to my question.

The Tánaiste: I could follow up on that.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I join colleagues in sending our best wishes to Deputies Kelleher, Fitzgerald, Clare Daly and Wallace. All four made a distinguished contribution to this House. Our technical group in particular will miss the contributions of Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, in particular, during the remaining period of this Dáil.

I wish to briefly ask the Tánaiste about a matter that was raised earlier. He was Minister of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for five years. We are a nation of animal lovers. Most people throughout the country were disgusted by what they saw on the "Prime Time Investigates" programme last night which seemed to indicate a major wanton slaughter of greyhounds, numbering up to 6,000, year in year out, simply because they were not fast enough. Also, there is

the issue of the licensing of knackeries as the conditions in them seem appalling. What actions will the Tánaiste and the Minister responsible take in response to the reporting of these matters? Many people throughout the country are outraged and want urgent action taken. We have the new Act and I have the Welfare of Greyhounds (Amendment) Bill 2017 on the clár, which deals with the export of greyhounds. We seem to have been told a pack of lies about such exports. Greyhounds are being exported to countries with deplorable animal welfare conditions and nothing is being done about it. Given that the Tánaiste held that portfolio for a long time, what will he and the Minister, Deputy Creed, do about this matter?

The Tánaiste: The Minister, Deputy Creed, is also here. We spoke about this issue this morning before Leaders' Questions. We will act on the basis of the evidence that was put forward in a very helpful but very graphic way from what I have been told about the programme last night. It is not acceptable that greyhounds that are to be put down because of injury or whatever other reason are not put down in an appropriate manner with the supervision of a vet. The days of sending a dog to the knackery or to the abattoir are long since over or they should be. Illegal activity will be pursued. We have the animal welfare legislation in place and new legislation for the greyhound industry to be able to ensure we have a proper transparent system that tracks where dogs are, who owns them, where they travel to, to whom they are sold and so on. If there is over-breeding within this sector, which I suspect perhaps there is, that is also something the Government needs to look at from a policy perspective. This is a sector the State significantly supports financially. It is an important one. It needs to be supported but it also needs to stamp illegal activity or animal welfare concerns, which were outlined last night.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I also wish Deputies Clare Daly, Wallace, Fitzgerald and Kelleher the very best. We certainly will miss Deputies Wallace and Clare Daly from the Independent benches. I suggest the Leas-Cheann Comhairle might give them an induction course given all his experience in Europe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is already done.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Good man. I knew that would be done in good spirit.

It is a sad day in Cahir town today with the regional Craft Granary for the south east closing its doors. I raised this issue with the Minister some weeks ago. The south-east arts strategy is rich in its support for arts centres but this craft centre will close its doors today. I thank the management, staff and board members for their work over the years. It provided a great outlet to craftspeople, those involved in the arts and many other groups to display their wares and to help stimulate small businesses and small local craft enterprises. Will the Minister convene a meeting with the council and other interested people, some private people, to see if a rejuvenated craft granary can be reopened in some other part of the town, because this is a bleak day for Cahir?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Minister in a position to answer in that respect?

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josephine Madigan): I am happy to engage with the Deputy regarding this arts centre. It is important to stress the Government has significantly increased its funding to the arts in the budget for this year. The Taoiseach has committed to double the funding by 2020. If the Deputy would like to talk to me about it further, I can get him a proper answer in regard to it.

Deputy John Brady: Last month, I gave the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local

Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, a number of sworn affidavits containing serious allegations about planning irregularities in County Wicklow. The Tánaiste would be familiar with the content of some of them because they were on his desk when he was the Minister with responsibility for this area in 2016 and 2017. I have not received a response since those sworn affidavits were handed over to the Minister. Subsequently, the Garda, which was also furnished copies of those affidavits, has opened up a criminal investigation into the allegations. These are legacy issues. They have been on the Tánaiste's desk and on the desks of previous Ministers. The Government is completely deaf to these allegations. What will it do about this? Will it lift the cloud hanging over the names of some good people-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have got the Deputy's question. Many other Members are offering.

Deputy John Brady: -----who work in County Wicklow, investigate these issues and hold people to account if they are to be held to account?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have got the gist of the question.

Deputy John Brady: The Government's deafness to these issues is unacceptable.

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

The Tánaiste: I have some recollection of these issues when I was in that Ministry, when there were discussions in the Department regarding those files but I would have to have a look at the detail again before I could give the Deputy a proper answer. I will certainly raise the matter with the current Minister.

Deputy John Brassil: In the context of the programme for Government and providing a fair and equitable welfare system, I was briefed yesterday by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland concerning an anomaly that exists with respect to people who are partially sighted and fail to acquire a driving licence, in that the criteria for the awarding of a free travel pass for those people are different from the criteria used by the driving licence department. It is only fair that if one is deemed unsuitable to apply for a driving licence that one would be assisted in getting a free travel pass. I ask the Tánaiste to look into that.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): This was brought to my attention only a week ago. There is an anomaly but I am not sure I can fix it. I will do more investigation. People who get a free travel pass from the Department of Employment and Social Protection only get one if they are in receipt of another payment but there are many people who are not in receipt of a payment who might have capacity issues with regard to their sight in terms of securing a driving licence. I have to square that circle. I will come back to the Deputy on it but I am aware of that since last week.

Deputy Niall Collins: I wish to raise the case of many people who are denied primary medical certificates. These are people with challenging physical disabilities which debilitate the use of their limbs. When they are denied a primary medical certificate they cannot avail of the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme which provides a range of tax reliefs for the purchase and use of vehicles. I have raised this matter on a number of occasions with the independent Office of the Ombudsman, that is, with Peter Tyndall. He has examined the issue and has written to me. I am sure he has also written something similar to many Deputies in the House. His letter states:

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I am concerned that this scheme, as currently framed, is overly rigid and inflexible and may well be causing inequity. A change in the legislation would be required to amend the scheme. Some time ago I raised these concerns with the Department of Finance which is responsible for the ... legislation. No amendments to the scheme have been made to date. In light of the volume and nature of the complaints which I continue to receive I wrote to the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Disability Issues ... to express my concerns ... and to suggest that an amendment to the [legislation is required].

On the basis that the Ombudsman has stated loud and clear that an amendment to this legislation in respect of the scheme is required for people who are being locked out of the scheme, people with genuine disabilities, will the Tánaiste consider prioritising this as soon as possible?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is there promised legislation on this?

The Tánaiste: My understanding is that the Minister, Deputy Harris, and Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, are looking at this scheme, obviously in consultation with the Minister for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe.

They have not yet come back with recommendations to the Cabinet. I will get the Deputy more detail on it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins. I want an appropriate question on promised legislation.

Deputy Michael Collins: In the programme for Government it was promised to reopen six Garda stations to redress some of the damage done by the previous Fine Gael-Labour Party Government through Garda station closures. In February Fine Gael MEPs, Oireachtas Members and local councillors were falling over themselves in Bandon, County Cork following the Minister's announcement that Ballinspitte Garda station would be reopened as one of the six. The people of Ballinspitte have seen nothing since and today is 27 June. Will the Tánaiste give me an exact date for the reopening of Ballinspitte Garda station?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is nothing to indicate that this is an appropriate question on promised legislation. Is the Tánaiste in a position to answer it?

The Tánaiste: I am not in a position to give an exact date. I do not think the Minister of State is either.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): We will bring the matter to the Minister's attention and get a response.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: After many years of negotiations, the Mercosur deal is near to conclusion. When the concessions on beef imports were given, European beef producers were in a completely different scenario from the one they are in today. Brexit will make the European Union 116% self-sufficient in beef, while climate change will pose significant challenges to sustainable food production in Europe. European beef producers cannot understand how South American beef could be allowed into Europe to displace European products.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Government shares the Deputy's concerns about the Mercosur trade deal, particularly the volumes

envisioned, the product mix, as well as environmental concerns. We have been active in communicating these concerns to all parties involved and building alliances with other Europe Union member states. Concern is escalating, but the negotiations have not yet been brought to a conclusion.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yesterday the Minister for Health signed legislation to allow for the operation of the medical cannabis access programme on a pilot basis for five years. The purpose of the programme is to facilitate compassionate access to cannabis for medical reasons. Some parents travel to Holland to obtain medical cannabis, under licence, on a three monthly basis. When will they be able to access the drug in Ireland? In the Minister's press release yesterday he stated pharmacists would be able to dispense cannabis for medical use, as set out in the legislation, once suppliers made the specified controlled drugs available in the Irish market. Do we have any timeframe for when the parents in question will be able to access these products?

The Tánaiste: I know that operational guidance on the medical cannabis access programme will be available shortly for patients, suppliers, importers, medical practitioners and pharmacists. They are valid questions. It was confirmed and the legislation was launched yesterday, but clear guidelines will be published shortly to answer all of the practical questions about access.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will accommodate the rest of the Members who are offering, but I want them to be brief and to the point. I call Deputy Thomas Byrne who I know will be brief and to the point.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On the programme for Government and the HSE's current budget, is the Minister for Health aware that there are 3,529 individuals waiting for an orthopaedic appointment in Navan hospital? Is he aware that 1,277 of these individuals have been waiting for 12 months or more for an initial assessment? Is he aware that for routine, follow-up appointments, as consultants describe them, there is a 27-month wait and a 17-month wait for urgent orthopaedic appointments? Does he believe this is acceptable? Does he have proposals to change this to relieve the suffering of those waiting?

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): It is welcome that on a monthly basis the number of people waiting for hospital operations or procedures is falling consistently, thanks to the investment we are making. Regarding the situation at Navan hospital, I will ask the National Treatment Purchase Fund if more can be done to deal with the issues raised. I will revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Michael Harty: The programme for Government contains a commitment to enter into a new contract with consultants, as well as a commitment to reduce waiting lists. Last week, in response to a question I put to the Taoiseach, he said there was a recruitment surge in the HSE. However, one in five consultant posts is vacant. The Taoiseach expressed his uncertainty about where the figures had come from. Many posts are filled by agency staff which costs a large amount of money or by people acting up who are not specialists. This is just filling a gap, rather than addressing the issue. If one does not recognise that there is a problem, one cannot fix it. Waiting lists are a function of the lack of consultants in the system. Will the Tánaiste or the Minister for Health identify where the recruitment surge is because none of the colleges can?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a statement of fact that there are 125 more consultants work-

ing in the health service today than there were 12 months ago and 500 more than five years ago. That is not to suggest there is no challenge in recruitment and retention, as the Tánaiste outlined. The Government has shown an ability to engage on a new nurses' contract and a significant addition to the GP contract. We will find a way to engage in a process to explore the recruitment and retention issues with consultants. We will do so in the context of Sláintecare and the important work we will have to do under the de Buitléir report.

Deputy Joan Burton: In speaking about the summer economic statement the Minister for Finance twice said the cost of the social welfare Christmas bonus this year was included in the base. I am rather surprised by that because I certainly cannot find it in the accounts of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The Minister did not mention the Department's Estimate but just said "it is in the base". If it is not included in the accounts of the Department, where is it included? Will the Tánaiste reassure pensioners, lone parents, carers and people with disabilities that the Government intends to pay the Christmas bonus and explain from where it will be paid? The most recent Irish Fiscal Advisory Council report stated that in 2019 provision had once again not been made for the Christmas bonus. In a footnote to the report, it is stated the current practice is a poor approach to managing the public finances. Where is the Christmas bonus provided for? Will the Tánaiste confirm that the Government does not intend to abolish it and that it will pay it?

Deputy Regina Doherty: As a former Minister for Social Protection for five years, the Deputy should know that the practice has not changed one single bit since she was in the Department.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister for Finance said it was included in the base. Where is it in it?

Deputy Pat Breen: Did the Deputy listen to the answer just given?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Aylward.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is a legitimate question. Where is it?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Dara Calleary: The position has not changed since the Deputy was in the Department.

Deputy Joan Burton: Where is it in the base?

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: The programme for Government states we should use the strengthening economy to become a leader in the provision of world class education and skills. Last week the Union of Students in Ireland made a pre-budget submission. Members of my local branch, Carlow IT Students Union, recently contacted my office to highlight some of the major issues facing students. They spoke about the importance of the SUSI maintenance grant in assisting many students in meeting day-to-day costs of third level education. Despite a significant increase in the cost of living, the SUSI maintenance grant has not been increased since 2012. It is also unfair that students are being penalised for earnings from part-time work.

Will the Tánaiste investigate the possibility of raising the threshold for the grants scheme ahead of budget 2020? Will he also look at excluding seasonal work from the evaluation of student income in assessing entitlement to the grant?

The Tánaiste: While they are valid issues, they are matters to be considered in the context of the budget.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions (Amendment) Bill 2019 proposes to apply the Magdalen redress scheme to women who worked in the institutions covered by the scheme but who resided in certain adjoining institutions. When is it likely to be brought before the House?

The Tánaiste: I understand that it is moving on to its Final Stages in the Seanad. If it is amended, it will come back to this House for final approval.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Durkan has given us an example of an appropriate question.

Deputy Tom Neville: Page 65 of the programme for Government refers to mental health. The post of clinical lead in the national clinical programme for those with dual diagnosis has been open since late 2018. Will the Government provide an update on recruitment for this post?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this important issue. This is a key post which we funded in the budget for the development of our mental health services. The HSE is progressing with recruitment for this post. I will get the Deputy a written note in that regard.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The New Zealand State Services Commission has reported on the actions of Mr. Gabriel Makhlouf, incoming Governor of the Central Bank. It has found that he did not act reasonably in continuing to focus on the conduct of those searching the Treasury website, rather than on the Treasury's failure to keep budget material confidential. This would appear to be a case of seriously bad judgment in a crisis. Does the Tánaiste still have confidence in Mr. Makhlouf?

The Tánaiste: Yes, the Government and I still have confidence in him.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I would like to make something clear to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. If a Deputy represents his or her grouping at Leaders' Questions he or she cannot come in a second time. Otherwise-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Order of Business is a different thing altogether.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has been in during the Order of Business.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle has been here longer than I have, but that is not how this has operated every other day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That would mean that every leader could come in twice.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They have.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Deputy Calleary came in twice.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's man came in in his place. What is the Deputy's question? It is to be a question, not a statement.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: People on the housing list are being thrown off because their family income supplement puts them over the income threshold for social housing. If people are poor enough to be on family income supplement, that money should not be considered as income for the purposes of throwing them off the housing list. A couple who have been on the housing list for 12 years are being thrown off because-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is to ask a question, not make a statement.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----their family income supplement puts them over the limit. That is not fair.

The Tánaiste: The Minister is reviewing the income thresholds.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I made a major mistake. Deputy Eugene Murphy was in the Chair prior to me and I overlooked his question. I call on him to put a concise question.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Last Thursday, I asked the Tánaiste about the industry funding levy for credit unions. I mean no disrespect to him because, in fairness to him, he always tries to answer the questions correctly but I did not get a correct answer. The information I have received from the horse's mouth is that there has been no consultation with the credit unions on this issue since 2015. Prior to that, the last consultation was in 2012. This levy will be increased to 50%, raising the amount paid from €1.8 million to €8 million over a number of years. There are already five levies on credit unions. I do not know how many people realise that. We cannot underestimate the benefits of the credit unions and the social role they play in society. If some of the levies could be got rid of and this one brought in over ten years, this would be acceptable to the credit unions.

The Tánaiste: I will get the Minister to come back to the Deputy on this issue directly.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Eoin Ó Broin - to discuss the closure of an emergency accommodation facility, Brú Aimsir, in Dublin city centre; (2) Deputies Ruth Coppinger, Jack Chambers and Joan Burton - to discuss emergency works required at Hartstown Community Centre, Dublin 15; (3) Deputy Michael Harty - to discuss a proposed wind farm at Moylussa, County Clare; (4) Deputy Mary Butler - to discuss funding of the North Quays project in Waterford; (5) Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan, Joan Collins and Paul Murphy - to discuss the issues raised in the RTÉ investigation into the greyhound industry; (6) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss the future of the An Post mail centre in Cork; and (7) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - the need for a statement on ways to fix the commuter crises in Ireland.

The matters raised by Deputies Eoin Ó Broin, Ruth Coppinger, Jack Chambers and Joan Burton, Mary Butler and Sean Sherlock have been selected for discussion.

Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019: First Stage

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990 by increasing the maximum sentence that can be imposed for the possession of a knife to cause injury to, incapacitate or intimidate any person.

I seek leave to introduce legislation entitled the Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019. The purpose of the legislation is to amend section 9 of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990, which deals with the crime of possession of knives. The Acting Chairman will be aware that there have recently been a number of significant criminal events involving the use of knives. Last month a young man was killed with a knife in Dundrum. Earlier this month a man was killed with a knife on O'Connell Street. Two days ago, a woman was killed with a knife in the region of the Liberties in Dublin. Unfortunately the crime statistics that are compiled do not give us specific detail on the number of homicides or assaults committed with a knife, but we do have some statistics that indicate that the use and carrying of knives is increasing. An Garda Síochána has been able to provide information to the Minister, which he shared with me in the answer to a parliamentary question. The number of knives seized by An Garda Síochána has increased by approximately 66% since 2016. In 2017, 1,600 knives were seized. In 2018, 2,000 were seized. From the recent terrible events and the statistics with which we have been provided, it seems that knives are being carried more frequently. Unfortunately, it also appears to be the case that people are using knives, sometimes with fatal and tragic consequences.

As I have said, the purpose of this legislation is to amend section 9 of the 1990 Act. This section deals with the possession of knives. Section 9(7) deals with the penalties that can be imposed by a court on somebody who is convicted of possession of a knife. The simple purpose of this legislation is to increase the maximum penal sentence that can be imposed upon a person who is found guilty on indictment of possession of a knife from five years to ten years. At present the maximum penalty is five years. Fianna Fáil believes this should be increased to ten years.

We are also fully aware that legislation cannot be the only response to this issue. The legislation will seek to provide a greater deterrent to those who are contemplating carrying a knife but we need a much broader response, based in society, to the issue. Unfortunately, it appears to be the case that many young men think it is appropriate, acceptable and, sometimes, necessary to carry a knife when going out. The message needs to get across that this is not correct. It is dangerous for them and for others and it can destroy lives, whether the life of a person stabbed with a knife or the life of a person who perpetrates such an act. Many perpetrators do not go out with a knife on the day of the offence with the intention of causing harm. They do so because they unwisely believe that it is necessary for their own defence.

In the neighbouring jurisdiction, and in London in particular, there is a chronic problem with

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the use of knives and the damage such use causes to younger people in particular. We are fortunate to be nowhere near that level of difficulty in this jurisdiction but we have to be conscious that seizures of knives are increasing and that fatal attacks have been carried out with knives. For that reason, this Oireachtas should try to send out a message by increasing the potential maximum sentence for those convicted. It is for that reason that I seek to introduce this Bill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Animal Health Levies (Pigs) Regulations 2019: Referral to Joint Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Animal Health Levies (Pigs) Regulations 2019,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 10th June, 2019, be referred to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 9th July, 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.

Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 (Specified Bodies) Regulations 2019: Referral to Joint Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 (Specified Bodies) Regulations 2019,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 24th June, 2019, be referred to the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 10th July, 2019, shall send a message

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to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

European Union Battle Group: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves Ireland's accession to the Memorandum of Understanding concerning the principles for the establishment and operation of a battle group to be made available to the European Union in the second half of the year 2020.

In its decision of 6 February 2018, the Government agreed to provide a contingent of the Permanent Defence Force, PDF, to participate in the German-led EU battle group 2020, which will be on standby for six months from July 2020. The motion before the House is to approve the memorandum of understanding, MOU, agreed among the battle group participants arising from that decision.

The MOU relates solely to the administrative and technical arrangements for the operation of the battle group. Any decision on a deployment of the proposed Defence Forces contingent on a battle group operation will require a further decision of Dáil Éireann in accordance with the provisions of the Defence Acts.

Based on advice from the Office of the Attorney General, this MOU is not subject to approval by the Dáil. However, I previously gave a commitment, which I stand by, to bring the memorandum before the Dáil, with due respect for transparency and the role of the House.

In commending the motion, I would like to outline the background to Ireland's participation in this EU battle group which will be led by Germany. The EU aims to be able to respond rapidly to emerging crises as and when they occur. The purpose of the EU battle groups is to meet this objective and undertake operations as outlined in the Treaty on the European Union. These operations, known as the Petersberg Tasks, which were further expanded in the Lisbon treaty, include humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking and peacebuilding, joint disarmament operations, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation.

Ireland has worked to uphold the primacy of the role of the United Nations Security Council in the maintenance of international peace and security. This commitment has found expression in Ireland's long-standing tradition of participation in UN peacekeeping, peace enforcement and crisis management operations, and our efforts at EU level to enhance EU-UN co-operation. Participation in EU battle groups represents another means for Ireland to express its commitment to the UN and its principles. In this regard, Members will recall that successive Secretaries General of the UN have endorsed the EU battle group concept and have encouraged and advocated for Ireland's participation in battle groups that could act in support of UN operations.

The Defence Forces contribution to this battle group will involve a special operations task group comprising a special operations forces platoon, engineer special search capability, ex-

plosive ordnance disposal, EOD, capability and a security platoon together with staff posts at force headquarters. The total number of Defence Forces personnel involved in this battle group will be approximately 150. This level of resource commitment will only arise should the battle group be deployed to undertake an operation and should Ireland agree to participate. The Defence Forces commitment leading up to and during the standby period, where the battle group has not been mobilised to undertake an operation will amount to ten personnel deployed to the battle group force headquarters in Germany.

The German battle group MOU is an agreement between the participants comprising the battle group, namely Germany, Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Latvia and the Netherlands. This agreement sets out principles on the operation, deployment and management of the German battle group. The text of this agreement was laid in the Oireachtas Library in advance of our debate today. Its terms are similar to those that Ireland has previously acceded to for the 2016 German battle group.

Each individual battle group participant retains the right to deploy or not to deploy its forces, irrespective of an EU decision to launch a battle group operation. In Ireland's case, the triple lock requirement for the deployment of the Defence Forces contingent will remain unaffected by its accession to this memorandum of understanding.

