



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 10 Deireadh Fómhair 2019

Thursday, 10 October 2019

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Eugene Murphy) i gceannas ar 10.00 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I wish Deputies, Ministers and the staff of the Houses a very good and prosperous day as they get down to their work once again.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That is a very nice start to the day.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is all downhill from here.

HSE National Service Plan

1. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health when a winter plan for hospitals will be brought forward; the reason for the continued overcrowding in emergency departments during 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41485/19]

2. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health when the winter plan 2019-20 will be published. [40975/19]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I ask Deputies to co-operate with the time limits to allow us to get through as many questions as possible. Questions Nos. 1 and 2, in the names of Deputies Donnelly and O'Reilly, are being taken together.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: How does the Chair want to do it?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): As Question No. 1 is in the name of Deputy

Donnelly, he can introduce both questions.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We will all be aware of the severe overcrowding in our emergency departments. I am sure the Minister is aware of the case of a woman in her 80s who had to wait on a trolley in Limerick for four and a half days last week. Her daughter said that she was moved around and had to lie under a glove dispenser while people tried to get gloves. I think we can all agree that nobody wants to see so many people waiting and such a level of suffering having to be endured. We have never seen anything like it in Ireland. Why is this still happening, in spite of enormous increases in budgets? When will the winter initiative be brought in?

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputies for tabling these important questions. This is happening because of years of decisions that there were too many hospital beds in the health service. As a result of the withdrawal of beds during that time, we need to continue to increase the number of beds. This year, for the first time since 2009, there are 11,000 open beds in the health service. We need to continue to increase this number while simultaneously reorientating the health service. I understand that a question tabled by Deputy Brassil, which we will come to later, relates to how we build up our community care.

On budget day, we announced the provision of €26 million between now and 31 December for winter preparedness. From memory, I think this is the largest sum we have allocated for the period from now until December. When I met the chief executive of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, on Monday, I made it clear that the HSE needs to get on with spending that money on increasing home care supply, increasing access to transitional care and providing extra funding for the fair deal. We are announcing the flu vaccine campaign today. We are fully funding that as well.

We are also looking at access to diagnostics. The Deputy and I were both present at last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Health when it was told that, on an average day, there might be 30 people in the hospital he mentioned who could get home if they could access diagnostics such as MRI scans and CAT scans. The provision of mobile diagnostic facilities in places like Limerick is an absolute priority as well.

The emergency department task force, which is meeting today, is one of the many forums at which the issue of overcrowding is discussed. There will be an opportunity to discuss overcrowding with nurses, patient representatives, doctors and health service managers throughout the country. I am pleased that Anne O'Connor, who is the chief operations officer in the HSE, has been leading on winter preparedness. She has been working on integrated winter plans between the community care system and the hospital groups. These integrated plans will support the development of a single overarching winter plan from the HSE, which will be finalised in the coming days. I am satisfied that we have provided the HSE with significant funding to increase the number of social and community supports that are available to try to decongest some of our hospitals.

The hospital in Limerick to which Deputy Donnelly specifically referred has, like the mid-west as a whole, has been neglected in terms of bed capacity for many decades. That neglect stops now. A 60-bed modular unit is under construction in the hospital as we speak. A further 96 beds are outlined in the capital plan. This means the hospital in Limerick will see a net increase of approximately 150 beds.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to put something

to bed. I keep hearing him saying that the failures in healthcare today, the likes of which this country has never seen and cannot be seen anywhere else in Europe, are somehow the result of some beds being taken out of the system 15 years ago.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The reality is that under the most recent Fianna Fáil Government, the number of beds increased by well over 1,000. There were a small number of years when a few beds came out. Does the Minister believe that this is causing the current failures? He and his colleagues have been in government for nine years. They have almost had a decade in power. In the Minister's term alone, the health budget will have increased by almost €5 billion. We need to start solving these problems. It is not helpful to pretend that overcrowding in emergency departments today is caused by beds being taken out of the system over a period of two or three years 15 years ago. There is overcrowding today because we have the lowest number of doctors anywhere in the developed world, the diagnostic suites are not open often enough and the home care packages are not in place, which means that delayed discharges are pushing back onto the system. This is a whole-system issue.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will endeavour to be helpful. In fact, the policies of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have brought us to this point. Perhaps the Minister and Deputy Donnelly can take some time afterwards to divvy up the exact portion of blame between themselves. I think the Minister will agree that he should have published the winter plan at this stage. Anyone looking in here who spent last night sitting beside a parent or loved one on a trolley does not want to hear squabbling. Such people want to hear what the plan is. The Minister mentioned new beds in Limerick, but both of us know they will not help this winter.

Deputy Simon Harris: Correct.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This winter is coming. Nurses in Limerick have been already through the worst overcrowding they have ever seen in their long careers. They are at the end of their rope. The Minister is telling them they will get beds at some point in the future, but they know they will have to deal with the coming winter in the meantime. When will he publish the winter plan? Will it contain all the learnings that he said he would take from last year's failure to deal adequately with winter? Has he reviewed the value for money of private beds? Has he reviewed the value for money of the almost €1 million that has been spent on public relations? Has he reviewed the value for money of home care packages? Will that be incorporated into the plan? When will it be published?

Deputy Simon Harris: I know the Deputy does not like squabbling. I would not call it squabbling; I would call it debating in a parliamentary Chamber on whose policies work and whose policies do not work. When someone is dealing with complex healthcare matters, one-liners only take him or her so far. Deputy Donnelly has characterised the current position by referring to "the likes of which this country has never seen", but that is not the case. Waiting times for hospital operations are falling. We do not know what the outpatient waiting lists were the last time Fianna