Ireland's participation in battle groups supports the development of rapid deployment skills and capabilities within the Defence Forces. It enhances Ireland's credibility as a provider of professional and effective military forces for crisis management operations. It reinforces our standing and capacity to influence the ongoing development of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy in support of international peace and security and the UN.

Deputy Jack Chambers: My party is committed to, and embraces fully, the important role our Defence Forces play in peacekeeping operations. Our record in peacekeeping is among the best in the world and our men and women deserve tremendous praise for this. Thanks to their dedication, professionalism and compassion, Ireland's reputation committed to peace is world renowned, and long may this continue. Our involvement in EU battle groups is in keeping with this policy. These special operations comply fully with Ireland's position in pursuing an active neutrality. This means playing a positive role in peacekeeping and assisting developing nations.

Having examined the MOU, I believe these components are at the heart of this particular battle group. In particular, I recognise the focus on being able to provide a rapid response within five days of a humanitarian disaster to deliver aid, food, medicine and supports to help people in crisis and at the point of death. We cannot opt out and be a bystander in any such situation.

Sweden, Finland, Cyprus and Austria, all of which are neutral countries, participate in EU battle groups.

This is also not a new development. Ireland participated in these operations in 2008, 2011, 2012 and in 2016. At no time has there been a deployment of our troops in any of these exercises. They fall under the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU. The key is in the statement: Keeping citizens safe and secure. If we were to opt out of this and not participate, we would effectively be saying to other European nations, "You do it. You keep us safe."

It is also important to point out that participation in these kinds of missions is underscored in the White Paper on Defence. This explicitly states that any threat to the EU is now regarded as a threat to Ireland's interest and welfare. We are committed to maintaining peace across Europe

and participation in these battle groups is a way to ensure people are safe, peace is secure and stability is ensured.

Support for this MOU does not commit us to anything further. Some colleagues will mention an EU army and other matters. It does not advance that type of proposal.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Deputy should tell that to Chancellor Merkel.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is important to separate rhetoric on that concept from the constitutional and legal basis for the European treaties, which do not mention that.

Participation in a battle group deployment in any peacekeeping exercise would still come under the provisions of the triple lock protocol and, therefore, would require Government and Dáil approval, and must be supported by the UN. We will support the motion for these reasons.

Participation in this battle group includes a special operations task group. Does this involve the Army Ranger Wing in any way? The Minister of State secured agreement to deploy the ranger wing to Mali for peacekeeping operations. Will the resources and personnel required for domestic security be in any way undermined by our participation in this battle group?

Representatives of the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, appeared before the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence earlier to discuss peacekeeping missions and deployment of our personnel overseas. They are frustrated over the ongoing delay in publishing the Public Service Pay Commission report and to act on that matter. It is very much intertwined with what we are discussing. Our participation in EU battle groups and in international missions is underpinned by the personnel numbers in the Defence Forces. We are considerably below the White Paper target. Pay and allowances need to be restored in order that the respect and dignity of the Defence Forces can be maintained with their loyalty central to what we are doing.

This is another week of missed opportunity. When will the Minister of State publish the pay commission report? When will he act on it and treat the men and women of our Defence Forces with the respect and dignity they deserve? They are the people who are central to these operations and battle groups. Unfortunately, we have had an ongoing fudge from the Government. There were pay increase announcements for judges and others in the public service, but our Defence Forces have been ignored. I ask the Government to please publish that report and, if it is not happy with it, to say so. It is time to restore pay and allowances for our Defence Forces.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Deputy Chambers said that the key is in the name. I do not think he was referring specifically to the words “battle group”, but the key is in the name. We are talking about combat forces and disarmament. In Europe, there is talk of an EU military headquarters; the key is in the name there as well. I did not coin the term “EU army”; it was coined by the EU Commission and the EU leaders who have supported the further militarisation of Europe for the past number of decades. The Minister of State is uncomfortable with the title “battle group”, but it is a battle group.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is a bit embarrassing.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Sending 1,000 soldiers to take sides in a conflict anywhere in the world is a battle. Europe would have two such groups on standby, with 3,000 battle-ready soldiers to send into an area to disarm one side or the other. That is taking sides and we are a

neutral country. That is not our role, has never been our role and should never be in the future.

Rather than rehash what I have been saying about the EU's military apparatus since I was elected in 2002 and before, I will quote one of the Minister of State's colleagues, who said:

I ask that we revert back to what we were the best at, namely, peacekeeping. We do not want all of this. Leave it to others, if they want to become part and parcel of battle groups. Battle groups are not peacekeepers. The words "battle groups" mean that they are trained to go into battle. Do we want to be part of the battle groups? Since when do peacekeepers become involved in battle groups? With the greatest respect, we are losing our way here.

It was not me or another Sinn Féin Member who said that, but the former Minister of Defence, Deputy Seán Barrett. I once again ask the Minister of State to heed the warning of those inside and outside this House who respect our proud tradition of peacekeeping and to stop now, before it is too late, and protect our neutrality.

It is requested that 152 personnel be on standby to be deployed at a moment's notice to anywhere in the world. This is at a time we do not even have enough Defence Forces personnel to deploy the existing naval fleet, to fly the planes and man the equipment that would allow the Air Corps to be fully operational, or to allow the Army to fully carry out the duties that it was expected to in the past. At a time there is no reason to, we are being asked to sign up to sending further troops abroad, on this occasion on a mission that is contrary to the traditions of this House and of Ireland, as a country of neutrality that does not impose itself on other parts of the world.

We do not support the new imperialist attempt to regain past glories for the likes of France, Belgium, Britain or Spain, which have fought proxy wars in Africa and elsewhere. Only last week, the Minister of State made the decision to send Irish troops to Mali in September to support the continuing French adventure, to the detriment of those who live there.

I urge him to row back, once and for all, on the trend in the European Union towards further militarisation and the spending of money that could be otherwise spent on peacebuilding. We must ensure that our developed world contributes in a positive way to those who are the least well-off in the world, so that they benefit rather than see their resources plundered, as they have over the centuries.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: The term "battle group" sounds quite dramatic, proactive and aggressive. For anyone with a tradition rooted in neutrality and peacekeeping, the instinct is to baulk at the idea of supporting such a thing. EU battle groups exist in a state of preparedness to deploy within five to ten days of a Council decision to a range of possible missions, including crisis management and humanitarian assistance missions. As is referenced in documents supplied by the Minister, the term "battle group" is unfortunate, as it is a standard, technical military term referring to a battalion-sized force with support elements, including logistics and transport. This has been the Irish experience in battle groups since 2008.

It is important to reiterate that Ireland's participation in a battle group operation would be subject to the usual triple lock requirements of a UN mandate, Government approval and Dáil approval, in accordance with the Defence Acts. We in the Labour Party support Ireland's right to determine for itself on a case-by-case basis whether it will participate in any battle group operation. As ever, the Labour Party is committed to protecting Ireland from involvement in any wars or battles of aggression. We have a proud tradition as a neutral arbiter in world con-

flicts and are synonymous with peacekeeping and peacemaking. Last week, we objected to the motion on sending troops to Mali, as we felt that it breached our standards of what kind of operations we should and should not be involved in. This motion on EU battle groups does not breach that threshold.

We need to have honest debates in this Chamber about our Defence Forces. It is easy to vote against this on the basis of the name including the word “battle”. It is also easy to raise alarm bells about super armies and rampant militarisation, but we should vote on the detail of the motion and how it would play out practically in the real world. Involvement in these battle groups provides the members of our Defence Forces with modern training and interesting exercises, and builds up positive relationships with our European partner states. Some in this House might be happy to see our Defence Forces wallowing in domestic barracks with very little to do. However, I have met members of our Defence Forces and know that they want to be active, to travel and to learn. I want that for them as well. They want to mix with other forces and exchange expertise and experiences. Ultimately, our members can learn from these experiences and that assists in the practical application of peacekeeping, which is where Ireland’s Defence Forces are in active operation.

We need to be honest and true to Defence Forces personnel and to our principles as a neutral state. We have been in battle groups previously. In 2008, 2011 and 2015, we were members of Nordic-led battle groups, and in 2016, a member of an EU battle group. We have not compromised our values, nor have we supported sending our troops into any battle of aggression. That will not change. Arguments about European super armies are a red herring when it comes to battle groups. There is no appetite in the Labour Party, this House or the country for us to be in any sort of super army. The triple lock will remain in place and we are satisfied with those safeguards.

It is worth acknowledging that the Minister did not have to bring the motion to the House for agreement. He has done so to keep the House up to date and included in the plans and operations for our Defence Forces.

If the House has not gathered it already, Labour will support the motion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are times when debate in this House is surreal, and this is one of them. Apparently, we are just dreaming up the idea that there are moves in the EU to create a European army. This is a German-led EU battle group so what did Chancellor Angela Merkel say, as the German Head of State? She said, in front of the European Parliament at the beginning of this year: “We have to look at the vision of one day creating a real, true, European army.” A couple of days before that, she signed an accord with Emmanuel Macron, also a supporter of an EU army, which said they wanted to create a common military culture as a step towards the creation of a European army. That is what the battle groups are about.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Not in this treaty.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Battle groups are about creating a common military culture as a step towards the creation of a European army. Various governments, including ours, seem to be willing to send troops into deadly and dangerous missions because they have just sent troops to Mali. Some of those supporting this battle group opposed that deployment to Mali - not Fianna Fáil, of course - but we are clearly being pushed down a slippery slope by the Government towards involvement in an EU army.

Why does the Government not pay our soldiers instead? Why will it not show us what is in the Public Service Pay Commission report instead of wasting money on this stuff and putting our troops in danger or involvement in a European military project? Why not pay the soldiers? Why not show us what is in the report? Why not pay the rangers who have just been sent to Mali the arbitration award that was granted in 2010, which the Government is refusing to pay? The Government does not respect, and will not pay, our soldiers, many of whom live in poverty, but the Government is quite happy to breach Ireland's neutrality, get them involved in an EU army and send them into dangerous missions in which we should not be involved such as those in Mali.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Every time we discuss battle groups or their equivalents in this House, the establishment parties wince in embarrassment at the name "battle groups" and try to explain away and justify the fact that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party will vote in favour of Irish participation in a German-led battle group by saying there is nothing to see here because it is all humanitarian.

What war has ever been fought with an open explanation that it is a war for oil or an imperialist war for plunder? Wars are always fought on the basis of false premises. Humanitarian reasons have, since the beginning of conflict, been a tried and trusted reason that various imperialist powers have reached for. A justification for First World War was the protection of Belgian refugees. The 19th century French intervention in Syria was justified as being for humanitarian reasons. The US invasion of Haiti in 1915 was for humanitarian reasons. It stretches to the present day, through the first Gulf War in the 1990s and the later Gulf War based on the dodgy dossiers. There were also the NATO interventions in Yugoslavia and Kosovo and, in 2011, the NATO-led attacks in Libya. Imperialist interventions are often justified as being on the basis of humanitarian need so this is no exception.

Is it true, as Deputy Wallace has said in the past, that Ireland's participation in battle groups has resulted in our troops being trained in the use of armoured personnel carriers armed with 30 mm cannons, grenade launchers and other such advanced weaponry? What on earth does that have to do with disaster relief and rescue missions?

Peace enforcement is also listed in the Petersberg Tasks to which the Minister of State referred. "Enforcement" is to make something happen or force somebody to do something. In conflicts, peace enforcement means using military force, or the threat of same, to impose one's will.

The Government hides behind the idea that unanimity is needed at European Council level so Ireland will not be forced into anything. As Deputy Boyd Barrett did, I will quote the words of Angela Merkel. Not only did she come out openly in favour of a European army, she also said that, in the long run, Europe must become more capable to act:

We have to reconsider our ways of deciding and to renounce the principle of unanimity where the European treaties allow and wherever this is necessary. I proposed a European security council in which important decisions can be prepared faster.

This is a German-led battle group.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I am sharing time with Deputy Wallace, soon to be a Member of the European Parliament. I fully support a very strong Army, Navy and Air Force defending our country and taking part in UN operations, which Óglaigh na hÉireann has done with

great distinction over the past number of decades. Like colleagues, I was worried when I read about the Franco-German treaty, which seems to be built on mutual defence and where even the term a “real European army” was used. It was not only President Trump who used that term. All of the other European countries seem to be expected to operate under the mutual defence clause.

There is also the situation in NATO. The Minister of State will know about Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s new rapid response formula and which will mean 30 combat ships, 30 land battalions, and 30 air squadrons being available within 30 days. There are NATO battle groups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. How do we disentangle this EU approach from NATO’s?

How would this interact with the European intervention initiative, EI2, of ten countries headed by France and Germany, which seems to be a rapid reaction force running what they call the EU navy? Will this not just be a subset of that? As Deputy Brendan Ryan said, battle groups have existed since 2007 but there are grave concerns that we could be involved in actions up to 6,000 km from home in north Africa, the Middle East and so on. That would not be in the interests of our country and not remotely befitting our long tradition of neutrality. We should look to the broader world and strengthen the UN. The organisation is exasperatingly weak when it comes to international crises.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister of State knows I do not agree with this at all. The Europeans knew what they were talking about when they called these “battle groups”. The word “peace” is nowhere there.

I was not here for the debate on Mali last week but I find it reprehensible that we have any involvement there. All we are doing there is backing up western financial imperialism in Africa. The French are up to their nuts in the area and there is no gain for the people of the region. It is all about financial gain for the French. The Americans and others are there as well, as are the Chinese and Russians. I do not agree with any of them exploiting that region for financial gain and we are facilitating it by sending troops there. There is no fairness or logic to doing that.

Deputy Brendan Ryan said that we are not sending people into battles of aggression. I am sorry, and it is nothing personal, but I strongly disagree. I do not take any comfort from the triple lock given that the Government of the day will decide if it feels like going further and more aggressively. We have seen what the Government of the day has been doing since 2001 in Shannon. Sadly, Fine Gael objected to it before going into government but went along with it in government. I strongly disagree with the fact that Shannon is being used by the US military to cause terrible destruction worldwide.

More than 60 million people are now displaced because of war. The militarisation of the planet has gone off the Richter scale and we are now looking at a gradual militarisation of Europe. It is very dangerous. Money is now being taken from environmental projects in Europe to go towards military subsidy. That is only subsidising the arms industry. The lobbyists from that industry are wearing out the carpets in Europe to get what they want.

Deputy Jack Chambers named a number of so-called neutral countries that have also signed up to these battle groups. Unfortunately, the number of countries in Europe that are prepared to stand up to the might of the military complex is zero. We will take no credit from being in the same boat as them.

This is the wrong path and that is an enormous problem. Everybody seems to be interested in the environment all of a sudden, but there is no entity on the planet causing more problems for the environment than the United States military and its 4,800 bases worldwide. There is no logic to us having anything to do with military expansion in Europe. It is a huge mistake and not what the people want.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish Deputies Wallace and Clare Daly and the others elected to the European Parliament the very best. I was present for Deputy Wallace's maiden speech and also present to listen to his leaving speech. I hope they will not be gone for too long, but I wish them well and know that they will be good representatives in the European Parliament. We will miss Deputies Wallace and Clare Daly from the Independent benches.

I too have major concerns about the ongoing situation with the Army. We know that the Defence Forces are being mistreated because the report of the Low Pay Commission has not been published. We meet members of the Defence Forces every week in our clinics and although they cannot go on strike, they are being treated appallingly. I am worried as week after week we are becoming involved in different issues across Europe and with the United Nations. I am proud of our record in United Nations missions in conflicts around the world through the decades. There are many people from Clonmel in the different representative organisations who have been to the Congo and elsewhere where it was very dangerous.

The wording of the motion is blatant and there is reference to a "battle group". Surely they could have called it some other kind of humanitarian mission and found a better name for it. We have heard what Mrs. Merkel has said and should not sign up. The Minister of State has listed the countries which are joining and implied that we should follow suit. We have been punished enough for being the good boy in Europe and cheerleading. The members of the battle group are Germany, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Latvia and the Netherlands. We do not have to be the best boy in the class in Europe as we were the best boy when money was shovelled in here to completely mess up the economy before we were fleeced in the so-called bailout, against which I voted and bitterly opposed. This is a most serious matter.

We must support our troops on UN missions but not in battle groups or similar positions. We had a debate last week about sending them to Mali and such places which are very dangerous. That was without having a proper debate or understanding of what went on in these countries. Many other speakers have said that we do not have personnel to equip Naval Service ships or fly the limited aircraft we have available. Soldiers are voting with their feet to leave because they are living in poverty. We want to send them to join what is blatantly called a battle group. If this is a neutral country, how can we add support to a battle group? It is what it says on the tin. It is not a peacekeeping mission. If it was, why would they call it a battle group?

I do not know what the Minister of State expects us to do. There is already a coalition on many issues between Fianna Fáil and the Government and the Labour Party is also supporting the Government on this one. I certainly will not be supporting it as I have the greatest of respect for our soldiers and what they have done. We decided to send the Army Rangers off last week. The Government should look after them and their families at home. They should be treated with respect by the Minister of State with responsibility for defence, rather than being placed in more perilous positions. Sometimes it is done with subterfuge and we do not know where troops are going, but the motion mentions "battle group". I will not support the motion and many of my colleagues in the Rural Independents Group will not support it either.

The Minister of State mentioned the triple lock, which is meant to be great. It is meant to be like having braces and a belt or two braces and two belts, but it will depend on the Government of the day and the majority it enjoys. A Government can push a triple lock mechanism any way it likes and achieve the outcome it desires, but we need to tread cautiously and consider things carefully when we hear the comments we heard from Mrs. Angela Merkel whose country will lead the battle group. We must make haste slowly and examine things carefully.

Deputy Wallace mentioned the expanding use of Shannon Airport, with troops heading to different war zones around the world. We are in a precarious enough time and should not be putting our soldiers in peril. It is appalling that in the past 18 months two lots of peacekeepers who were ready to return home were left stranded, high and dry. There were families waiting for them to attend weddings, First Holy Communion and other events. They were stranded because of technical issues. The Government should respect them by keeping them at home where they are safe. They should go on United Nations missions but not with this kind of battle group.

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I thank all Deputies across the House for their contributions. Our previous experiences in participating in EU battle groups where countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden have led nations have all been very positive and valuable to members of Óglaigh na hÉireann, the Defence Forces. I again state how important our participation is in developing improved interoperability between the Defence Forces and the forces of other EU member states. This is vital for Ireland when deployed with other countries in peacekeeping operations.

As I have stated before, I have concerns about use of the name “battle group” as it sends the wrong message, but people should look beyond the name to the many positives in Ireland’s participation in this mission. I emphasise that battle groups, in common with all other capabilities under the Common Security and Defence Policy, have been developed to enable the European Union to carry out a range of crisis management tasks as outlined in the Lisbon treaty. They include humanitarian rescue tasks. In that context, it is possible that battle group formations could be called on to assist in large-scale complex emergencies where we would want to be useful and effective partners. I have no doubt that if a humanitarian issue arose, many Deputies who will vote against the motion today would want us to assist.

Participation in the battle group will have no effect on our traditional policy of military neutrality. A commitment to a battle group does not involve any commitment to common or mutual defence. Should a battle group be deployed, each battle group participant will retain the right to deploy or not to deploy its forces, irrespective of an EU decision to launch a battle group operation. The deployment of the Defence Forces contingent as part of a battle group in peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations will continue to require an EU mandate, Government and Dáil approval, in accordance with the triple lock provisions of the Defence Acts. This fact remains unaffected by Ireland being a signatory of the memorandum of understanding.

A number of Deputies spoke about an EU army. The formation of a battle group is not a dry run for a European army as certain Deputies claim each time I bring any motion such as this before the House. Some Members would love it if members of the Defence Forces rode to barracks in the morning and stayed there all day, except to shovel snow, help when there is flooding or cut trees, etc. They do not want the Defence Forces to participate in anything.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Pay them properly.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There is no housing in barracks any more.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: There are many-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They should be paid properly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Deputy is correct. They should be paid properly.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They should be paid. The barracks in Clonmel was closed.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Many people in County Tipperary will participate in this battle group and be disgusted if the Deputy votes against the motion.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are disgusted with the Government because it will not pay them properly. They can talk to me any time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They have to be paid.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Use them and abuse them. That is the Minister of State's record.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Irish protocols of the Lisbon treaty specifically state that the Lisbon treaty does not provide for the creation of a European army.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Sure that is grand.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The European treaties require that the EU respects-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Let us call it something else then.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: -----the specific and different policies of member states in the area of security and defence. Battle groups, as part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, offer a stance in terms of military capability and enable the EU to react rapidly and decisively in a crisis situation.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about the Lisbon treaty and almost dismissed it. It is a very important document because if there is ever talk of an EU army, the Deputy will have a say in that
2 o'clock as an Irish citizen. I will not decide that. Neither the Government nor this House will decide that. The citizens of this country will decide that. Deputy Boyd Barrett often dismisses that but it is contained in the protocols of the Lisbon treaty, which are unique and important in terms of this country.

I want to address a final issue very briefly. I was asked about the Army Ranger Wing and if we had the capability to be able to respond to-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: To pay them the arbitration award you owe them.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Defence Forces have confirmed-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Does the Government have the capacity to pay them?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: -----that the Ordnance Corps and the Army Ranger Wing are in a position to support fully and meet the requirements of the EU battle group 2020 without compromising Ireland's security requirements or explosive ordnance disposal, EOD, outputs.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What else can they say?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I thank the Members who spoke in favour of the motion. I am disappointed that some Members will vote against it.

In conclusion, I will miss my constituency colleague, Deputy Wallace, when he is gone to Europe. I will miss him in Wexford and I wish him and Deputy Clare Daly the very best of luck.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He will be back.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: They may be back here in this House again but as a constituency colleague, I genuinely wish Deputy Wallace well in the next five years as a Member of the European Parliament. I have no doubt we will continue to hear his views on military operations and other issues.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister of State will be delighted to hear I am on the security and defence committee.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Nil, 29; Staon, 0.</i>		
Tá	Nil	Staon
Aylward, Bobby.	Barry, Mick.	
Bailey, Maria.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Barrett, Seán.	Brady, John.	
Brassil, John.	Broughan, Thomas P.	
Breathnach, Declan.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Collins, Joan.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Bruton, Richard.	Connolly, Catherine.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Burton, Joan.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Calleary, Dara.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Canney, Seán.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cannon, Ciarán.	Kenny, Gino.	
Carey, Joe.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Casey, Pat.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Cassells, Shane.	Munster, Imelda.	
Chambers, Jack.	Murphy, Catherine.	
Collins, Niall.	Murphy, Paul.	
Coveney, Simon.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Cowen, Barry.	O'Sullivan, Maureen.	
Creed, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Curran, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
D'Arcy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	

Daly, Jim.	Shortall, Róisín.
Deasy, John.	Stanley, Brian.
Deering, Pat.	Tóibín, Peadar.
Doherty, Regina.	Wallace, Mick.
Donnelly, Stephen.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	
Doyle, Andrew.	
Durkan, Bernard J.	
English, Damien.	
Farrell, Alan.	
Fitzgerald, Frances.	
Fitzpatrick, Peter.	
Fleming, Sean.	
Griffin, Brendan.	
Halligan, John.	
Harty, Michael.	
Haughey, Seán.	
Heydon, Martin.	
Howlin, Brendan.	
Humphreys, Heather.	
Kehoe, Paul.	
Kelleher, Billy.	
Kelly, Alan.	
Kyne, Seán.	
Lahart, John.	
Lawless, James.	
Lowry, Michael.	
MacSharry, Marc.	
Madigan, Joseph.	
McEntee, Helen.	
McGrath, Finian.	
McGrath, Michael.	
McLoughlin, Tony.	
Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Murphy, Dara.	
Murphy, Eoghan.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	
Neville, Tom.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	
O'Connell, Kate.	
O'Dea, Willie.	

<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Mick Wallace.

Question declared carried.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am breaking with precedent and I am giving each of the Deputies departing for the European Parliament a minute to say goodbye.

Deputy Michael Creed: Can the Leas-Cheann Comhairle guarantee it will only be a minute?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Some of them may like to take the opportunity to make up for any hurt they have caused. Three of our departing Members are here. I call the former Tánaiste, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I was not expecting this but I thank him for giving me the opportunity to say a few words on this very special day for me, which is the last day of my service in the Houses of the Oireachtas. I remember very clearly the first day I walked into the Dáil and the sense I had of what a fantastic privilege it was to be elected by the public to serve. Almost everyone here will have had that same feeling. It is a huge honour to have been elected by the public to serve in these Houses. I have been very lucky to have had the opportunity to serve as a Deputy, a Senator and as a Minister and to bring forward very important legislation and see it passed in the Houses, and, of course, to serve as Tánaiste.

I want to take this opportunity to say this and to thank my constituents in two constituencies in Dublin, namely, Dublin South-East, which is now Dublin Bay South, and Dublin Mid-West. I thank people from all sides of the House for the camaraderie I have experienced here and for the friendship. I have spent an extremely challenging, interesting and worthwhile time here and I have really enjoyed it. I also thank all of my colleagues in Fine Gael and the staff of these Houses, who give us such a fantastic service and I know everybody will agree with me on that.

When one is the point I am at, one becomes very conscious not just of one's own work because we do not do these things on our own and we do not serve here on our own. We have wonderful teams of people and parties behind us and we have constituents, families and friends. I say a very big thank you to everybody, including my family who have always supported me through the ups and downs of political life and we all know how challenging it can be. As I said, it is so worthwhile. I really look forward to becoming a Member of the European Parliament representing this great city and county of Dublin. I say a very big thank you to everyone. I will be back and forth. I am not disappearing. I will be back here linking and working with colleagues in the years ahead. I thank everyone. It has been a huge privilege. Particularly to my constituents, I say a very big thank you for the honour of having the opportunity to serve in the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It is always nice to be able to pay tribute to yourself in the House and to listen to others paying tribute to you when you sit at home watching it on the television. In one sense, it is nice to leave the Houses of the Oireachtas on your own terms. It is something that is very unusual in this very precarious occupation.

First and foremost, it is a huge honour to have served in the Houses of the Oireachtas since 1993. I came in here when I was 24 years of age and it has been a hugely enjoyable journey filled with honour and privilege on many occasions. I served under numerous taoisigh from various parties. I worked in a collegial manner with most people in the House. I would like to think I have made friends along the way and learned an awful lot. From this perspective, I thank everybody in the Dáil, the previous incumbents of previous Dáileanna and Seanaid I have served in. I also thank each and every one of the previous Leas-Chinn Comhairle and Cinn Comhairle for their courtesy, co-operation and support.

On the issue of family, friends and supporters, a huge team of people give of their time and service in a voluntary capacity to put every one of us in here and very often this is forgotten. I thank each and every one of them. The people of Cork North-Central in particular have been very supportive of me over many years. It has been a privilege and an honour to represent them and I hope I never took that privilege or honour for granted. I thank each and every Member, my wife, Liza, and my family. I look forward to playing a representative role with dignity in the European Parliament on behalf of the people of Ireland South.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I have sorted out a few things with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle about the times he pulled on me when he should not have done so and tried to shut me up before my time. I was not in here quite as long as Billy and thanks be to God for that. I can live with that. I start by thanking the people of Wexford for electing me in 2011 and 2016. In 2019, it was pretty emotional to get so much support in Wexford, Wicklow, Carlow, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly, Waterford, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare and Tipperary. It was probably more support than I deserved. If I never do anything else I will always appreciate it.

I have had an amazing time in here. It has been very frustrating and fulfilling in equal mea-

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sure. It has been an incredible experience. I thank all of the staff and Members. I have probably been pretty merciless with many Ministers but I like to think that my criticism was never personal and I always respected the person I was taking lumps off. A few of them pushed me to the bone all right and I was threatening to go down those steps and across the floor after a couple of fellows but I stayed on this side.

I do not know what it will be like in Europe. From the couple of weeks I have been over there trying to organise things, it will be very challenging and difficult to make a difference but I was never afraid of hard work and I am going to work incredibly hard to try to make that difference and to rescue Europe from the hands of large corporations and the neoliberal philosophy. I see this as something the people who elected me want me to do.

There are two people I will mention and I am probably abusing my position. Catriona Lawlor and Conor Sugrue both work for the HSE. I have been pretty critical of the HSE in my time in here but both of them have done some very good work for someone very close to me. Thank you.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There will be no further opportunity to speak on this but I remind the departing Deputies that all of the Leaders or their representatives spoke on questions on promised legislation today and wished them all well. I believe I speak for everyone when I wish Deputy Clare Daly well. I know all four departing Deputies will be missed. They made a major contribution to political life in Ireland and they will make a major contribution to political life in Europe. As an Irish mother would always say, the door will always be open. It will be a hard door to open. The Tánaiste and I are two of those who had a dual mandate and both doors were open to us but that is not the way it is now. Some of us came back and we are very happy. As I said yesterday, I have no doubt that, despite carrying different flags, from the left and the right, the four departing Deputies will all represent Ireland and wear the Irish jersey while in Brussels. We are confident that they will do so. Guím gach rath ar na Teachtaí. Áth mórt orthu agus go n-éirí go geal leo.

Home Help: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Louise O'Reilly on Tuesday, 25 June 2019:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

- the invaluable work carried out by home help workers;
- the contribution made by homecare in assisting with tackling delayed discharges from hospitals;
- that care delivered in the home is the preferred form of care for most people and their families;
- the cost-effective nature of home support by comparison to hospital care and nursing home care;

- average weekly cost for home support services is approximately €165;
- weekly cost of a hospital bed is approximately €5,992; and
- weekly cost of a nursing home bed is approximately €1,048;
- that the best value for money is provided by directly employed and not-for-profit homecare workers;
- that travelling between clients is work and should be remunerated as such; and
- that any form of co-payment for basic homecare is an additional burden which families should not have to bear in any form;

notes that:

- there are over 6,000 people on waiting lists for home help;
- the number of people over the age of 65 is increasing by over 20,000 persons a year;
- the proportion of people over the age of 85 is projected to double in the next 20 years;
- by 2030 the over 65 cohort will increase by 59 per cent, and the over 85 group by over 95 per cent;
- the Economic and Social Research Institute's report on Projections of Demand for Healthcare in Ireland, 2015-2030: First Report from the Hippocrates Model noted that demand for homecare packages is projected to increase by between 44-66 per cent by 2030, while the demand for home help hours is projected to increase by between 38-54 per cent in the same period;
- in spite of increases in home support, resources have not kept pace with demand for services;
- the numbers receiving home supports in the community does not provide an accurate reflection of current and future need, with some older people opting not to apply as they know that services are insufficient to meet their need, as noted by Age Action;
- unmet need is associated with a variety of negative consequences that can affect the health and well-being of older people;
- without access to homecare supports many older people have to pay for private care, rely on loved ones to provide unpaid care, or are forced to move to a residential care setting which is often not their first choice thus undermining their human right to live with dignity and independence; and
- research conducted by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service published in 2018, showed that while the level of funding allocated to home supports was approximately €450 million, the allocation to the Nursing Home Support Scheme, the 'Fair Deal' scheme, was significantly higher at €962 million; and calls for:
 - immediate steps to ensure the viability and sustainability of homecare provision;
 - no reduction in the provision of home help hours and an end to the effective freeze on

the allocation/recycling of hours;

- immediate investment in a recruitment campaign for directly employed home helps;
- an increase in the number of home help hours provided by directly employed homecare workers;
- an investigation into the value for money provided by private homecare providers;
- a Government commitment that any statutory entitlement to homecare will not place an additional burden in the form of co-payment for those who need the service;
- the immediate elimination of any call-out which is below 30 minutes;
- the development of a system of time management and tracking to ensure that payments for travel time are calculated fairly and transparently and related to actual time travelled; and
- the establishment of a working group or task force to examine the job of home help workers to look at:
 - how the job can be made more attractive to ensure the supply of a well trained workforce;
 - how the job can keep pace with the changing demographics;
 - making the job sustainable as a full-time option;
 - guaranteeing fair terms of employment and rates of pay across the sector;
 - a sectoral employment order; and
 - ensuring services are deployed to meet the need of older persons.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“recognises:

- the invaluable work carried out by homecare support assistants;
- that the Home Support Service is a core service for older people and is highly valued by service users, their families and by the Health Service Executive (HSE), providing supports which assist older people to live independently in their own homes for longer and enabling large numbers of people to return home following acute hospital admission, who otherwise would remain in hospital or would be admitted to long stay residential care;
- that the core stated objective of this Government is to promote care in the community so that older people can continue to live with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes and communities for as long as possible;
- that the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report supports a significant shift in our model of care to one that is focussed on prevention and early inter-

vention, which will provide the majority of care in the community, and the Government's Sláintecare Implementation Strategy sets out an ambitious programme of reform to deliver this vision;

- that over the past number of years, improving access to home support has been a priority for the Government, as reflected in the increases in the home support budget which has grown from a base of €306 million in 2015 to about €446 million in 2019, representing about a 45 per cent increase in the annual budget for this service;

- that the 2019 HSE National Service Plan provides for 17.9 million home support hours to be delivered to over 53,000 people at any time, and the Intensive Home Care Packages to be delivered to approximately 235 people at any time, delivering a further approximately 360,000 hours; and

- that despite this significant level of provision, demand for home support continues to grow;

notes:

- that the HSE reviews people on the waiting list, as funding becomes available, to ensure that individual cases continue to be dealt with on a priority basis within the available resources and as determined by the local front line staff who know and understand the clients' needs, and who undertake regular reviews of those care needs to ensure that the services being provided remain appropriate;

- that the allocation of funding for home supports, though significant, is finite and services must be delivered within the funding available and in line with the HSE's budget, delivery plan and the National Service Plan;

- that the HSE has confirmed that there are no cuts to the Home Support Service and that the HSE will meet its service plans target to deliver 18.2 million hours this year;

- that all Community Health Organisations are working to ensure the best use of available funding to support the greatest number of people requiring homecare services;

- that following a Labour Court recommendation in 2014, the HSE implemented new contracts for its directly employed homecare staff, providing each worker with a guaranteed minimum number of hours per week and a guaranteed income each week with actual work assignments, managed in a reasonable way to meet the needs of clients over the course of 12 months, and that this new contract was regarded by staff, unions and management as a positive development for HSE employed staff;

- the future demographic projections and their implications for future service provision;

- that while the existing homecare service is delivering crucial support to many people across the country, it needs to be improved to better meet the changing needs of our citizens;

- that the Programme for a Partnership Government signals the Government's intention to improve homecare services and to introduce a uniform homecare service; and

- that the Minister for Health has committed to establishing a new stand-alone statutory scheme and system of regulation for homecare services; and

confirms that:

- there are no cuts to the Home Support Service, the HSE will meet the service levels set out in its 2019 National Service Plan this year, the allocation of new hours will continue to be based on clients' needs and the resources available, and hours that become available will continue to be reallocated within the increased budget provided in 2019;
- a review of existing home support services will be commissioned that will, amongst other things, examine:
 - the policies and procedures currently in operation at national, regional and local levels pertaining to the administration of services;
 - the quantum of services provided by the HSE (through direct service provision), voluntary providers and private providers, and the coordination of these services within this 'mixed economy of welfare' at national, regional and local levels;
 - the ratio of care workers to service users at national, regional and local levels, and whether the supply of appropriate skilled staff is adequate to meet current and projected demand for home support; and
 - the current funding of the Home Support Service, including analysis of the distribution of the budget for home support services at regional and local levels, the calculation of the unit cost of home support services, the proportion of the funding allocated to direct service provision by the HSE, the methodology for the allocation of funding to service providers through the HSE's tendering processes, and how this relates to the funding of direct service provision by the HSE; and
- a new statutory scheme and new system of regulation for home support, informed by international and national evidence and stakeholders' engagement, will be developed that will:
 - improve access to home support services that people need in an equitable, affordable and sustainable way, ensuring that the system operates in a consistent and fair manner across the country; and
 - ensure that the public can be confident that the services provided are of a high standard and will bring Ireland in line with best international practice

-(Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion re home help. On Tuesday, 25 June, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to," a division was claimed. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must take place now.

Amendment again put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 47; Nil, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Nil</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	

<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>

<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>
	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>
	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>
	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>
	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>
	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>
	<i>Quintivan, Maurice.</i>
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Mary Butler: I move amendment No. 2:

(a) To insert the following after “should be remunerated as such;”:

“— the recent and welcome agreement on travel expenses for homecare support workers;

— that the introduction of new five-over-seven-day rosters is not supported by adequate information technology (IT) systems;”;

(b) To insert the following after “sustainability of homecare provision;”:

“— home support to be adaptable and responsive especially for conditions such as dementia;

— individual need to be the decisive determinant of care, not geography or funding;

— the accelerated implementation nationwide of the Single Assessment Tool;

— investment in IT systems to support the implementation of five-over-seven-day rosters;

— a guarantee that the recent agreement on travel payments for homecare support workers will not impact on the delivery of the additional 800,000 home support hours pledged in the 2019 HSE National Service Plan;”; and

(c) To insert the word “basic” after “statutory entitlement to”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Question put: “That the motion be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 68; Nil, 46; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Nil</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>	
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Madigan, Joseph.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	

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<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
<i>Quintilivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin.

Question declared carried.

Carers: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Willie Penrose on Wednesday, 26 June 2019:

That Dáil Éireann:

recalls that:

— Ireland has ratified both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC);

— these UN Conventions place a duty on Ireland to ensure that children and adults with mental or physical disabilities should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate active participation in the community, including through the provision of facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health; and

— these UN Conventions also place a duty on Ireland to ensure assistance to the parents and caregivers for children and adults with disabilities, including assistance with disability-related expenses, including adequate training, counselling, financial assistance and respite care;

recognises that:

— a Central Statistics Office study found that 10 per cent of the population are providing care to someone with a chronic condition or an infirmity due to old age, for an average of nearly 45 hours per week;

— an estimated 355,000 people in Ireland are carers, many of them caring for family members on an unpaid basis;

— over 13,000 carers are under the age of 25, including children involved in caregiving; and

— many people prefer to remain in their homes rather than move to a healthcare setting and this adds to their wellbeing;

acknowledges that:

— the work of carers is of inestimable value to Irish society;

— a financial estimate of the annual work of carers is €10 billion, which would otherwise be a cost to the public finances to provide a range of health and social care services;

— one in five carers receives Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit, and 119,975 carers received the Carer's Support Grant in 2018; and

— an estimated 35,000 or more full-time carers do not qualify for Carer's Allowance due to the means test, the income disregard for which has not increased since 2008;

further recognises that:

- caring for a loved one has a knock-on effect not only on people's lives but also has consequences for their families and their other relationships;
- a great many carers are under stress, with significant increases in the numbers reporting poor health, including conditions such as depression and anxiety; and
- measures taken during the period of Ireland's Economic Adjustment Programme now need to be re-examined to ensure that carers receive an appropriate level of support from the State, including additional support to cover the rising cost of living in recent years; and

calls on the Government to:

- develop a new National Carers Strategy, taking into account the implications of Ireland's recent ratification of the UNCRPD, and with regard to the specific needs of minority populations;
- conduct a study of the income and living costs of carers, with a view to ensuring that income supports are sufficient to ensure all carers can meet the extra costs associated with caring and can attain a decent minimum standard of living for themselves;
- substantially reform the means test for Carer's Allowance, with the long-term aim of its abolition, and as an interim measure in Budget 2020 to substantially increase the income disregard, extend the range of allowable deductions and increase the capital disregard in the means test;
- make the Carer's Allowance exempt from income tax in line with other means tested welfare allowances;
- increase the hours a recipient of Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit can work or study from 15 to 18.5 hours per week;
- provide adequate funding to address waiting lists for homecare and home supports;
- provide community and voluntary organisations with increased funding so that people in every location have access to adequate services;
- replace the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant;
- increase funding to the Housing Adaptation Grant; and
- extend the GP visit card to carers in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

"acknowledges that:

- Ireland has a duty to protect persons with disabilities and their caregivers, in

line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and provide necessary support for the child and for those who care for the child, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC);

— the vision of the Carers' Strategy is to recognise and respect carers as key care partners, who are supported to maintain their own health and wellbeing and to care with confidence and empowered to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life;

— the Health Service Executive (HSE) Disability Services budget for 2019 is €1.9 billion, providing 8,568 residential places, 22,272 day places, 182,506 respite overnights, 32,662 day respite sessions, 1.63 million personal assistant hours for 2,535 people, and 3.08 million home support hours for 8,094 people; and

— an additional €10 million was provided to the disability sector in 2018, to enhance respite care and alternative respite services including extended day services, summer camps and Saturday clubs;

notes that there are a number of sources of data on family carers in Ireland, and that Census 2016 found that:

— 195,263 or 4.1 per cent of respondents indicated that they provided regular unpaid personal help for a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability, including problems due to old age;

— the total number of family carers increased by 4.4 per cent between 2011 and 2016 and the total number of family carers aged 45 or older increased by 11.3 per cent; and

— there were 13,000 family carers under the age of 25 in 2016, a decrease of over 1,000 compared to 2011;

recognises that:

— the health system relies heavily on family and other unpaid carers, who make a profound difference to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of those that they care for;

— two in five family carers receive Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit;

— the rate of Carer's Allowance has increased every year since 2017;

— since 2016, Carer's Allowance continues to be paid for 12 weeks after the death of the person being cared for, an increase of six weeks, and since 2017, this extension was also granted in cases where the cared for person permanently moved into residential care or a nursing home;

— the means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social protection system, in that €332.50 of gross weekly income is disregarded in the calculation of means for a single person and the equivalent for someone who is married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting is €665 of combined gross weekly income;

- the work of family carers is indispensable in ensuring that people requiring care across the country can receive such care in their own homes and communities, while maintaining their independence and sense of self-worth;
- providing care to loved ones can have a significant impact on the health, physical and mental wellbeing, finances and familial and societal relationships of family carers;
- a range of social services and supports are necessary to enable family carers to provide care to the best of their ability;
- the Government is committed to the full implementation of the National Carers' Strategy, 2012, a whole-of-Government response to the challenges faced by family carers through the development of 42 actions under four national goals;
- five progress reports published by the Department of Health, along with a series of independently conducted assessments of progress on the implementation of the strategy from the perspective of family carers, have found that a majority of actions have progressed in a way that has led to a positive impact on the lives of family carers although more work remains to be done;
- the provision of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Carer's Support Grant and Domiciliary Care Allowance, at a cost of almost €1.2 billion in 2019, offers an important income support to family carers;
- since 1st June, 2017, all children in receipt of a Domiciliary Care Allowance are eligible for a medical card without a means test;

— increasing the income disregard for Carer's Allowance from €332.50 to €450 for a single person and €665 to €900 for a couple would cost the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection approximately €73 million, with income tax and Working Family Payment offsets, the net expenditure would be €55 million; and

— it is a condition of receipt of Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit that the carer must be providing full-time care and attention, and the current limit of 15 hours of work or study per week is considered to represent a reasonable balance between meeting the care recipient's requirement for full-time care and the carer's need to maintain contact with the workforce;

further recognises that:

— over the past four years there has been a considerable increase of nearly €140 million in the home supports budget which has grown from €306 million in 2015 to almost €446 million in 2019, with demand continuing to grow, and a combined 18.2 million hours of general and intensive home support for older people will be provided this year;

— the HSE reviews people on the waiting list as funding becomes available to ensure that individual cases continue to be dealt with on a priority basis within the available resources and as determined by the local frontline staff who know and understand the clients' needs, and who undertake regular reviews of those care needs to ensure that the services being provided remain appropriate;

— the HSE provides over €21.6 million in annual funding through service level arrangements with community and voluntary organisations who provide services to support family carers including in home respite services, peer-to-peer support and training courses;

— the Minister for Health and the Minister of State for People with Disabilities intend to revert to Government in due course with revised proposals to reflect discussions at Cabinet and further discussions between the Ministers on the best way to progress the Transport Scheme, and it is notable that with regard to transport there are improvements in access to a range of transport support schemes available to persons with disabilities in the State and on-going work is being carried out by Government Departments, agencies and transport providers to further improve access to public transport services, and under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of public transport for people with a disability;

— in 2019, funding of €71.25 million was allocated by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, Housing Aid for Older People and Mobility Aids Grant, comprising €57 million Exchequer funding, an increase of some 8 per cent on the 2018 figure, with the balance of €14.25 million being contributed by the local authorities and the responsibility for the apportionment between the three grant schemes is a matter for each local authority; and

— since September 2018, free GP visit cards have been extended to persons in receipt of the Carer's Allowance, and a key point in the decision to exclude Carer's Support Grant recipients from the GP visit card scheme is that the grant is not directly comparable to either the Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit, it is a once-off yearly payment of €1,700 made by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and is not means tested; and

further acknowledges that the Government commits to:

— fully implementing the National Carers Strategy, and developing a new Social Care Strategy, in line with the vision of Sláintecare to deliver a universal health service that offers the right care, in the right place at the right time;

— establishing a new stand-alone statutory scheme and system of regulation for home care services;

— including representatives of family carer advocacy organisations in the development of policy that has an impact on the ability of family carers to care for their loved one(s); and

— continuing to grow supports for family carers to allow them to maintain their health and wellbeing and to continue caring with confidence.

- (Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Jim Daly)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the

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motion re carers. On Wednesday, 26 June, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to,” a division was claimed. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must take place now.

Amendment again put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Nil, 38; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Nil</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	

<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>		
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>		
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>		
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>		
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>		
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>		
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>		
<i>Lahart, John.</i>		
<i>Lawless, James.</i>		
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>		
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>		
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>		
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>		
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>		
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>		
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		

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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Brendan Ryan and Jan O'Sullivan.

Amendment declared carried.

Amendment No. 1 not moved.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 43; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	

<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>
	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>
	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>
	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>
	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>
	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>
	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>
	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Brendan Ryan and Jan O'Sullivan.

Question declared lost.

Sitting suspended at 3 p.m. and resumed at 3.40 p.m.

Climate Action Plan to Tackle Climate Breakdown: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy): Last week the Government published Ireland's climate action plan. Climate disruption is already having diverse and wide-ranging impacts on Ireland's environment and society, as well as on its economic and natural resources. The climate action plan sets out an ambitious course in the coming years to address this issue. The plan which represents an all-of-government approach to the climate challenge consists of 183 actions. Its focus on renewable energy, for example, includes actions aimed at having 1 million electric vehicles in the State and retrofitting 500,000 homes by 2030.

As my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment Deputy Bruton, said when he launched this important document, realising the plan will involve a radical change in the way we do things. The plan will require considerable investment from public and private sector sources of funding. According to some estimates, investment of €50 billion or more will be needed. If we are to meet the plan's objectives, we must harness private capital at home and abroad. This can be achieved by Ireland which was one of the first countries to recognise the importance of green and sustainable finance. The private equity funding stream is unavailable in Ireland as a result of the failure to date to pass through both Houses the investment limited partnership legislation which was published recently. The deployment of capital for the decarbonisation of the economy and our society requires blended finance from Government sources, multilateral banking sources, borrowings and private equity. When the investment limited partnership legislation is passed, all funding streams will be available in Ireland to make it a global centre of sustainable green finance.

Since 2012, the Government has been steadily building a cluster of experts in this area. Several Irish firms are considered to be global leaders in this sector. There is critical mass of expertise in Dublin and Cork. Over €30 billion in green and sustainable funds are managed, listed or domiciled from Ireland. Ten specific green and sustainable finance actions are included in the Ireland for Finance 2025 strategy which was launched by the Department of Finance recently. This shows that activity is increasing at a fast pace. The ESB recently issued a €500 million green bond to support its decarbonisation efforts. At an event jointly co-hosted by the Department of Finance and Sustainable Nation Ireland in May the World Bank issued and listed a €1.5 billion sustainable bond on the Irish Stock Exchange. It was the first World Bank bond in Ireland in 25 years. Both bonds build on last year's Irish sovereign €3 billion green bond. Ireland is just the fourth country in Europe to issue a green bond. On Tuesday of this week the National Treasury Management Agency announced that €1.95 billion of the €3 billion available had already been allocated to eligible green projects. Ireland will build on this by becoming the first country in the world to divest public money from fossil fuel companies and industries when the Fossil Fuel Divestment Bill 2018 is enacted.

I would like to mention some other notable green and sustainable finance achievements in recent months. My colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has become a member of the global coalition of finance Ministers for climate action. The Central Bank of Ireland has joined more than 30 other central banks as a member of the Network for Greening the Financial System. Since February, the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund has had climate change as one of its five priority investment themes. Late last year Dublin was selected as the European headquarters of the United Nations' environmental and financial sustainability centres. As we seek to build on this momentum and support Irish efforts in this area, we will publish a national

sustainable finance roadmap for Ireland later this year. This roadmap which will be a 2019 output of the Department's Ireland for Finance 2025 strategy, will be launched during Ireland's second climate finance week which will take place from 4 to 8 November. Irish capital market participants which have increasing expertise in green and sustainable finance will play a key role under the Government climate action plan by developing new products and services that can unlock capital to meet Irish needs and perhaps do likewise further afield.

The direction of travel is clear. Climate change is a fact. It recognises no borders. As the Minister of State with special responsibility for financial services, I will oversee implementation of the Ireland for Finance 2025 strategy. I look forward to working with my colleagues to achieve successfully our climate targets between now and 2030.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I want to say a few words about this important issue. I am concerned that communities and workers affected by the transition to a low-carbon economy seem to have been forgotten in the Government's new climate action plan. The plan fails to reflect, even in part, the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Climate Action on a just transition. It ignores the committee's recommendation that an independent "Just Transition Task Force be established in 2019 to proactively consider the likely upcoming challenges of the forthcoming rapid transition". The plan merely refers to the establishment of a "Just Transition Review Group" within the National Economic and Social Council which is undertaking research in this area. It is not the appropriate forum to engage communities and workers. The Government's plan also fails to address the central point in the joint committee's recommendations, that the just transition task force will need to apply itself to other industries and sectors, not just to the challenges faced by the midlands. I am sure the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, is aware of the significant challenges faced in that part of the country.

Last week the European Commission highlighted the same failings in Ireland's draft climate report which was submitted to Brussels last year. We often think the European Union is too rigid in the way it addresses issues in this country. In this instance, it has emphasised that the plan should "integrate just and fair transition aspects better, notably by providing more details on social, employment and skills impacts of planned policies and measures", "address the impact of the transition on the populations living in carbon-intensive regions" and "complement the approach to addressing energy poverty issues with indicative objectives for reducing energy poverty". There is no doubt that we will have energy poverty as a result of the plan. The Joint Committee on Climate Action made precisely the same findings. All members of the committee, including those from the Fine Gael Party, recommended that an independent task force be established to examine "the social and employment impacts of climate policies", address "training and skills development", identify "social protection needs" and develop "local economic diversification plans". Will the Minister clarify the reasons for the categorical failure to take account of these recommendations? Will he commit to amending the plan in accordance with them?

It has been proposed to increase carbon tax between now and 2030. Fianna Fáil has been very clear that prior to any carbon tax increase, the Government must introduce specific measures to protect people who are vulnerable to fuel poverty and ring-fence revenues to assist people who are not in a position to transition from fossil fuels. This is a significant issue in many parts of the country. We welcome the ESRI's recent announcements on the issue and the recent consultation by the Department of Finance. I ask the Minister to update the House in advance of budget 2020 on the introduction of these measures, particularly in the context of the need to

combat energy poverty and support vulnerable households that will be affected by these plans.

Last month the House learned of the significant environmental, economic and health impacts of biodiversity loss and the destruction of natural habitats. The joint committee made it clear in its report that the implementation of several of its recommendations would have the double benefit of reducing emissions and supporting biodiversity. There is a need for a new land use plan, new incentives under the Common Agricultural Policy, the protection of hedgerows, forestry management initiatives and the restoration of peatlands. As a result of an amendment proposed by Fianna Fáil, the link between the climate and biodiversity crises was reflected in the declaration by this House in May of a climate and biodiversity emergency. However, the importance of biodiversity is largely absent from the new climate action plan. The Minister seems to believe biodiversity is an entirely separate issue which should be dealt with by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. I ask him to confirm that investment in biodiversity protection will be supported, including through the development of a national hedgerow conservation strategy, as recommended in the joint committee's report.

I am sure the Minister will agree that if we are to have this massive change in society - I believe we all agree there must be some aspect of change - he must bring his people with him. If he does not have the people on his side to implement such change, he will not succeed. That is the reason I am putting specific questions to him today because they are very important issues. Regarding electric cars, what the Government is proposing is not implementable; it just cannot happen.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The specific part of the Government's action plan I wish to address is that related to the built environment, specifically the residential housing sector. As the plan rightly points out, approximately 30% of our emissions come from the urban environment and a very significant portion of those come from our housing stock, which is using approximately 60% more energy than the EU average. That reflects poorly on the quality of that stock. One of the more alarming elements, according to the CSO data on the building energy ratings, is that it is not only our old stock, as the housing stock built between the late 1990s and the mid to late 2000s is some of the poorest in terms of energy efficiency. Alongside that, in the context of the just transition to which the previous Deputy referred, we need to acknowledge also that we have significant rates of fuel poverty. Some estimates, although official figures are hard to come by, suggest that as many 400,000 people are experiencing some form of fuel poverty, which we need to take into account. That means there are two major challenges. I am not convinced by what I have read in the built environment section of the action plan that the Government has yet made up its mind on the specific actions it will take to address both the legacy of inefficient energy buildings and the challenges in terms of planning new building into the future.

I will refer briefly to what I believe is needed and certainly what many people with far more expertise than me or the Minister on these matters believe is urgently needed. With respect to retrofitting, there are three immediate challenges. The first is the social housing stock. While €25 million was made available last year to bring some of the social housing stock to a higher building energy rating, BER, than where it is currently, it is still nowhere near enough in terms of the volume of funds or the energy efficiency improvements. In many cases buildings are being brought from a D rating to a C rating or from an F rating to a D rating, rather than further up the scale. That is not only a problem in terms of energy efficiency in meeting our climate change targets but many of these are the same households experiencing significant levels of fuel poverty. We need to hear from the Government how much extra it will start investing in upgrading the social housing stock.

The second challenge is funding for private homeowners. That is a major challenge. None of us should underestimate the scale of the funds needed but all the experts are telling us we need a blended financing model of grant aid, albeit a reformed grant aid such as that currently provided by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and some form of Government backed low-interest long-term loan, a system which operates in many other European jurisdictions. Whether that is provided through a utility and the cost of repaying the loan is deducted from energy bills, or whether a low-interest loan is provided by Home Building Finance Ireland or some other fund, we need to move to a simple, easy-to-access blended finance model where, depending on one's income, one would get some level of grant aid and one would get an easy-to-access low-interest loan. That means we need to take the advice both of the Tipperary Energy Agency and the SEAI that accessing both the finance and the works needs to become much easier. Rather than having a single one-stop shop, every local authority in the country should have something like the Tipperary Energy Agency to facilitate precisely that type of work.

We also need to accept the fact that 340,000 residential properties are in the private rental sector, with one in four in Dublin. Finding a way of ensuring all private rental properties meet adequate standards is something that seems to be strangely absent despite the small reference to tackling the issue of what is called the split incentives. Many of the people concerned are low-income earners and the big fear is that many of them would be hit with higher carbon tax charges. As they do not own the property in which they live, they would not be in a position to make the energy efficiency upgrades required. Therefore, that is an issue that urgently requires action.

Another issue concerns new buildings. While new building is not happening anywhere close to what is needed in the public or private sector, it is still increasing year on year. While I welcome the fact there is a proposal to include in the nearly zero energy building, NZEB, standard in the regulations a phase-out date not only for oil boilers but for gas boilers, 2025 is far too late for that. While there are some constraints in terms of skill levels within the sector, the priority should be to bring that forward much earlier in order that we do not have a situation where we are installing gas boilers in properties over the next five years only to have to then seek funding to retrofit to remove those in five or ten years' time. We could be much more ambitious.

We could go even further, particularly in the context of the new city and county development plans, and promote the very good technology and some good building practices among some of the public and private sector in terms of having fully passive buildings. There is simply no reason those standards could not become the norm. I would like to see us exceed rather than only meet the minimum standard with respect to the near zero energy building standard and become a world leader starting first in our public housing stock and then in all new private housing stock, so we get the highest quality new builds alongside a much more ambitious retrofit programme.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government is trying to address a gigantic challenge. It is a pity there was not more information in the details, including costings of the plan brought forward by the Government recently in respect of climate change. I have said previously that climate change presents Ireland with a political challenge which is as important as Brexit, as demanding as the peace process and as costly as the financial crisis of the past decade. If we look at climate change in that perspective, it is the biggest challenge. It is one of the reasons younger people are so militant in their approach to wanting sensible and affordable change and change that meets the requirements of the savings we have to make as a society with respect to the re-

ductions in our carbon emissions and putting them forward within a reasonable timeframe. The timeframe the Government has put forward and the level of detail it has offered to the public are not convincing.

Not too long ago, I ran a very well attended public meeting in Dublin 15 in Dublin West about climate change at which one of the speakers was Professor John FitzGerald, together with other experts on climate and climate change. One of the issues that arose was for people who wanted to retrofit their homes and the question of who they would get to do that. As Professor FitzGerald pointed out, we do not have a training system to produce the tradespeople and the small businesses that will be able to do retrofitting on a house-by-house basis for many of the older homes in every other part of Ireland, whether urban or rural. We know already that the training of apprentices in SOLAS for the traditional apprenticeship trades is running at an extremely low ebb, notwithstanding that the building industry is desperately trying to recruit people. What we are doing at present is a repeat of the previous boom of the early 2000s, whereby we are importing huge numbers of tradespeople from other countries to work in Ireland. I agree with Professor FitzGerald that this is a fundamental change. Unless somebody reputable can give householders an estimate of the best way to address the various issues in their homes, they will not be in a position to judge that. We will be left with a situation where a huge amount of piecemeal retrofitting is being done; a bit of this, a bit of that.

The Government has made a number of noises around the potential, for instance, to have credit loan schemes at cheap prices via institutions such as the credit unions in particular or to do it, in some cases, via utility bills.

There is merit in both of these suggestions. However, the Minister must ensure that for those who are not technical experts, they can get serious advice which they can study and examine. They must be able to meet somebody qualified who will not rip them off in telling them that they need to undertake works that will cost €30,000. Instead, they should be given a menu of actions which they can take on an affordable basis over time and in respect of which they can actually claw back the cost.

Another area where the Government can receive a double dividend is maintaining hedge-rows. Hedgerows are being cut down at a ferocious rate by farmers who have been encouraged to do so by one side of agricultural policy. The Government must promote the growing of trees in towns and cities. Asthma and other major respiratory health problems affect young and old citizens. If more trees and hedges could be planted in cities and towns, these health difficulties would be massively reduced. That, in turn, would lead to a reduction in the burden on health services of chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases and asthma, diseases which are costing the HSE massive amounts of time and money. The Government could put in place several practical measures for the coming winter. The tree planting season starts in late October and November and continues until March. We could green cities and towns.

As for training apprentices, the academic year starts in September. We could start immediately to ensure we will have qualified and reliable workers who will not rip people off. That is what the public is afraid of.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: This is the only planet we have, but we are destroying it. The destruction is being felt more in developing countries because of what we are doing in the developed world and the decisions we are making. In Ireland there is an overall sense that

we are not experiencing the destruction and disasters other countries are facing. At times, we would not even know there was a climate emergency. Therefore, it is good that we are talking about it now. However, we have to move on from talking about it to taking action to deal with it. We must accept that it will hurt all of us because we all have to play a part. We cannot put the onus on any one sector, particularly as the international climate change treaties have been ineffective. The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights warned that the impacts of global heating were likely to undermine not only basic rights to life, water, food and housing for hundreds of millions of people but also democracy and the rule of law.

We can say Ireland's record on climate change ranges from poor to extremely poor. Granted, we did not have massive dirty industries like coal mining or heavy manufacturing. However, we are more reactive than proactive. That will cost us, both morally and financially, with targets being missed in 2020. It is a case of we must do better.

In the developed world we have a responsibility to tackle climate change head on, not renegotiate targets or view the avoidance of fines as a win. We must not use any loophole and not put profit above sustainability. We must face up to the fact that the planet we will be leaving to future generations will be an adverse and a much less habitable place without that strong resolve. The climate action plan is welcome, but it would have been more welcome in 2009 rather than 2019.

Points were made about the carbon-proofing of budgets. One of the particular actions in the plan is the electrification of transport vehicles and having more electric cars. Recently, I had an experience with electric car infrastructure which proved that we were putting the cart before the horse. I was travelling in an electric car from Dublin to west Cork. Having an electric car means that one has to be super-prepared. On our journey we stopped in Tipperary to charge the car. Fortunately, neither of the two chargers in the garage was being used. Otherwise, we would have had to wait one or two hours. One must be able to do the sums in one's head to work out the remaining charge. Heading into Cork city, we had to calculate the number of kilometres left in the charge and the number of kilometres we still had to travel. The sums indicated that the car needed an extra charge. We located a charger in a hotel, but we had to do two tours of the car park before we located it. When we did find it, somebody else had parked in the bay, although they were not using it. As it was a new car, phone calls had to be made to the ESB to connect to and disconnect from the charger. On the way back, we had to calculate the number of kilometres to the nearest charging station because there was so little charge left. It was slow to charge, at only 2 W. It was at a different hotel and another tour to find the charger. We got to a figure of 25 km after two hours of charging. Granted, it did not cost anything, but it was a stressful journey.

Like many people, I had a petrol car, but I was encouraged to change to a diesel car which at the time was cheaper. We are now being told to move to an electric car, but I am not convinced that we have all of the science just yet. Lithium carbonate which is used in electric car batteries is selling at \$11,500 per tonne. Given the global demand for electric cars, there will be a significant increase in that figure. Lithium is found in China, poor parts of Argentina, Chile and the Philippines. It is to be found on lands which belong to indigenous peoples who are losing out. Where is the tie-up if the countryside is being taken over to develop lithium mines to prevent climate change? Chinese companies are buying up mines from Australia to South America and we could all get caught up in trade wars. The annual revenues of two companies involved in this sector went from €100 million to over €1 billion in ten years. The jump to using electric cars might just be a little premature and we might be coming back to search for another plan.

Agriculture is our Achilles heel, but all of the fault does not lie with it. There is a need for more forestry. It is good to see some supermarkets tackling the plastic packaging issue in a proactive way. A report from Repak this morning stated Ireland was doing well in recycling. However, this House could do much better. When I was teaching, my school won numerous green flags and there was far more awareness of how to recycle among teenage girls than there is in this House. We could start to look at ourselves like they do in the Bundestag. If one was to check several bins in this building, one would find the same items in each, even though some of them can be recycled.

A recent article in *The Guardian* referred to climate apartheid, where the rich pay to escape the heat and the hunger caused by the escalating climate crisis, while the rest of the world suffers.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about this matter. Everyone agrees with the climate action plan when it comes to the better insulation of houses. The more insulation one can use, the better. However, the problem emerges when one looks at the price of insulation which ranges between €30,000 and €50,000 which many in this country cannot afford. They are the people who will not receive grants because they are above the thresholds, have youngsters in school or college and are repaying a big mortgage in what we call middle Ireland.

In agriculture 18% of the stock of cattle which go into the factories are produced in feedlots. However, nobody has examined this issue. It is not natural for cattle not to see daylight. We were brought up in a tradition of farming where cattle were out for the summer and brought in for the winter.

While it is not the Minister's fault as he has only been in the job a short time, the way carbon emissions have been added is a complete fraud. Hedgerows were referred to. As was said, farmers are not taking out hedgerows. In fact, they are sowing them. They did so before under the AEOS, agri-environment options scheme, and the REPS, rural environment protection scheme. Between 6% and 10% of the country is covered in hedgerows. However, we cannot sequester one tonne of carbon through the hedgerow network because it is not allowed for in our emissions calculations. That is the fraud when one is adding the country's carbon emissions. Once we go over a sequestration figure of 2.94 million tonnes in forestry, we are not allowed any more, even though the climate action plan states we can sow more forests. What seems to be coming from the plan is that rural Ireland will be the sequester of Ireland's carbon, but, on top of this, its people will have to pay. Nobody has a problem with reducing carbon emissions. Farmers were always prepared to do their bit using traditional farming methods. I am not talking about having big landlords, which is where we are headed in certain parts of the country. I heard a debate in the Dáil the other day during which the Taoiseach said that we would get smaller lorries. We will not get smaller lorries. The reality is that changing a lorry from diesel to gas costs €18,000. The transport sector needs some help. An electric car is 100% perfect for someone living in a city putting up a few thousand kilometres. People in rural Ireland, from Roscommon or Galway for example, who have to drive 30 or 40 miles every day to get to work and come home were told by a Green Party Minister in 2009 to buy a diesel car. It was promoted as being the best thing since the sliced pan. They are now being told to get rid of it. That Minister knew what he was talking about fairly well.

There is now talk of forestry in rural Ireland. Forestry is crucifying counties such as Leitrim and parts of Roscommon and Galway. If forestry is put in everywhere people will not live in

the area.

The carbon tax is another big problem for rural Ireland. Whether we like it or not, under the plan being promoted currently contractors will have to charge farmers an extra euro per bale. This tax will cost farmers €700 to €800. The media has said that a normal family will pay an extra €700 or €800 on diesel for their car and heating their house. People will therefore be paying an extra €1,400 to €1,500 while working in sectors that are on their knees, such as the sheep and beef sectors. At the same time we are promoting feedlots so that the slurry can be taken out and exported to tillage farmers. We are allowing that, which will ensure that more cattle are kept in sheds. That is fairly good planning for the future.

Rural Ireland will not accept the carbon tax that is being talked about. People in rural Ireland will not accept it until a LUAS, an Iarnród Éireann line, or a bus route passes by their doors. One would not see a bus in a month of Sundays in some such places. There is nothing and until there is the Minister should not be talking about crucifying these people, who are doing their bit. They have no problem doing their bit when environmental schemes are brought in for farmers. They have always done their bit. Statistics show that the bee population in the west of Ireland has increased. The amount of ammonia is low in the west of Ireland, which is very good. Despite this, we are being thrown into the same package.

I do not accept the media and politicians blaming people in the agricultural sector. Let us remember that when this country was on its knees it was the agricultural sector that kept it afloat for the five or six years until we were back on the road again. Now that the job market is moving, which we welcome, these people are kicked in the teeth again and let off. We are having trouble bringing young people into farming, yet we are kicking the agricultural sector. We are told that everything needs to be culled. When it comes to traditional farmers and family farms, successive Governments down through the years have promoted the return of landlordism, driving people into the cities. Let us look at where we were and at where we should go.

Deputy Tom Neville: I sat on the Joint Committee on Climate Action. We deliberated for eight months. We spent many hours going through and teasing out what the Citizens' Assembly said. I will pick up where Deputy Fitzmaurice left off and express my support for the agricultural sector in County Limerick. The county is heavily dependant on the dairy sector. Milking cows was of great help in pulling us out of the recession back in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. We need to be mindful of that. Agriculture is our natural resource in Ireland. We do not have oil or any other natural resources. Agriculture has been our natural resource and we need to mind it at all costs.

We need to do this in a balanced fashion. I have been speaking to the farming organisations. I spoke to them as part of the work of the committee and farmers are willing to step up to the plate. They understand that there will have to be changes and that a transition will have to take place, but this must be done in a balanced fashion and be phased in over time so that economic hurt is not felt while the transition takes place. That has to be done across all sectors, which leads on to my next point, which is about public consultation.

We see consultation happening and ideas coming forward here in the Dáil. People have spoken about the west of Ireland and I am speaking about Limerick. Deputy Burton mentioned ratings and checklists with regard to retrofitting houses. These are the ideas that are starting to come through that will affect and help people on the ground. Public consultation is paramount. I have said this to the Minister privately as well. I welcome the fact that consultation has start-

ed. The Minister, Deputy Creed, is starting a public consultation process, as are the Ministers, Deputy Bruton and Deputy Donohoe. The committee specified that public consultation would be paramount in ensuring the success of our climate actions. It will prevent misunderstandings and misinformation and will allow for peer-to-peer learning and discussions between people on the ground. We need a bottom-up communication process because if we get this wrong and get the public's back up we will set ourselves back ten, 20 or 30 years. That mistake has been made before when dealing with other issues. We do not want to repeat it. Public consultation and education are key to taking politics out of the issue.

As I have said before in the Seanad, we have to avoid parties playing politics with this issue. We must stick to the facts, help people and communicate with people because this affects us all. This issue is not owned by any particular political party or group; it affects us all. It is therefore paramount that we get it right.

With regard to Project Ireland 2040 and transport, I am a big believer in our economic development as well as our climate change policies. I want to see the Cork-Limerick motorway and the N21 Limerick-Foynes route with the Adare bypass. I want to see those projects proceed. There is no reason to stop them or even to moot stopping them. The Minister may correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that the public spending code is to be reformed to include a shadow price of carbon, a hypothetical surcharge on market prices for goods and services that involve significant carbon emissions. This can be done in real time as each project comes up, whether in 2024, 2025, or 2026. It is proposed that the shadow price of carbon will be €32 per tonne in 2020, increasing to €100 per tonne by 2030 and to €265 per tonne by 2050. Each of these projects can be costed in real time as they arise. If, having been costed, they are stopped now, as has been suggested in other quarters, they will have to be costed again in 2024 or 2025. They will have to be costed twice. It totally defeats the purpose.

We need to progress with these projects. They are paramount for our economic development, particularly in County Limerick. The Adare bypass has been needed for years. The Limerick-Foynes route is required to service the deepwater port of Foynes. It is a European tier 1 port. Cork, Dublin and Foynes are our three tier 1 ports. Foynes can be developed because it is not surrounded by a city: it is a small country town. Such development would provide more jobs for the area and the greater mid-west region. It also has a sister airport just across the Shannon. Freight from Kildare is coming to Foynes to avoid the rush-hour bottlenecks in Dublin. It takes an hour and a half or an hour and 40 minutes. If this motorway is put in, the time to move freight will be brought right down. That frees up the whole mid-west, which is important for balanced regional development. It will bring people into rural Ireland. The Cork-Limerick motorway is connected to this issue as well. We can put electric vehicles on the motorway afterwards. That would mitigate its effects in respect of climate change.

A just transition and a lot of public consultation is required. I encourage all parties to work together as we did on the Joint Committee on Climate Action. I started from a position of ignorance before getting where I am today in respect of climate action. I learnt so much from the journey. It is about leading on this issue. How we lead will affect how future generations will perceive us.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this issue. The first thing we should recognise is that everybody has a contribution to make in reducing carbon emissions. We have to face the facts and face reality. To refuse to accept reality is to go in the wrong direction and if we do so we will be liable to really serious carbon charges in the future,

which will accelerate much more rapidly than we think.

We must consider the alternatives. The biggest single contribution that can be made to carbon reduction is a change to the means used to generate electricity. There are a variety of ways to do that which are carbon-free including wind, wave, solar and nuclear, although I do not agree with using nuclear energy and have never been in favour of it. There is also biomass and a number of others. I will go very quickly through them. The best and safest method is wind energy. We have a lot of wind in this country and plenty of places to put wind turbines. Many communities do not accept the sight of wind turbines, but many in other counties do. They are making a reasonable contribution to the generation of electricity at the moment. We frequently hear of the considerable research on wave energy. However, that has gone on for 20 years and we have not yet seen the results to any great extent. However, with wind energy, big results can be achieved in a short time.

Some people have proposed biomass to replace coal burning in Moneypoint, County Clare. That is not a realistic option I am afraid. It would require the planting of biomass in at least half the country and we would need to import the other half just to keep the one station going. In addition, that happens to be the biggest polluting station with 1,000 MW currently. Taking that 1,000 MW out of the system and replacing it with clean generation would mark a serious effort. If that is multiplied by five or six, we are into self-sufficiency.

We need to recognise that various types of trees have a positive contribution to make to carbon sequestration. For example, the unfortunate and much maligned Sitka spruce is the best with up to four times the capacity of an ash, oak or one of the other broadleaf species. We need to interplant between broadleaf and spruce trees to give ourselves the best options.

The next method is simple. I have shifted over and rely heavily on a wood-burning stove, which has significant beneficial effects. However, somebody was happy to produce a report in the past six months or so to the effect that the burning of wood allows particles into the air that cause serious congestion problems for persons with asthmatic conditions and so on. The people who produced that report were not necessarily physicians; they were more likely to be proponents of another type of energy generation.

The use of electric cars will make a major contribution to achieving the results we need. It is where the electricity for that transport is generated that brings it to its most satisfactory conclusion. We need to bring the two issues together - the generation and the use of electric vehicles. Given the bigger and heavier engine requirements in agriculture and construction generally, it will probably need to come from something like hydrogen as an electric engine of 200 or 300 horsepower, which is required in today's modern machinery, is very much in its infancy and I have concerns about the battery for that.

Solar energy is an option. It is not big in generating electricity. Five acres generates 1 MW whereas one wind turbine can generate up to 5 MW of electricity. There is a significant difference in the space taken up.

We need to acknowledge how the farming community has managed the environment over the years. Everything that grows absorbs carbon. Many of the things that grow such as trees are carbon neutral. They only emit what they have absorbed over their growing life. I can speak more on that some other time, but I do not have time today.

I support the Government's plan. In recent years, I have attended incisive meetings in my

constituency and others where I heard people with contrary views to mine. The predictions I made ten years ago are coming through faster than I thought and certainly faster than many of my opponents thought.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the debate, but five minutes is a ridiculously short time for each Member's contribution.

I wish to start with the good stuff the Government is doing in tackling climate change, particularly in the transport area. Public transport in Dublin is being transformed and will continue to be transformed by MetroLink, BusConnects and the DART expansion. I hope they will proceed with the consent of everybody. I acknowledge there are issues regarding MetroLink, which have been addressed by the National Transport Authority, NTA. I praise the NTA for its commitment, research, and capacity to listen and change plans if needs be.

I live in a constituency where an increasing number of people commute. The DART expansion to Drogheda will have a major beneficial effect, planned, as it is, with new hybrid diesel trains. Irish Rail is in the process of ordering up to 500 carriages, which will come to Drogheda well in advance of the electrification of the line.

There is a new sense of urgency in the debate. We all hear and understand the views of young people. I visited a primary school this morning and all the questions were about what I was doing about climate change. I welcome the involvement of young people in changing some of our views, and ensuring our agenda and our priorities change.

One thing that should change quicker than all those transport projects I mentioned is the use of strategic park-and-ride facilities on the approach to cities. For example, a 4,000 space car park-and-ride facility is planned for the Malahide Estuary. It should be fast-tracked so that people can connect from the estuary to the city as their schedule of work demands.

My colleague from Roscommon made an important point regarding rural versus urban interests. We do not need to have this conflict in our society - similar to the yellow vest problems in France - with rural communities up in arms against increases in taxes, which is exactly what Deputy Fitzmaurice was talking about. What is needed is prior notice, consultation, and encouraging and supporting change particularly in rural communities that are adversely impacted but do not have public transport because of the low density of population in them. I welcome the Government's commitment to rural transport links. I do not know about Roscommon, but I believe 40 or 50 community buses run every week in Kerry. They support people in the absence of a commercial or Bus Éireann service to meet those needs.

People living in rural communities who have to come into towns were concerned about Deputy Dooley's commentary as Fianna Fáil spokesperson on transport, when he questioned the veracity of the road network programme planned by the Government, which is needed.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is untrue.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I did not interrupt the Deputy. If he reads Deputy Dooley's speech, he will see in black and white-----

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is not here.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: -----he is questioning the roads programme.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: He is not.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: He is. The Deputy may have a Roscommon edition of it-----

Deputy Eugene Murphy: No.

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

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I am telling the Deputy that he is wrong.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I have *The Irish Times* edition of it and there is a bit of a difference between the two. I suggest he buys *The Irish Times*.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Deputy O'Dowd is not the first Fine Gael Deputy to say that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Dowd without interruption.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Put that man out and let him go home by public transport-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: -----rather than his big diesel-guzzling car.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The Deputy is about the sixth Fine Gael Member who has said that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Let us be serious. The issue with the new roads programme, which Deputy Dooley when he is Minister will inflict on communities, is the absence of essential road works that are part and parcel of reducing our carbon footprint. The east-west and north-south improvements that will arise from the Slane bypass are important for the people who live there. If Deputy Dooley does not build that, it will damn those people forever to the danger and delays they are now experiencing.

The Ardee bypass costing more than €30 million is also in doubt as a result of Deputy Dooley's promise.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Untrue.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Irrespective of whatever deal Fianna Fáil might do with the Green Party or any other party, essential road improvements such as the Julianstown bypass will significantly reduce travel time and reduce our carbon footprint. I want to make one final point. When the motorway through Gormanston was being built, there were 20,000 cars per day going through the village of Julianstown. It was built to take those cars off the village roads, but guess what? There are still 20,000 cars per day passing through that village from morning to evening. If Fianna Fáil continues to oppose the bypass-----

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is propaganda.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: -----it will leave serious problems. The Deputy can put that in his pipe and smoke it.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I first acknowledge Deputy O'Dowd's remark about the large car parking facility in Lissenhall, Swords, near the Malahide Estuary in my constituency. The

car park is compliments of the work of very forward-looking councillors some 15 years ago, namely, Councillors Alan Farrell, Darragh O'Brien, Leo Varadkar and Clare Daly, who all supported the zoning of that plan. I thank Deputy O'Dowd for mentioning it.

I am pleased to contribute to this debate on our climate action plan and climate change in general. It is one of the foremost threats facing our country and the globe. For too long, there has been much inaction when it comes to addressing climate change and I am pleased that the Government has brought forward comprehensive plans to fulfil our responsibility to the environment. It is important that we acknowledge collectively the work of the all-party Oireachtas committee. As Deputy Neville mentioned, the committee took eight months to come to this position. I welcome the involvement of the Minister, Deputy Bruton, in the climate action plan, which has been brought forward for debate.

One key finding in the committee's report, and a central part of the climate action plan, is that we continue to work towards the banning of single-use plastics. That is incredibly important. Such a simple change could have a positive impact on how we care for our environment. In the average supermarket selling the usual items, it is astounding just how hard it is to avoid buying plastic and non-degradable fruit trays and packaging. The onus is very much on the citizens of the State to make changes in what they do, how they do it and what they buy. However, it is also incredibly important for our supermarkets, retailers more generally, and manufacturers to re-evaluate how they produce the products they provide us with and whether there is a reasonable level of recycling in this country. We are ahead of target on our green recycling and have been for many yeas, but we clearly need to do more.

Polystyrene should be much more readily recycled. There is often a reluctance to take empty packaging back to the store in which it was bought for recycling, but in most cases the store will take it. However, we have to ask ourselves whether the packaging was really required in the first instance. Often, computer screens and phones will come in polyethylene packaging, which is, I think, called SPI 4 and is not currently recycled in this State. We must take steps either to eradicate these materials from supply chains or to ensure that they are recycled here.

It is very important that we change the source of our energy from the current reliance on oil, gas and peat to more renewable resources. A conversation must take place around wind, wave and solar energy, heat pumps and other sources of electricity and their promotion. Homeowners must be able to generate their own energy and small and medium-sized enterprises should be encouraged to erect electricity generation stations, whether that be turbines or otherwise. I welcome the fact that, separate from this plan, homeowners will be able to feed back into the network the energy that they do not use. In this country there is massive potential to harness renewable energy, particularly given our Atlantic coastline.

My final point is on the retrofit scheme, which I am pleased with. I welcome the Department's announcement that the adaptation and retrofitting grants are being upgraded. However, as I have said privately to the Minister, Deputy Bruton, it is important for this State to recognise the BER standard of a property when considering eligibility for such schemes and not the date when the property was built. Unfortunately, there is a legacy in this country of the implementation of building standards being at best haphazard and at worst bordering on criminal. That is true for work done to a large number of properties well after the closing date for the current grants available to homeowners to upgrade.

It is important that this plan be supported by as many Members of the House as possible,

from all parties. We have to have a realistic conversation, among ourselves and with the public, as to how we are going to achieve this and what changes we as individuals must make to ensure that we stave off the worst effects of climate change, which we see every day across the globe.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): It is fair to say that everyone in the House acknowledges the scale of the climate change challenge facing Ireland and the level of transformation required if we are to see a meaningful decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. That challenge needed a step up in ambition and renewed determination across Government and society to tackle climate disruption. The climate action plan gives us this required level of focus and drive. For my part, I am strongly committed to ensuring that decarbonising transport remains a key priority and that the sector continues to contribute to our national decarbonisation efforts.

The transport sector accounts for a little over one quarter of Ireland's non-ETS emissions, and there can be no question but that transport must feature strongly in our approach to tackling the problem. A wide-ranging set of bold and challenging actions for transport is set out in the climate action plan, particularly in the areas of public transport and active travel. I want to make sure that public and active travel options are a viable alternative for as many people as possible and for more of their journeys than ever before.

I am ambitious to ensure that, between now and 2035, more than half a million extra journeys per day will be taken either on public transport or by walking and cycling. This ambition is supported by the €8.6 billion investment secured under Project Ireland 2040 for sustainable mobility. This investment in new public transport and active travel projects is well above that for new roads, which is a reversal of the balance of investment in these two areas. An investment of €8.6 billion is transformative. It will be used to greatly expand our public and active travel range through key projects such as BusConnects, MetroLink and DART expansion, as well as enhancing the cycling and walking infrastructure in all our major cities. We have a clear plan of action for improving and greening our public and active travel offerings.

With more than half of transport emissions coming from private cars, we must work harder to shift people from using their private cars to greener ways of travel. However, this can tackle only a limited set of journeys and emissions. To really reduce transport emissions, we must decarbonise private cars. Globally, electric vehicles are the leading solution to the decarbonisation problem. It is the Government's job to ensure that conditions and policies are in place to support citizens in making the greener choice and selecting electric vehicles, now and in the years to come. Through a combination of incentives and a positive policy environment, we have seen sales of electric cars increase and there are now approximately 11,500 electric vehicles registered. We know the technology is getting better. Driving ranges are improving, more models are becoming available and, most importantly, the cars themselves are becoming cheaper. As the technology gets better and cheaper, we will continue incentives and investment in the charging network. We are ambitious that, with a real push, we can make progress towards getting the electric vehicles we need on the road by 2030.

That target of almost 950,000 vehicles is a very challenging one and demonstrates the scale of transformation required across all sectors if Ireland is to reduce national emissions and reach its legally binding emission ceilings. Now is not the time to underestimate the size of the task ahead: it is the time for action.

As we have done with the low-emissions vehicles task force, my Department and I will

work closely with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, and their Departments to map out the new policy pathway that will be necessary. It will, of course, require widespread support to be effective and I am committed to ensuring that the necessary broad consultations will take place.

I am strongly committed to the decarbonisation of transport agenda and, as we saw last year, I hope to see further falls in transport emissions in the years ahead. Every sector must step up to the challenge if Ireland is to get on track for 2030 and beyond.

I commend the Minister, Deputy Bruton, on bringing this plan to fruition and look forward to working closely with him and my fellow Ministers to ensure the plan's success and place Ireland on the right trajectory to tackle climate disruption.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): First, I thank the Deputies who participated in this debate. A wide number of issues have been raised and I understand why people are expressing fear about the impact on different communities. That is always going to be the case when we face the significant change that is required of us. I ask people who have expressed such fears to show a little forbearance about thinking what the future of our community will be like if we postpone all of this change. That is an important question.

I come from a family farm background and recognise that our agriculture depends on exporting. We need people who are committed to buying our products because of the high standards to which we produce them. That is increasingly becoming a feature of the marketplace. I have been on a number of trade missions promoting Irish food and it is really important to think that through. If we start to rail against the unfairness of the changes that we, as a relatively prosperous country, have signed up to at international level and point the finger at other countries that should be doing far more, we run the risk of undermining the whole effort with absolutely catastrophic consequences for the global community.

It is important that we think of what will future proof homes, family farms and enterprises in ten, 15 and 20 years' time when, as we know, carbon is going to be valued at €265 per tonne. That is the world in which we will be living and we must ensure that the choices we make now mean our families will be best placed to be resilient in that new world that is opening up.

It is not an accident that the next generation is pointing its finger at us and saying we have failed it. It is really important that we think this through. Deputy Neville compared the Joint Committee on Climate Action to the debate around the repeal of the eighth amendment to the Constitution. Many people went into that committee with views that were fairly fixed but not altogether based on having evaluated the evidence and found that the evidence, when they looked at it, was different. Some people came out of that committee strongly endorsing the Teagasc action plan as something that should be done and also endorsing the need to have a signal in carbon pricing that ensures we do not lock ourselves into carbon dependent assets that will become stranded assets in the years to come, dependence on which would lock us into very poor lifestyles that would undermine the well-being of our generations to come.

I understand why people ask how this will be done and how we will make the change. Those are legitimate questions. The way I look at it is that those who postpone change will face the highest costs and be left with the fewest opportunities. If we can start now and trace

a roadmap to delivering these things, we will deliver significant change. The changes will be challenging. We need the fabric and heating systems of one third of existing homes significantly improved. One third of vehicles on the road need to be electric and non-carbon emitting by 2030. We need to expand massively the amount of renewable energy we put onto our system using wind resources and other alternatives to the fuels that are now doing such damage. These are big changes but we have, as a community, been able to make big changes before. We pride ourselves in having the pragmatic flexibility to do it.

It is important that we try and stay together as a community to deliver this. Brendan Behan used to say the first item on the agenda of any new organisation was the split. If we do not stay together, we will fail the generation that is knocking at our door and saying we need to make radical change.

I cannot go through, in five minutes, the many worthy comments that were made in this debate. I assure Deputies that this is the start of a process where we are determined to achieve the necessary change. This plan is not set in stone. As new ideas emerge, we will adapt and change the plan. It is important that we start by recognising that every part of our community, be it enterprise, agriculture, homes, public service or waste management, needs to make a contribution. This plan has tried to allocate that fairly across those sectors. We must work together with those communities to achieve this. At the end of the process, we will have warmer homes, cleaner air, resilient enterprises and farms that can stick the test of the changes that are rapidly coming down the tracks. The goal we are trying to achieve here is well worth the effort.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Can the Minister answer the question I asked?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister did say there were too many worthy questions for him to respond to in five minutes.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: How are we going to ring-fence money with the carbon tax coming?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Deputy knows, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, has a consultation out until the end of this month which is asking people to submit their views as to how that is being done. He has clearly signalled that both energy poverty and the need to make change, which is part of the plan, are factors that should be taken into account in evaluating how revenue should be used. He has been very clear that the raising of this revenue is to change behaviour, not to penalise people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have opened up a can.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle should close it quickly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Fitzmaurice can ask a brief question.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: To receive cash-backs or apply for a grant, one must earn less than a certain threshold. The reality, which we see day in and day out, is that people in middle Ireland, earning €35,000 or €40,000 and paying a big mortgage, do not get money back. Some of those people are driving large distances to work. Some are driving from Roscommon to Dublin, some to Sligo and Galway. We hear promises about cheques in the post but such people are not in a situation to move to an electric vehicle and they will be crucified. Will allowance be made for them?

Deputy Richard Bruton: There is no means test being applied to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants which are available for electric vehicles or for modification of homes.

There are means tests for people who are in energy poverty. People on the fuel scheme get a 100% allowance. Other than that, these schemes are generally available. There is a grant of €10,000 for an electric vehicle, plus a €600 subsidy for a home charger. There are 30% grants for a range of things under the SEAI. We must move to a new model with retrofitting that will make it easier for people to look at easy payment methods, smarter finance and aggregation of the work. It is about making it easier for people to lock into the work. We recognise that we cannot rely just on the grant model that now exists.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Justice and Equality has completed its consideration of the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019 and has made no amendments thereto.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Emergency Accommodation Provision

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Brú Aimsir was opened as a temporary facility in 2015 on Thomas Street in Dublin city centre. The building is owned by the Digital Hub Development Agency and it was always envisaged it would be a temporary facility. I raise the matter not to argue that it should be a permanent facility but to give the Minister of State the opportunity to put on record the arrangements being made for the 95 people who have been recently using the service. It is primarily a night-to-night facility and it deals with single homeless people, many of whom have other complex needs. Having visited the facility and knowing the good work done by Depaul, I realise a very good service is being provided by the support team.

Will the Minister of State confirm that the facility is closing and when it will close? What arrangements are in place to meet the temporary accommodation needs of the 95 people using the facility? I am not asking him to say where the people are moving to but I would like some reassurance on who will provide the support. Will it be Depaul or other agencies? How is that being managed? I appreciate that moving emergency facilities is always difficult and there are a range of considerations, both for the service provider, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, and the Department. Nevertheless, I was a little surprised to find out earlier this week that the closure of Brú Aimsir was imminent, and a little more transparency might have made it a little easier for everybody. Will the Minister of State address why the decision was taken?

The broader issue is the monthly homeless figures, which were finalised with the Depart-

ment yesterday and are with the Minister now. If the Minister of State is in a position to give any information on those, as they have not yet been published on the Department's website, we might be able to have a conversation about the broader homeless crisis in my response.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and for the opportunity to clarify what is happening. I do not have the numbers referred to by the Deputy but I am happy to discuss the general point. We naturally hope the good work happening during each month is demonstrated in the figures. Although the figures are far too high, quite a number of families are helped at a much earlier stage now and we find them homes much more quickly. The numbers are still high, as both we and the Deputy know, so there is no disputing that. Progress is made every month working with different families, so I hope that will be evident in the figures coming in the days or weeks ahead.

The homeless hostel mentioned operated from Brú Aimsir since 2015. As the Deputy mentioned, this was always intended to be a temporary facility and was due to close at the end of March 2016. However, the closure was subsequently deferred and is only taking place now in the context of the DRHE having put in place additional enhanced facilities for those who used the service. The DRHE is continuously working to ensure there is an adequate supply of emergency accommodation so there is shelter available for those at risk of rough sleeping. At least 200 new permanent emergency beds have been introduced in the Dublin region each year under Rebuilding Ireland. At all times we try to ensure there are enough beds in the system, as well as upgrading those beds and making them more suitable for the needs of people. Every year we engage with non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and service providers to try to ensure we have enough capacity in the system, which I believe we do. The capacity is generally there.

Brú Aimsir had capacity to accommodate 105 individuals and the DRHE has opened 120 new beds to replace those previously provided at this facility. By 10 July, the executive will increase the supply of new emergency beds by a further 45. This will mean 165 new beds will have been provided. The majority of the new beds being put in place will be supported temporary accommodation, where individuals will be provided with a 24-hour service and will receive the housing and health supports they need to exit homelessness. It is a more enhanced service than they received at Brú Aimsir. It is still very much a temporary emergency service, and I am not saying people would want to live there permanently. However, it is better that this will be a 24-hour service and people will not be asked to leave in the morning. We try to ensure to provide that option in most of our emergency bed accommodation.

I assure the Deputy and others that the DRHE has confirmed that nobody in Brú Aimsir will be left without accommodation. We have engaged with Depaul in that regard to ensure nobody will be left without accommodation. Supporting rough sleepers is a priority for the Government. We also recognise that many of those engaged in rough sleeping have significant health support needs, particularly in the area of mental health and addiction. The Deputy referenced the other needs of these individuals. In addition, we are focused on the delivery of long-term solutions for these individuals beyond providing emergency accommodation, which is of course essential but must be matched by the necessary wrap-around support services.

We have introduced a Housing First model in Ireland that has worked quite well in other countries, namely, Finland, Canada and elsewhere. It is a good model and I am glad it is rolling out in a few other countries this month and next month as well. The Government introduced the Housing First national implementation plan, which is a joint initiative of the Departments of

Housing, Planning and Local Government and Health, the HSE and local authorities. The plan enables rough sleepers and long-term users of emergency accommodation, who have complex needs, to obtain permanent secure accommodation with the provision of intensive supports to help them maintain their tenancies. The plan sets targets to create more than 660 Housing First tenancies in the period to 2021. It is all the better if we can do more but that is certainly the minimum.

Prior to the national implementation plan being launched, Housing First operated as a pilot project in Dublin. The Dublin region Housing First service has housed 276 homeless individuals to date, 87% of whom have successfully retained housing, which is a major positive. Following a tendering process by the DRHE, the Peter McVerry Trust will operate this service to deliver a further 400 Housing First tenancies over the next three years. A complementary street outreach service operated by Dublin Simon Community is assertively engaging with people who are sleeping rough in the Dublin region to support them into temporary accommodation and long-term housing options. Both services commenced on 1 June. Addressing the complex needs of rough sleepers and people in emergency accommodation will continue to be given the highest priority by the Government. We have personnel on the streets every night of the week trying to encourage rough sleepers to avail of services.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The DRHE put it on record earlier this week that nobody would be left without accommodation. The questions I hope the Minister of State will answer are a little more detailed so perhaps I will go through them again. We know the facility is closing but when will that happen? It is an important piece of information. My understanding is that prior to it closing, it will have approximately 95 residents. I would like to be assured that not only will they all have a roof over their heads but that the location they are going to will be appropriate in that it should at least be within the city centre. Support services must continue, whether provided by Depaul or others. I have had some conversations with Dublin City Council officials and they have told me approximately 70 of the individuals will move from the night-to-night facilities to locations with 24-hour service provision. Will the Minister of State confirm if that is the case and who is making that provision? That would be welcome.

A further 25 individuals will go to supported temporary accommodation, which I presume are six-month placements with a private room or at least a room only shared with one individual. Will the Minister of State confirm that? Will he also confirm that all the accommodation that these individuals will go to will be run by voluntary sector providers and that hotels or temporary private sector emergency accommodation will not be used? There is no suggestion that will happen but if he puts it on the record, it would be welcome.

His reply mentions increasing the capacity by 120 beds. Is he saying those 120 beds that were opened had not been occupied prior to the winding down of Brú Aimsir and they were opened specifically for the purpose of accommodating, in the first instance, the 95 to 105 individuals who on any given night would be in the hostel? Are they other beds that have been opened? I am seeking the maximum amount of information and my intentions are genuine. What I am hearing from Dublin City Council is giving me less cause for concern than when I first heard the news. Nevertheless, the more information that can be put in the public domain, the better it would be for everybody, and particularly those who use the Brú Aimsir service.

Deputy Damien English: Deputy Ó Broin seems to have plenty of information but I understand he wants to put it on the record of the House, and there is no problem doing that. If I do not have the full answers to any of the questions he asked, I will get them for him.

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My understanding is that they are 120 new beds to replace the previous beds and that they will be run by different service providers. I cannot give the Deputy a list. I have a fair idea of the locations but I will not put them on the record, and I am conscious the Deputy did not ask for the individual locations. They are run by a number of different organisations and I can get that list for him also.

To clarify again, these will be enhanced services providing 24-hour beds in most cases and beds for longer periods in other cases. With all our emergency provision our aim is to ensure that 24-hour option is available, and the six-month option in many other cases, which is much

better for many clients. Everybody agrees it is not ideal that people have to leave 24-hour emergency accommodation the next morning, so that is our aim.
5 o'clock

In total, there will be 165 new beds - 120 plus another 45 beds that I understand will open on 10 July. The aim was that the facility would close today, 27 June. I presume that has happened. It takes a little time to make sure everything is managed properly, but that was the intention. There are places and I believe the majority are quite close in location and all the services will be available also.

The Deputy asked some other questions.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Are they dorms or single beds? Is there the same distribution of-----

Deputy Damien English: I do not have the breakdown as to whether they are dorms or single beds. I will get that information for the Deputy. It is possibly a combination of both.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: And the male-female split as well.

Deputy Damien English: I do not have that but, if possible, I will get it for the Deputy. I want to be clear. All Deputies know, because they engage frequently with the NGOs, that we would prefer people not to stay on the streets. There are beds available. We make sure there is extra capacity in the system and that there is a bed available for everybody. During major weather events more people come in but on a nightly basis our teams are out on the streets asking people to come in to avail of these beds. We would rather they would come in to use our services so that we can work with them to find more long-term solutions. If it was shown that we needed more capacity, we would provide that. There is no restriction on what we can provide in terms of capacity because we want people to come in and use the service. I believe the Deputy knows that in his heart also. It is important people know that because that is what they would expect of us.

Community Development Projects

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next issue is in the names of Deputies Ruth Coppinger, Jack Chambers and Joan Burton. The Deputies have one minute each.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can you give us one and a half minutes each, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle? It is normally four minutes for three Deputies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Nóiméad amháin. We have to-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is a very important issue for the community of Hartstown in the Dublin West constituency, which has a population of more than 7,000. There is a crisis

facing Hartstown community centre, which requires emergency works to be done in terms of fire exits, windows and a number of other issues. It was deemed necessary in an audit by the St. Laurence O'Toole trust, the church which owns the land.

This centre is extremely important to the community. It has a range of clubs, including sports and youth clubs and services for elderly people. Religious groups and many ethnic minorities use the centre who do not have other places to worship. Also, two childcare facilities use this community centre every day and 120 children and their families will be very put out if it closes, many of whom are on low pay. Those families rely on the centre.

The issue straddles a number of Departments, not just that of the Minister of State. The community is willing to fundraise but the State has to step in and assist also. This is a community provision so the Departments of Community and Rural Development, Children and Youth Affairs and Transport, Tourism and Sport, and obviously Fingal County Council, are involved. People are busily fundraising but they need State help as well.

I am appealing to the church which owns the land and the building to provide the management committee with a legal agreement and a lease giving them security. The community is willing to raise funds but it has to have security of tenure in that building in the future and in order to access State funds.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy took her minute and a half.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It will have devastating consequences for the community of Hartstown if a local community centre, of which I am sure the Minister of State has many in his area, closes down. More than 100 families avail of preschool, Montessori and after-school services. Many local voluntary groups use the community centre on a daily basis. It is a busy centre, which has a significant level of throughput numbering some thousands per week.

With the scale of the capital investment required based on the fire safety audit and report, there is a major volunteer effort to secure funding to get the works required done but that cannot be done alone. The State needs to provide some support to this community. It will have a major consequence with respect to childcare, sport and a massive amount of voluntary activity that takes place in the centre. A solution must be provided by the State side to ensure the community centre can remain open. There is a voluntary board in place and the option facing it is to secure the funding to rectify what is required or else the centre will be closed. That will leave a major vacuum within the community. It will leave a vacuum for many parents who will not have a place for their children to attend while they are at work but also for many volunteer groups which use the facility in the evening. I would appreciate any support or guidance the Minister of State could give on the matter.

Deputy Joan Burton: Hartstown community centre has served the community of Hartstown and surrounding areas for the past 30 years. The community centre has suddenly found that there is a real threat to the continued provision of a wide range of services from preschool to crèche to sports services, dance classes and activities for retired people and other local people.

The building, which I understand is owned by the local Catholic Church on behalf of the St. Laurence O'Toole trust, has received an insurance inspection that has declared that urgent remedial works are required in respect of key elements of the building. The cost of the amending works to the building, which include upgrading fire safety, windows and doors and other elements of the building, has been estimated to cost initially somewhere around €100,000 mini-

mum. Other works as yet to be described in detail may add significantly to that cost.

This is a centre that is used by hundreds of people in Dublin 15. The community has organised a very large public meeting to declare its support for fundraising but the community cannot do that on its own. This is one of the communities that was hardest hit by the collapse of the building industry in Ireland. Many family members lost employment at the time. Happily, that situation has changed. However, the community has a limited capacity to fundraise for all the money required.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. As we all know, community centres are a cornerstone of many communities around the country. They provide a vital function, bringing together members of the community for social, educational and informational purposes. We need community centres open and working well in communities because they help tie all communities together, particularly new, developing communities. As Members of this House, we see on a daily basis the benefits of a strong community centre for a local community.

My colleague, the Minister for Community and Rural Development, supports such important initiatives through, for example, the community enhancement programme, which provides small capital grants to community groups in this area. It is not a direct funding line from my Department.

Importantly, facilities where people gather need to be fire safe. That is probably the issue causing the difficulty in this community centre. I understand that issues in that regard have arisen in respect of the community centre in Hartstown and that Hartstown community centre is doing everything within its power to address these and work through those requirements.

Statutory responsibility for safety is assigned to the person having control of a building, who is required to take reasonable measures to guard against the outbreak of fire and to ensure the safety of persons in the event of fire. That would include ensuring that all necessary fire prevention measures are in place.

To meet their duties, operators of buildings, in general, should have arrangements in place to prevent fires occurring through control of ignition sources, such as electrical equipment, and regular removal of combustible waste. Additionally, early warning in the event of fire is important, along with arrangements to ensure safe evacuation of occupants, including those who may require assistance, such as the very young or elderly people.

Buildings need to be maintained in good condition, particularly in terms of fire protection equipment therein, such as fire detection and alarm systems, emergency lighting, fire-resisting doorsets, and the fabric of the building. Regular fire drills should be arranged to ensure that people know what to do in the event of fire.

Record keeping in respect of all of these matters assists those having control of premises in ensuring, and demonstrating, that they are meeting their statutory duties.

The provision of a fire service in its functional area is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under section 10 of the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003. A fire authority may give advice on fire safety to the owner or occupier of any premises or to any person having control over any premises. If it has not happened already, it may be useful to the community centre to engage with Dublin Fire Brigade on the issues that have arisen. We have found that the brigade

engages on these issues with many individuals in dwellings, apartment blocks or community centres and is proactive in working with them on that in terms of solutions and what has to be done.

I am aware that the funding is an issue. Everyone says the State has to be involved in that. While our Department is responsible for local authorities in respect of fire safety, we do not have the funding mechanism to address this issue. I will bring it to the attention of the Minister for Rural and Community Development to see if there is any way the State can help. I note the point that the community is willing to raise funds but it seems the costs involved will be high.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Now that we rightly have much more stringent fire safety regulations, surely this is an issue for other community facilities and public buildings? I expect this will arise elsewhere and it will be necessary to establish a grant system to allow providers of such services to access funds to help make these buildings safer. Many of these community centres were built with prison labour and some do not seem to have proper plans. Hartstown community centre is not the only building of this nature in the area.

While I fully agree that the owner of the building is ultimately responsible, many community buildings are owned and run by councils, the church or private companies so there cannot be a hard and fast rule on assisting them. These facilities provide public and community services. I ask that the Taoiseach or the Minister convene a meeting of officials from the relevant Departments to see how assistance could be provided. I also appeal to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin to hand this facility over to the community in order that it can go forward with it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Minister of State referred to compliance with fire safety regulations and we all accept the need for such compliance. In this case, it is the reason for the crisis because the community centre must get funding or it will close its doors. Closure would have catastrophic consequences for the area in terms of childcare, sporting and community facilities. As Deputy Coppinger noted, the complicated ownership presents a difficulty. The board of the community centre was told that no financial assistance will be provided by the technical owner of the centre. This is, to all intents, a completely voluntary effort and there is no private gain. The State should provide a safety net for so many important services. I would appreciate if the Minister for Rural and Community Development would meet Deputy Coppinger, Deputy Burton and me, and perhaps also the Taoiseach, to find a funding mechanism that would avoid so many important services in our community falling off a cliff edge.

Deputy Joan Burton: Hartstown community centre has been supported by years of voluntary community effort by a fantastic group of people. I want the Minister of State to declare that the Government will stand by the people of Hartstown and the area's community centre and provide it with the resources it desperately needs. The active crèche and preschool facility, as well as a separate Montessori school, serve more than 100 young children each day. I am mindful that the community centre is in the Taoiseach's constituency. Has the Minister of State spoken to the Taoiseach about this? We all agree with the Minister of State's comments about fire regulations but that does not solve the issue. We want him to tell us how we can access Government funding to help this community in its valiant efforts.

I raised this issue with the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, in a parliamentary question about a week and a half ago. I can make the answer he gave available to the Minister of State. I agree with the proposal that we meet the Minister and Minister of State. However, the Minister referred us to Department of Housing, Planning and Local

Government because his funds come through the mechanism of the local authority committees on development. The Minister of State and the Government must help this community in its hour of need.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the three Deputies for raising this issue. I sense its importance. Deputies have noted, probably with some frustration, that my answer focused specifically on fire safety but, as the issue that falls within my remit, I was asked to address it. It is a serious issue. I am conscious that other centres and buildings may face the same issues.

I must be clear on the ownership and control of the building. Somebody has to be responsible for it and this must be established and clear for fire purposes or otherwise. Many community centres are owned by the State and I understand that in this case ownership is complicated. For the fire authority to undertake its work, there must be a clear line in respect of who owns the building and who is responsible. Otherwise, further difficulties will arise.

My Department does not fund the provision or renovation of community centres. Deputy Burton knows, having been a Minister, that I cannot just rock up in the House with a cheque-book. While I wish I could do so, that is not how it works. I do not know whether any of the Deputies has engaged with the local authority or any other agency on applications or if the centre itself has done as this would not have gone through my Department. I do not have a chequebook and I cannot announce funding. However, I will be happy to raise the matter with other Ministers to see if we can help.

The Department for Rural and Community Development has a scheme called the community enhancement programme which was established in 2018 to replace the recast RAPID programme. Funding is also provided under the community facilities scheme. Last year, the scheme provided €18 million for projects. The community enhancement programme is administered by the local community development committee but is funded through the Department of Rural and Community Development. Each local authority is involved, which is why I asked the Deputies whether they had engaged with the local authority on the matter. I understand the closing date for applications to the scheme has passed for this year but there may be some way that, with the involvement of that community development committee, we could find a way to have an application submitted. I will try to help and I will raise the matter with the appropriate persons.

Urban Renewal Schemes

Deputy Mary Butler: I have raised the north quays project in Waterford numerous times and I know the Minister of State is familiar with it. The north quays in Waterford is the site of a proposed €350 million regeneration project that will be a game-changer for the city. This opportunity has presented itself through the hard work and efforts of Waterford City and County Council under the leadership of its CEO, Mr. Michael Walsh. The proposed investment in Waterford city by the Alhokair Group from Saudi Arabia has provided a much-needed confidence boost for the city and the whole south east.

The south east needs a regional city of consequence and that must be Waterford. The city must be enabled for propulsive growth. For regions to be strong, they need a strong city. However, this project is so much more, with an impact on additional permanent services such as healthcare, education and transport. It would also have significant economic benefits. The

development is planned on approximately 17 acres of substantial and spectacular river frontage. The proposal includes development of a total of 60,000 sq. m to include retail units, leisure and office space, 200 apartments and a relocated train station, which will result in an integrated transport hub. This will provide a sustainable transport corridor and improve access from north to south by creating a pedestrian bridge linking the north quays to the south quays and the remainder of the city centre. The north quays development will increase Waterford's retail offering by 50%. It is envisaged that 2,300 direct jobs will be created on completion of the project.

The planning application for the project is extensive. The scale of the documentation is enormous and the application is cognisant of all regulatory guidelines. The cost alone of printing the documents is around €120,000, which gives an idea of the work that has already gone into this project. I understand the planning application will be lodged in coming weeks.

Waterford can and must act as a release valve for the pressure that is building in the capital. The city and county council has done an amazing job in getting the project to the current stage with the support of politicians, Waterford Chamber of Commerce, the Alhokair Group and other stakeholders. Under the national planning framework, on which the Minister of State has worked hard, Waterford metropolitan area has been designated for population growth of up to 30,000. If Waterford is to realise this aspiration, the development of the north quays is crucial.

In 2017, Waterford City and County Council applied for funding of €20.1 million from the urban regeneration and development fund for the first phase of this development. It received €6 million, which is well short of what is required. We need to see how seriously the Government views promoting regional economic development. What we need from the Government today is certainty, commitment and clarity. We need certainty that the Government fully supports this vital project, commitment to the finance required over the next three to four years and clarity as to when and how the finance will be allocated to progress this vital project. When will the 2019 tranche of funding be allocated?

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Butler for raising this important matter and for giving me another opportunity to discuss and clarify it. It is a project with which I am very familiar. I am also familiar with the site. It is a project of which we are very supportive and rightly so. It is very important if we are to achieve our ambition in Project Ireland 2040 and the national planning framework. It is very important that we follow up national plans through local implementation. I compliment all involved in the north quays project in Waterford and, in particular, Waterford City and County Council's efforts in leading on it, along with the support of the chambers, many others and politicians, as Deputy Butler rightly said. Along the way it was important that everyone was able to play their part in helping.

I am glad to have an opportunity to discuss Waterford City and County Council's bid for funding for the north quays under the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which is part of Project Ireland 2040. In 2016, the north quays area in Waterford was the subject of a strategic development zone, SDZ, order made by the Government, recognising the social and economic importance of the site to the State, and designating the Waterford north quays for mixed use development, subject to preparation of an SDZ planning scheme, which has since been completed.

The national planning framework launched in February 2018 as part of Project Ireland 2040 includes objectives to achieve more compact urban growth in Ireland's cities, including the significant further development of Waterford city and to move development away from the east

coast to all of our other cities. Further to the national planning framework, the ten year URDF, worth €2 billion to 2027, was established, with €550 million of committed Exchequer grant funding available to 2022.

In 2018, bids were invited from public bodies for funding support from the URDF. On 26 November 2018, the Minister, Deputy Murphy, announced initial support of €100 million in provisional allocations to a total of 88 projects throughout the country. As part of this first tranche of approvals, the Waterford north quays project was allocated support of €6 million. A large and complex integrated urban project, the Waterford north quays proposal, includes significant high-cost capital elements. Under the first URDF call for proposals, the council submitted a bid for URDF funding, which included four significant elements. These were relocation of the city's railway station to the east to form a new public transport interchange; a new pedestrian, cyclist and public transport bridge and associated urban greenway; site access roads and road realignment; and off-site roads in the wider north bank of the Suir area in Waterford and Kilkenny. It is intended that the infrastructural works involved will open up the north quays site, making it more accessible and supporting the achievement of the objectives of the SDZ planning scheme more generally.

The overall project is one of the more complex URDF proposals and it is essential that careful consideration be given to the proper advancement of its design, planning, procurement and construction. I recognise that all of the promoters involved have big plans with a lot of detail and they are very committed to the project. The initial URDF support to Waterford, as with all other successful bid proposals, is approved in principle and is subject to a finalised agreement between the Department and Waterford City and County Council. I have said before, and I say again, that it has to be seen as a starting point in a programme of ongoing support for a significant city centre urban renewal project. This is a very clear commitment from the Government. We stress that it is a starting point. There is an initial tranche and we will need to continue with the work. Deputy Butler should recognise this as support and backing up our plans, commitments and recognition of projects of significant value to the region and Waterford city. In this regard, the Department is continuing to engage with Waterford City and County Council on advancement of the overall project to agree project composition and sequencing and establish project cost certainty to inform current and future URDF funding support and allocations.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Minister of State for his commitment to this project and I welcome the fact he has said the initial URDF support to Waterford as well as other successful bid proposals is approved in principle and is subject to a finalised agreement between the Department and Waterford City and County Council. I acknowledge what he said about it being a starting point but I need to reiterate that it is very important to state it is extremely unlikely that the project will get over the line without State funding. A total of €13 million is required in 2019 to start the process and a commitment of €90 million is needed over the next three to four years. Much of the infrastructure development involved in the project would have had to come in future anyway. What this project is doing is accelerating this hugely important infrastructure and increasing connectivity between the north and the south of the city.

Sustainable transport infrastructure is the essence of this project and development of this site can and will act as a catalyst for the city and county of Waterford and the entire south east. The employment opportunities, housing opportunities and health opportunities cannot be underestimated. The north quays development will act as a catalyst for all these things because it will lead to population growth and to Waterford and the south east acting as a release valve for the overcrowding in Dublin.

I reiterate that what is needed in the project to drive it forward at this stage is certainty, commitment and clarity. As the project goes to planning in the next couple of weeks, Waterford City and County Council and the developers need clarity on funding and a timeframe for the funding because this is such an important opportunity for the people of Waterford city and county and we have to make sure it happens.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Butler for raising this issue. The URDF is focused on supporting projects that will assist regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's five cities and other large towns and enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed use development to deliver within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and towns. I reiterate that we are very supportive of the project. It will ensure that more parts of rural urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people can choose to live and work as well as enabling them to win greater investment and make it more attractive to visit.

In keeping with the aim of the national planning framework and Project Ireland 2040 more widely, the URDF represents a more enlightened approach to the provision of Government support and a movement away from silo policies, thinking and funding of the past, which has held back many of our cities and towns. Through the fund we offer targeted integrated support for innovative holistic solutions to the issues that for too long have prevented the regeneration and rejuvenation of our cities and towns. It is anticipated that the continuation of the URDF in 2020 and beyond will facilitate a greater focus on integrated urban projects such as the north quays in Waterford, as these proposals require sufficient time for design, planning, procurement and construction to be advanced properly. The Government is only one of the stakeholders and Deputy Butler mentioned some of the others. It is important that we are seen as part of the funding mechanism. The taxpayer cannot facilitate all of it. The fund is about making it happen and giving the Government's stamp of approval. It is all about releasing other matched funding.

As I indicated earlier, the Department has already engaged with Waterford City and County Council and will continue to do so to discuss the progression of the proposal in 2019 and onwards, with the intention of agreeing the project composition with regard to URDF support and future funding allocations. We do see the importance of this for the city, the south-east region and the regions beyond it and for achieving our aims in Project Ireland 2040.

I am conscious that the Minister, Deputy Bruton, is sitting beside me. We can look back over the past seven or eight years at the support we have given to and the focus we have put on the south-east area and the city of Waterford, starting with the Action Plan for Jobs and the south-east plan for jobs. The employment situation in that area has been transformed. We recognise there is still more work to do to complete this journey and to future-proof the area so it can continue to win investment and jobs. People have to see there has been a strong commitment to the south-east region over the past seven or eight years from the Government because we are committed to it. I want to say on the record that we are committed to it through this funding model in the years ahead.

Another example of this is the recent announcement of support for the regional airport. I am surprised by a lot of the commentary around it. To me it was a very wise decision. Regional airports transform an area. Kerry is a prime example and we can also look at Knock. The local commentary was positive but did not take on the national commentary questioning the logic behind it. It makes total and utter sense, certainly when it releases other supportive funding from other stakeholders and brings in private capital. We get best value for taxpayers' money through using it to match private money. We have always said a mixture of public and private

enterprise coming together to drive an area is key but people seem to knock it. The Deputy should be making it very clear so people see the commitment to Waterford city and county and the surrounding region.

Postal Services

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I express my solidarity with the more than 200 workers who find themselves in a position where they are going to lose their jobs. There are some 240 jobs, 161 part time and 79 full time, on the line at the Cork mails centre. I anticipate that the Minister will tell us he has no operational involvement in decisions of this nature. It is important, however, that we have an opportunity to raise our concerns about this decision. Those concerns are based on the fact that it is difficult to see the justification for the closure of this mails centre. An Post is telling us that its operating profit last year was €41 million and that there was a 7% rise in revenue as well as a 40% rise in parcels volumes. The company's justification for the closure of the Cork plant is that the centre is operating 25% below capacity due to the decline in traditional mails volumes. It is difficult for me, and the workers, to reconcile that fact with the 40% rise in the parcels delivery volume last year. That surely represents an opportunity. If that business is growing, An Post should ensure that all of its sorting and mails centres are included within the mix.

The people of Cork are disgusted by An Post's decision to cull, in a very political way, the Cork mails centre because they see no justification for this decision. The excuse that there is a decline in traditional mails when the evidence shows an increase in revenue from the rise in parcels volumes does not stand up to scrutiny. The decision is made and I note that the narrative has now moved on to trying to get the best deal possible for the workers. Let us remember that there are 161 part-time workers and 79 full-time workers. I raise this issue because we have to understand, at a time when parcel volumes are increasing across various business sectors, why An Post is excising one of its key centres and sacrificing one of its mail centres. To my mind, that does not stand up to scrutiny. I am raising this with the Minister because it is important that there is a political response from the Government regarding this issue.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): There is no doubt that this is a difficult day for the workers directly affected by this decision. I assure the Deputy that not only will good terms and conditions be offered to the workers but every support will also be made available by the company and, indeed, by the State to support them at this difficult time. The company has outlined some of the supports that will be provided. These include efforts to redeploy staff as well as offers of support for training and education. The centre will be phased out and continuing support will be offered.

Deputy Sherlock raised the question of why a company undergoing difficult structural change should make a decision like this. I am conscious that some years ago An Post's survival was on the line. That was the reality given the long-term decline of its mails operation. The company needed to dramatically diversify its business. It entered into negotiations with its workforce to try to devise a strategy to make a successful transition. A modest pay agreement was part of that strategy but there was also a structural plan which involved the closure of one of its mail centres. The difficulty is that there is a long-term structural decline in mails volume, as the Deputy recognises. An Post had too much capacity in that area but not enough capacity in the areas where it sought to grow, including in new services, such as financial services through

the post office network and online services as well as parcel delivery services. An Post has successfully done that following the changes which were negotiated.

The company's announcement makes it clear that while it was forced to make this decision, which was part of the original negotiated deal, it is also making a significant investment in the Cork region. It is doing that to put the company in a position to build out the opportunity in parcels delivery. An Post is making a conscious decision to expand its capacity in that area and it has listed some of the investments it will be making. These include parcels lockers, a major parcels delivery centre, and a new electric, zero-emissions, delivery fleet. The company is, therefore, upgrading and changing its business model to meet the new opportunity. There is no doubt that this is a painful decision. It is being taken, however, in the best interests of making sure that the company can continue to deliver a quality service to its customers, ensure it is attuned to changing needs and can secure the future for its workers by making the plans and changes necessary to support An Post's prosperity into the future.

Deputy Sherlock is, of course, right that, under legislation, we do entrust day-to-day decision-making on these matters not to Ministers but to the company. The Deputy will have been here last week when the case was being made for another of the centres that it was felt was under threat. It would be very invidious if these decisions were taken on a political basis. They had to be taken by the company, based on its assessment of the best interests of the company, its customers and its workers. This is a disappointing day for those people who have been adversely affected but the closure has nothing to do with the very high quality of workmanship that was being delivered in Cork. This decision is being taken in the long-term interests of the company's capacity to sustain employment and service its customer base.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Is that not the point? We do not know which of the centres was the most efficient. We have not had sight of the McKinsey report so we do not know for sure which of the centres was the least efficient. This was a political decision. I believe An Post went for the political path of least resistance. The Cork mails centre was sacrificed on the altar on that basis. I was hoping that in Government circles there would have been a greater degree of resistance by those at Cabinet and that there would have been some fight for Cork. That has not been the case, as it transpires.

I will make a prediction. I forecast that this is the beginning of the end of the universal service obligation and the five-day delivery service. We are starting to get rid of mails centres and post offices and that is cloaked in the pretence of investment in the General Post Office, GPO, on Oliver Plunkett Street and a new delivery unit being opened in Skibbereen. Those are all welcome changes but they are piecemeal. The structural long-term objective of An Post is to go down to a three, a two or even a one-day delivery service in certain parts of the country. That is where we are heading and that has to be called out. If we do not stand up for jobs in Cork and for what could be a viable business, which could operate at capacity, on the basis of the argument that An Post itself makes regarding a significant rise in parcels volumes, then I think that is a bad day for the postal service in this country.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I have to disagree with the Deputy. He is advocating that this decision should have been politicised. He is suggesting that this decision should have been taken around the Cabinet table, with people muscling one another as to whether this should have been in favour of one part of the community or another. That vision of how decisions should be made is not one to which I subscribe. The decision must be based on a fair assessment of the long-term interests of the company, its customers and workers and-----

Deputy Sean Sherlock: With all due respect to the Minister, we have not had sight of the McKinsey report. The decision was not based on the efficiency model.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): One voice, please.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Deputy can, of course, express scepticism about how the company reached its decision-----

Deputy Sean Sherlock: It is more than scepticism.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----but that is not what he advocated. He said it should be a question of muscling at the Cabinet table-----

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I am advocating a more rigorous political examination of decisions.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----to make a decision about State companies that we rightly say should be run independently for the benefit of the public, their workers and the customers they serve.

The Government does not in any way countenance a reduction of services from five-day delivery, on which this and previous Governments have insisted. That is the obligation of An Post. The Deputy has to recognise that any company that wants to survive must accept that what customers want is changing. A company that continues to do what it has always done and refuses to look at what would copperfasten its future will not survive for very long. At one stage An Post was looking down the barrel of this reality and restructured. I agree absolutely that this is a very disappointing day for the workers in Cork who have been exemplary in their service. Nonetheless, it is an important part of a process by which the company will become strong for the future. The 1,000 people who work for the company in Cork can know that the company will sustain their livelihoods based on a sound business model. That is the other side of it; the company is doing what is in the long-term interests of its workers and customers.

Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Amendment) Bill 2017: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy John Brady: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

It was way back in December 2017 when I first introduced this Bill. It is unbelievable this issue has been ongoing for more than two years. When the Bill was selected in the lottery, I asked myself whether it still had any relevance. I spoke to people on the ground who were involved in the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, across the State. After conversations with them, the importance of the Bill and why it needed to be progressed really hit home. It is more relevant now than ever. One volunteer at MABS to whom I spoke described the Citizens Information Board, CIB, as the most toxic organisation with which he had ever dealt. They are the words of a volunteer who has nothing to gain in raising concerns about the CIB. He volunteers to ensure the delivery of services at MABS for his community and receives absolutely nothing for his work.

The CIB appears to be intent on destroying the community ethos fostered by MABS since it began in 1992. It is that very community ethos that made MABS unique in the work that it did in assisting individuals and families at hugely difficult times in their lives - situations that involved personal debt in struggling with their mortgage, credit card debt and debts owed to moneylenders. MABS has provided immense support for people in financial distress and in assisting citizens in communities across the State it did what nobody else was there to do. I take the opportunity to wholeheartedly commend all of those who have volunteered with MABS since 1992. I refer to those who give of their time for no monetary gain, who simply want to assist people in their communities by ensuring the smooth running of the service. They are a credit to the communities in which they have served for many years. I also mention the commitment and hard work of the MABS national management forum and those in the MABS national development offices in Blanchardstown who have worked tirelessly to ensure the people in need of the service are always kept at the centre of everything that they do.

It should be a matter of deep regret for the Government that it sat back in 2017 when the CIB announced its intentions to make changes to the way in which MABS operated. The major restructuring plans announced by the CIB were opposed by those involved in MABS. The CIB never sought or heard the views of those who actually deliver the service on the ground. The damage the restructuring would do was outlined to the Government in black and white on several occasions, yet those concerns were ignored. The restructuring which is now complete has seen this damage, unfortunately, come to pass.

Ahead of this debate my office reached out to every MABS office in the State to seek views on the restructuring and make staff aware of the Bill. I received several emails in reply. Two were from regional managers who told me of their opposition to the Bill and informed me of the benefits of the restructuring and the support they had received from the CIB. I would not expect them to say anything else, given the fact that they are employed directly by the CIB. The third email was sent anonymously by a MABS staff member who was terrified to disclose his or her identity. As they put it, it was because "some colleagues who were previously very vocal about the absurdity of the restructure plan are being targeted." This staff member spoke about the fear and stress felt among the staff. It should equally be a matter of deep regret for the Minister and the Government that many MABS staff have already left the organisation, either through early retirement or to move to another job. That is what the restructuring has meant for the highly knowledgeable and experienced people on the front line in MABS.

I have been stunned by the information I have received from MABS volunteers on their treatment at the hands of CIB board members. I am utterly appalled by board members' treatment of MABS members and volunteers. As a result of that information, I am deeply concerned about the future of the MABS service. I do not say this lightly. In a recent reply to me the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, explained that the restructuring had been undertaken in order to deal with governance issues. What were those governance issues? They have never been explained to us either in the House or at the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection which held a series of meetings on this important issue. Nobody seems to know and some have been asking this question since 2017. The Minister and her predecessor - the Taoiseach - know this quite well. The Taoiseach also dealt with this issue during his tenure as Minister for Social Protection.

The Minister's reply cited a figure of €668,240 as the total cost of the restructuring, yet that is not the final cost. Eight regional managers will be paid a salary, which represents an additional and ongoing cost, that will be paid for years to come. Doubtless, it is a very fine salary.

The Minister also stated the benefits in service delivery to MABS clients were evident and that the service had been enhanced. What are these benefits? I have yet to see them. People on the ground have yet to see them. As far as I can see, there are no benefits whatsoever. How has the service been enhanced for users? It has not been enhanced at all. In fact, waiting times for appointments for members of the public have increased and have continued to grow since the restructuring. Morale among MABS staff is on the floor. We are seeing the loss of experienced and highly qualified staff. That is hardly enhancing the service - quite the opposite in fact. All that was given in evidence way back when we discussed the matter at the joint committee and before the restructuring had actually commenced. The joint committee was given examples from Dún Laoghaire where, even at that stage, volunteers were walking away from the service. They felt they were not wanted and that their skills and talents were not appreciated. MABS is busier than ever and its support is need more than ever. The Minister need look no further than the data published on the number of phone calls made to the national helpline each year. The number of calls has increased year on year from 4,556 calls in 2014 to 7,155 in the first quarter of 2019.

MABS staff do incredible work in their communities, but they have been ignored by CIB and the Government. When word of the restructuring of MABS was made known, the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection decided to examine the rationale behind the changes. We brought in witnesses and heard from all stakeholders involved, including CIB itself. It must be noted that the CIB representatives were very reluctant witnesses. After listening to everyone and engaging with them, the joint committee made a unanimous decision that the restructuring should be halted to allow proper consultation to take place. This decision was ignored by CIB which bulldozed ahead against the wishes of the national management forum, MABS ND and the majority of local boards and staff. The views of those on the ground actually delivering the service were also ignored. If the Minister does not see fit to support the legislation this evening, I implore her to, at the very least, undertake to speak to the members of the MABS national management forum, former members of local MABS boards or MABS staff on the front line about the impact of this restructuring. If she does nothing else, the Minister must at the very least listen to them. The Money Advice and Budgeting Service is far too important to ignore issues raised as to what is happening to the service from the very people on the front line. If the Minister does not take this opportunity, there is no knowing what the future of MABS will be.

I commend this Bill to the House and genuinely look forward to the Minister's response and to her answering some of the points I have raised. For example, where are the benefits of the restructuring she has referred to? I have not seen them and people on the ground have not seen them.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I would love to be able to thank the Deputy for introducing the legislation, but it is a tremendous pity that he opened his statement on this exceptionally flawed Bill by calling the Citizens Information Board the most toxic organisation in the country given that it provides extremely valuable and much-loved services.

Deputy John Brady: They were not my words. They were the words of a volunteer.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): One speaker at a time.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The anonymous nature of the way the Deputy put it does him and

the Citizens Information Board a disservice.

Deputy John Brady: Can I point out that-----

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy had his 15 minutes and it is now my turn to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): One voice.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy has just pointed out that the person who gave him that information was a volunteer in MABS. I point out to him that we do not have any volunteers in MABS. The only volunteers we have are in the Citizens Information Board where they are very valuable and we appreciate greatly the work they do. It is a real pity the Deputy started off in that vein.

Approximately 19 months ago, Deputy Brady introduced this Private Members' Bill on First Stage in the House. While it is very short, the Bill has magnificently significant implications for the services provided by MABS nationally. Section 2 of the Bill proposes simply deleting all references to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service from both the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2008 and the Comhairle Act 2000. At a single stroke, this short section seeks to remove the statutory basis for MABS and replace it with a big fat nothing. It falls so short of the required standard that it would, if implemented, create a dangerous vacuum for an excellent and a vital service that supports, as the Deputy rightly notes, thousands of our citizens. The Government has no alternative but to oppose the Deputy's Bill which seeks to remove the Money Advice and Budgeting Service from under the statutory remit of the Citizens Information Board. The Deputy has not put forward any alternative scenario for how MABS would operate after this change, how it would be funded, where responsibility would rest for the delivery of the service and whether there would be any legislative basis for MABS in the future. The Private Members' Bill is silent in relation to all these important points. If enacted, the Bill would remove the governance structure for MABS and create an accountability vacuum. That said, I welcome the opportunity to talk about MABS. Doing so allows me to emphasise the vital work the service delivers right across the State. As the Minister responsible for MABS and on behalf of all citizens who receive and require its services, I thank MABS staff and their boards for the invaluable support, advice and guidance they offer people every day of the year.

In 2008 in recognition of the need of the MABS network of 53 independent companies for a proper legislative basis and enhanced governance structure, the then Government, following detailed and careful consideration, assigned statutory responsibility for MABS to the Citizens Information Board. It was the Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition which very wisely did that. Under the CIB's governance structure, MABS has continued to develop into a professional, well-respected provider of free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome indebtedness and support them in managing their finances. MABS services have evolved so that they are increasingly responsive to the needs of clients and its work has become more varied and complex over time. MABS assists people in dealing with multiple debts and advises them on the voluntary and statutory options available to them. Under CIB's guidance since 2009, MABS has been to the forefront in delivering a number of specific initiatives. MABS has developed operational protocols with the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland, or BPFI, and all major energy suppliers to put in place affordable repayment plans for clients. Following the introduction of the Insolvency Act 2012, CIB worked closely with MABS to establish a new statutory service of approved intermediaries to process debt relief notices for people with low levels of debt. More recently in 2015 and again under CIB's guidance, MABS

established a dedicated mortgage arrears service as part of the Government's response to providing supports to those tens of thousands of mortgage holders who were in arrears at the time. MABS has played a key role in the Abhaile service which helps people who are insolvent and in mortgage arrears. MABS has a key function as it is the gateway for a person to access the most appropriate professional advice under its voucher scheme.

Throughout the development of all these initiatives, the CIB has worked tirelessly and effectively with MABS to design new services, secure the necessary resources from Government and deliver them to clients. MABS is fully funded and supported by the CIB which has consistently fought during my tenure as Minister and previously for an increase in annual resources for the service. It is interesting to note that prior to moving under the CIB governance structure, the MABS annual allocation was €14.5 million in 2007. With CIB's support, this allocation has increased to almost €21 million in 2019. This represents an increase of €6.5 million, or approximately 45%, over the period. The increased allocation is evidence of the CIB's strong and ongoing commitment over a sustained period to the excellent service provided by MABS. The scale of the increase in investment in MABS over an extended period, the creation of a legislative basis for MABS and the complementary nature of the services provided by MABS and the Citizens Information service are evidence that the transfer of responsibility from my Department to CIB has facilitated the growth and development of the Money Advice and Budgeting Service. That is very welcome.

With Exchequer funding and national recognition comes increased accountability. CIB is accountable for the funding provided to MABS.

To improve the governance arrangements and better direct valuable resources to front-line service delivery, the board of the CIB decided in February 2017 to restructure the governance arrangements of its locally delivered services. This decision was made following detailed consultation and assessment, which commenced in 2014. The previous structure, which involved

51 MABS companies and 42 citizens information service, CIS, companies, was
6 o'clock restructured into an eight-region model, with each having a MABS company and a CIS company. The rationale for the new regional companies was to improve the governance arrangements for CIB-funded services and to optimise the benefits from operating a more modern and streamlined service delivery model that focuses on citizens. The proposed restructuring has been achieved through the co-operation of local MABS and CIS companies with the CIB. Members of the UNITE trade union in MABS voted in favour of the transfer to the new regional company structure. The restructuring process was completed in October 2018. New service level agreements are in place for all the new companies, in line with best governance practice. The CIB and the regional companies are working effectively together to further the MABS service. The board remains committed to the establishment of local advisory committees. It is working closely with the regional companies on the completion of their establishment.

The Deputy originally proposed this Bill in 2017, which was prior to the commencement of the restructuring process. It was proposed on the basis that the restructuring would have a negative impact on the services offered to citizens. Despite what we heard more than 19 months ago, MABS has been fully protected under the restructuring process. There have been no job losses and no service delivery centres have closed. Most important, there has been no diminution in the services provided to MABS clients. On the contrary, the restructuring process has yielded benefits to MABS companies. Additional resources have been allocated to the eight new regional companies at an additional cost of approximately €500,000 a year. Further ben-

efits for MABS and its clients are being realised. The regional companies have more flexibility in allocating staff resources to areas of need. Specialist skills are more easily shared across the new regions. Administrative resources are being freed up from previous work associated with supporting 51 local companies. This enables MABS to have a greater focus on the requirements of clients and ensures more MABS resources are directed at citizen-centred services rather than administrative overheads.

Other efficiencies have also been achieved. The number of payroll providers has been reduced to one. A single insurance scheme is in place for all the new regional companies. The standardisation of practices across the eight regional MABS companies is being achieved. A greater proportion of resources is now focused on quality assurance and achieving improved outcomes for clients. That is what we are all supposed to be here to bring about. The new structure has not changed the values of MABS. It continues to have a focus on clients. Its commitment to empowering clients with debt problems and supporting them at vulnerable times in their lives is still at its core. The decision to assign responsibility for MABS to the CIB was taken because MABS and the CIS, which was under the legislative remit of the board, complement each other. Both services are involved in providing independent information, advice and advocacy services to the public. That was the position then and it remains the position today.

The Deputy's Bill proposes to remove MABS from the legislative remit of the CIB. This ill-conceived proposal has not been fully considered. The full implications of the enactment of this Bill have certainly not been thought through. It needs a lot of wisdom to guess, but we can assume that the Deputy is proposing that MABS be removed from the remit of the CIB and transferred back under the remit of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. This would have significant implications. In essence, it would recreate the approach that was in existence in 2007. It would overturn the decision made by this House in 2008 to align MABS with the CIB, thereby ignoring the concerns expressed about the governance of MABS and diluting the independent role of the service. It genuinely would not have a statutory basis anymore. If the Department is required to take over the functions carried out by the board in respect of MABS, it will have significant policy and legal implications, including but not limited to matters of contract law, procurement, the transfer of undertakings (protection of employment) regulations and administrative law. It will call into question the continued existence of the eight new regional MABS companies and the benefits that are accruing from the new structure, such as enhanced front-line services, improved management and governance oversight.

I stress that if this legislation is enacted and responsibility for MABS is transferred back to the Department, it will have significant cost implications for the Exchequer. In such circumstances, the Department would have no alternative but to replicate and probably duplicate the MABS governance structure that was in place in the Department prior to 2008. Substantial additional resources would be required to oversee properly the governance of MABS, given the significant development in the services offered by the service since then. The Department would have to make a further significant investment in the development of ICT systems that create an interface and reporting structure between it and each of the MABS companies. This would be a significant investment and would replicate similar ICT projects that the Department has implemented in respect of other services, such as community employment and the local employment services.

I do not have a glass ball, but I hope I understand correctly the aims of the Deputy's Bill. In light of the costs associated with it, as I have outlined, I ask the House to note that in accordance with Standing Orders 178 and 179, I have asked for a money message to be issued in

respect of this Bill. The Bill dates from a time the restructuring of the CIS and MABS had not commenced. At that time, I could probably have accepted that the Deputy had concerns. Nineteen months on, we know the restructuring process has worked well. Despite assertions to the contrary, there has been no diminution of MABS or CIS services, no job losses, no reduction in opening hours and no weakening of MABS's responsibilities for local issues. I, therefore, ask Deputies from all sides of the House to give careful consideration to this Bill and, in particular, the implications it will have if it is passed. If they consider it as I have asked, I hope they will realise that it should not be supported.

Deputy John Curran: The Bill before the House sets out to remove MABS from the remit of the CIB and return it to the remit of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Deputy Brady was correct when he said that the Bill was initiated in December 2017. We probably need to examine the lottery system that applies to Bills to ensure they come before the House in a timely fashion. Having said that, we must deal with the Bill that is in front of us. We must admit that it is somewhat out of date, given that the restructuring of MABS has been completed. While there are flaws in the Bill for that reason, Deputies will have an opportunity to propose amendments on Committee Stage. We will, therefore, support the Bill on Second Stage.

I disagree with the Minister insofar as I think it is too early to say what the impact of the restructuring process has been. We will support this Bill to signify that we continue to be opposed to the manner in which the restructuring process was undertaken, to highlight the Government's blatant disregard for those who expressed reservations about this process and to reflect the majority view of this House when it called for the process to be halted. There was a great deal of debate about this project. It was a futile effort because it was going to be railroaded through at all costs. The Minister has said that this process has been successful, with employees of MABS and others who are involved with MABS jumping up and down and talking about its success. That is simply not happening.

When my party colleague, Deputy O'Dea, brought a motion to the House in March 2017 regarding the restructuring of MABS, he called on the Minister of the day to halt the restructuring process. I mention this to indicate that the changes that were made were not introduced without significant opposition. Deputy O'Dea's motion was passed by a significant majority in the House. As Deputy Brady mentioned, the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection had an extensive range of interviews and meetings with people involved in the CIB, MABS and various other organisations. With the exception of the representatives of the CIB, everyone to whom we spoke was opposed to the restructuring. It is important for the Minister to note that the CIB and the members of the committee who were in favour of this approach failed to convince us of the rationale behind the restructuring process. They failed in every regard when they tried to explain a real rationale to us. They covered themselves by saying it was not about a cost saving. I recall that well. They knew that no cost saving would emerge. They spoke about the complexity of managing 93 companies and the need to reduce that number to 16. When it was suggested that they might save some money in the process, they said it was not a cost-saving exercise.

It is worth remembering that the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, was an initiative developed by Brendan Roche in Cork in the Lough Credit Union in the late 1980s when he became aware of difficulties people had in meeting their debt, difficulties with illegal moneylenders and other related matters. He established a small group of people and together they offered help and support to those who were affected by debt. The project was successful

and it was adopted on a pilot basis. The 1992 budget provided IR£250,000 - that was the scale of the figures back in those days - for the establishment of five MABS pilot projects around the country. Since then the number of MABS offices has grown to 51. Between 1992 and 2009 MABS was funded directly by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and then there was a changeover when it came under the Citizens Information Board, CIB.

I mention that because the ethos of the organisation was to take a community-based, bottom-up approach. The restructuring has turned that upside down. That is the point the Citizens Information Board completely missed in all the discussions, namely, that the community-based, volunteer-led organisation that had been created in that form was being radically changed. Those involved did not explain what they were doing but it transpired these individual companies would now act to do and deliver programmes without an input into the process; they would deliver Citizens Information Board-led programmes rather than responding to community-based needs which was their original remit. That was a significant point.

Having sat at the committee and listened to witness after witness in terms of the whole restructuring process, and this was at different levels throughout the organisation, nobody explained and no rationale was given as to the benefits that would accrue. By the time it was all over, I felt frustrated, annoyed and what really needed restructuring was the manner in which the Citizens Information Board did its business. I thought it was an appalling process.

I advise the Minister that I did not receive the anonymous emails Deputy Brady received but during the restructuring process people were very concerned not only about their employment but that what they were doing was not valued or recognised. Certainly across the Citizens Information Board services volunteers felt the work they had been doing for years was not recognised. It caused much anger and upset in many communities.

I clearly understand that the Bill is flawed. The Minister has clearly put on the record she will require a money message for it and she has set out the grounds for that. She will use a blocking mechanism to stop this Bill from progressing. That is what she is saying. She and the Government have done that with respect to this issue every step of the way. It was debated and the committee came to a conclusion but the Minister ignored it. This House debated it and nowhere along the way was there an effort to accommodate the views of the majority of people in this House or the majority of people involved in providing the services. The only people who were satisfied at the end of this process were the board of the CIB and the officials in her Department but that process missed what community organisations were about and there was a sense of loss and frustration among the volunteers.

I know this Bill will not go any further and that the money message will kick in. The Minister said the service is excellent but time will tell. We believe the jury is still out on how it will function over the longer period. We do not see the savings. The Minister mentioned increased efficiencies and so forth. Many of the efficiencies could have been introduced under the old structure. We could have had one set of accountants, one set of auditors, doing the accounts of all 90 companies. There were other ways to introduce those efficiencies but they were not significantly examined. One model was kept in mind the whole way through the process and it was railroaded through. It is a pity we have come to the point where this Bill had to be introduced tonight to revisit an issue that has been spoken about in the House and in committee and on which no progress has been made because that model was railroaded through.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: The Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, is a household

name throughout the country since it was first founded in Cork more than 25 years ago in response to over-indebtedness and, in particular, to address the reliance by many less well off in our society on moneylenders, both legal and illegal. It was founded on the basis of involving the voluntary and community sector in identifying local issues in their local area and putting in place local solutions. Such was the success of the venture that the then Department of Social Welfare embraced the local voluntary concept, rolling out and funding the model throughout the country.

MABS flourished, grew and gained the respect of creditors, public utilities, financial institutions and the courts. It was an honest broker which could be relied upon to present the raw details, as they were, of a customer's perilous financial state. Arrangements were agreed with a certain amount of hand-holding leading to light at the end of that dark tunnel of over-indebtedness for people and their families. The MABS objective was to be an honest broker giving independent, free, and confidential advice to those less well off in our society. This attracted many vulnerable people to open up for the very first time and to share their every hidden secret to a MABS staff member, whom they now trusted, not only as a professional but as a friendly ally to lessen the burden they may have carried all alone for many years, fearful of sharing the stigma of debt with anyone else.

As the years passed the level of indebtedness of people and its complexity changed dramatically. However, MABS did not divorce itself from the likes of the unpaid utility bills, the withdrawal of basic services, the unexpected family events or the local authority rent arrears but it also quickly recognised the need to upskill its staff in the new complexities such as mortgage debt, large unsecured debt, the loss of the family home, the recession, which still lingers in many parts of rural Ireland, debt relief notices, alternative repayment arrangements with financial institutions, debt write-downs and write-offs. MABS is to the forefront in delivering on Abhaile, the national approach to mortgage debt. MABS is the engine room which ensures that the arrangements are put in place, that clients in distress can get access to their vouchers for financial and professional advice, that there are constant communications and protocols developed with all the leading mortgage providers. This all happens quietly under the radar delivering the results for us as legislators and for those in fear of losing their homes.

For many years MABS operated under the umbrella of the then Department of Social Welfare, now Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. On many occasions, programmes for Government identified the need to have MABS established as a separate entity allowing it to continue its massive support to national government and to society in a way that no other body has ever equalled. Sadly, the ideals of various programmes for Government never resulted in the implementation of those promises.

As a stopgap, in 2008 the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act transferred statutory responsibility for MABS to the Citizens Information Board. This, in hindsight, was a mistake. MABS and the Citizens Information Board are not happy bedfellows. While the Citizens Information Board has much to offer in its area of expertise it has nothing to offer to MABS. It is no secret that morale in MABS is at an all-time low. MABS staff throughout the country feel that MABS is no longer a service that can pride itself on what it can achieve.

A few years ago, the Taoiseach, and, indeed, the Minister who has left the Chamber, told this House that they could not, on the advice of the Attorney General, interfere with the Citizens Information Board's decision to demolish the most successful ever locally-based MABS in favour of a regional model. This was another mistake.

More than €2 million of taxpayers' money has already been spent on the project. The results are there for everyone to see - longer waiting times, no training for staff, and no expertise in the Citizens Information Board to lead and support this vital service. The Minister oversaw this in the face of a damning report by the Oireachtas committee and the wishes of this House, which showed the greatest support ever for a motion to halt the process. I agree with Deputy Curran's comments on that process. We now have the results. What has been delivered against what was promised? The answer to that is absolutely nothing other than despair and disaster.

Tonight the Government has an opportunity to take back control before we lose the real benefits of what MABS has delivered over the years. The Minister has already indicated that she will use whatever force she can in terms of stopping this, including a money message, but I point out it is the Ceann Comhairle who decides about money messages. I advise the Government to allow this Bill to proceed to Committee Stage and get to a point before it is too late to open up the discussion on what has been achieved with the reorganisation of MABS. It would also allow us an opportunity to listen again to the stakeholders who have indicated a lack of satisfaction with the outcomes. It would allow us learn what has been achieved but also what has been lost. We must call a halt to the reorganisation before it is too late. We need to keep the best of MABS and we will be supporting the Bill on that basis.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: While it is too early to say with certainty the impact that the restructuring process has had, it did not have widespread support. Serious reservations were expressed regarding the manner in which it was undertaken, along with the lack of a cost-benefit analysis and that it risked disenfranchising those who had contributed positively to MABS for years, namely, volunteers. Volunteers are important in every aspect of Irish life.

Fianna Fáil recognises and values the vital work that MABS and Citizens Information Services do. During the recession many individuals and families relied on the help and support offered by these services. They provided a vital lifeline for many of those who found themselves unemployed, in mortgage arrears and overwhelmed by debt. MABS gave a great service to many families who felt they had nowhere to turn for advice and guidance. It was the link many needed to prevent insanity coming into their lives and families. I know that from people I brought to MABS over the years. The half-hour of advice from MABS or being sent somewhere else for advice was important to those people.

Our party spokesperson on social protection, Deputy O'Dea, brought forward a motion in March 2017 which passed in the Dáil. It received widespread cross-party support calling for the restructuring process to be halted. Members of our party who sit on the social protection committee also welcomed the report from the committee which also called for the restructuring process to be halted for a while. Fianna Fáil raised this issue on several occasions on the floor of the Dáil and by way of parliamentary questions to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Fianna Fáil repeatedly called on the Minister to intervene in this issue and not to ignore the will of the Dáil, as well as that of the many staff and volunteers involved. Deputy Brendan Ryan put it well when he spoke about the trust factor where people were at ease when speaking to MABS volunteers. That link was important to the many families who availed of these services.

Fianna Fáil also called on the Minister to ensure any restructuring process did not result in the downgrading of the quality, effectiveness and accessibility of services to citizens. Fianna Fáil recognises there is scope for greater efficiency and effectiveness. We are not opposed to change and reform where necessary. We are, nevertheless, concerned about the considerable

disquiet surrounding the restructuring process. It is vital that the concerns of those directly involved in the provision of services are taken on board. Many volunteers have given freely of their time and energy to these services. They now feel they are being pushed aside while their contribution is no longer valued or wanted. We should never let that happen to volunteers in any sector. As many of my colleagues know, this country would be in a different zone if it did not have volunteers.

The Government has not shown much regard for those who expressed concerns about the restructuring process. It is guilty of hollowing out the community and voluntary sector, often ignoring and downgrading the valuable experience and contribution of those who have given positively to their communities for many years. That is why we are supporting this Bill. We feel the restructuring has been rushed through and it was not an improvement. I am concerned that the volunteers in question are no longer part of this process. I regret the Minister used those two dreaded words “money message”. It appears that many of us who support this Bill will not be listened to. I hope the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, will take my concerns to the Minister. The Government should withdraw its opposition to the Bill and allow it to proceed to Committee Stage to be discussed further.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. All Deputies recognise the vital service that MABS provides to people at the most vulnerable times in their lives, right across the State. Every Member has engaged with the service at some stage, representing our constituents.

The Bill, however, is ill-timed and simplistic in its approach to the separation of MABS from the Citizens Information Board, CIB. It falls short of logic, rationale and the effective and efficient delivery of modern citizen-centric services. This proposal runs counter to one of CIB’s core functions, namely, the provision of advice on personal debt and money management delivered through MABS. Any attempt to take MABS out from under the remit of CIB will have nothing but a destabilising effect on service delivery, which, in turn will permeate to MABS clients. It will affect those who lie awake at night with worry due to debt issues, those who are at risk of losing their family home and those who MABS supports. Nothing should distract from this work.

Deputy Brady offers nothing to support making such a fundamental change to the MABS governance structure at this time. Any attempt to unravel this model which is delivering results for clients will only be futile. It can only serve as a distraction to the important work that MABS staff are engaged in every day. Under CIB, MABS has continued to develop into a strong, professional, well-respected provider of free, confidential and independent advice, helping people from all sectors of our society to overcome their debt problems and support them in managing their finances.

In regard to the recently completed governance restructuring carried out by CIB, it is important to echo the Minister’s earlier statement that there have been no job losses, no closure of service delivery centres and, importantly, no diminution in services provided to MABS clients. One of the primary objectives of the CIB’s strategy for the next three years is to consolidate and embed the changes resulting from this recent restructuring process, to deliver the benefits of these changes to the clients who need them. It is important to allow for that time to show the benefits.

These changes have led to a reduction in back-office administration, increasing the available

resources for front-line services, which all Deputies will agree can only be positive for MABS clients. CIB remains ideally positioned and legally empowered to support and promote two vital citizen-centric services, Citizen Information Services and MABS. Both are charged with the delivery of information, advice and advocacy. Both deliver to citizens at a local level, are entirely State funded and operate successfully under the single governance structure of CIB.

I thank all the MABS staff and their boards for the invaluable support, advice and guidance they continue to offer to people in their time of need.

Deputy John Brady: I could say I am surprised by the initial response from the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection who is no longer in the Chamber. However, I am not. That type of stick one's head in the sand approach has been adopted from day one. The Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, was in the Minister's position when this issue first arose. He did not want to deal with it. He did not want to engage with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social Protection. We brought a whole raft of witnesses in to the committee and produced a brilliant report which received cross-party support. We sent that report to the Minister who failed to engage or to express any views on it. He stuck his head in the sand and allowed the tearing apart of the MABS structures to proceed. There was a debate on the issue in the Dáil and a motion was passed. It was the will of the House that the process be stopped. That was also the main finding of the report. This was all ignored.

I am therefore not surprised that the Minister's Government, knowing that it will be defeated on this legislation, is again pulling the money message procedure out of its back pocket. That does not surprise me but it does disappoint me because not only has the Minister not taken on board the views of the Members of this House and of the Oireachtas joint committee, she has not taken on the views of the people who matter, the people who have worked on the front line since MABS was set up in 1992. She has not taken on board their concerns. The evidence I have been given shows that there has been a reduction in the standard of service being provided to people. People are experiencing lengthy delays when waiting to be seen. One person who actually works within the service says that there has been a massive brain drain and that people have walked away. This person says there has been:

Loss of knowledge, talent and skills of qualified professional staff in the organisation. As noted, many staff qualified as AMA's and AI's. Others were solicitors, barristers, accountants, etc. Many have since left the organisation either early retired or moved on to other organisations.

This was a direct result of what has taken place. There have been negative consequences to the restructuring process. The Minister has said that the legislation is deeply flawed. I find that insulting, although not to me personally because I did not draft it. This legislation was drafted by the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers. If the Minister is having a go at the people employed by the Houses to draft legislation, it is a serious error on her part. I certainly do not believe this legislation is deeply flawed. I am not precious about it. If the Minister thinks there are flaws within the legislation I will happily accept constructive amendments on Committee Stage in order to strengthen the Bill and to put meat on the bones, so to speak. I will absolutely do that. The Minister should not, however, hide behind the nonsensical argument that this legislation is deeply flawed.

I spoke about the anonymous correspondence I received. It would be worthwhile to put some of it on record as it shows what people who actually work within the service feel:

Anonymity and Fear

Apologies for being anonymous but some colleagues who were previously very vocal about the absurdity of the restructure plan are being targeted. There is a general feeling that we are NOT allowed to talk to media or anyone else about what has and is going on.

What was/is the purpose of the restructure? Well not for the benefit of all stakeholders nor primarily the public (the old vision, mission, etc) which we are supposed to serve!

From the very first commissioned study (by contractors!) in 2014 it was very clear that not all stakeholders were being considered. Over the last two years it is abundantly clear that the only stakeholders represented are CIB and the many expensive consultants contracted at regular intervals for lots of projects.

No valid reasoning/evidence was ever provided for the need to restructure. Derogatory comments had been made such as ‘there is a horrendous lack of governance...’ One possible example being constantly repeated as such evidence. But it made no sense because ... This was against a background of much increased governance and controls

These are the words of a person on the front line regarding the impact this restructure is having. These are the views I take on board and the views to which the Minister and her predecessor have not listened. That is an absolute shame.

In her opening comments the Minister unfortunately attacked me for quoting someone on the front line who talks about the toxic organisation that is the Citizens Information Board. She tried to muddy the waters and to suggest that I was making a direct attack on everyone involved in the Citizens Information Services. That is completely disingenuous of the Minister. I know from dealing with people, as does everyone in this House, that the work done by the staff of the Citizens Information Services is phenomenal. There is a distinct difference between the Citizens Information Board and the Citizens Information Services, which it funds. A person who works on the front line categorises that board as a toxic environment. To suggest that is an attack on all staff in the Citizens Information Services is absolutely pitiful. To use that to try to take away from what this legislation seeks to do is very sad.

The Minister also says that this Bill is 19 months too late and that, had it come before her at that time, she would have looked at it or taken it on board. Neither she nor the Government would have. I have outlined all the reasons. The Minister who was in charge at that time would not even engage with the committee. He outlined all the reasons he could not intervene and hid behind advice from the Attorney General, even though previous Ministers had intervened to stop the exact same thing happening in the past. So many false arguments have been put forward and that is pitiful.

My sole objective in all of this is ensuring that the phenomenal work carried out by MABS over many years is allowed to continue into the future. The evidence shows that this restructuring has cost a fortune. The Minister said in a reply to a parliamentary question of mine that it has only cost in the region of €660,000. The actual figure is closer to €2 million. As a result of this, not only have we seen the brain drain described by one worker on the front line, but a reduction in services. That is my sole motivation in bringing forward this legislation. I want to ensure that MABS is allowed to continue doing the phenomenal work it has done in the past.

The Government is going to be defeated on this. There is cross-party support for this Bill.

Dáil Éireann

Unfortunately the Government will again hide behind a money message. That is no surprise. There are now 55 Opposition Bills being held up by the money message procedure. That is a disgrace. If the Minister is serious about MABS, about protecting people, and about providing service to people who need it, she will allow this Bill to move on to Committee Stage. We can then bring in expert witnesses, tease things out, and make amendments to strengthen the legislation to ensure that MABS can go forward on the strongest possible footing.

Question put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 4 July 2019.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.40 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 2 July 2019.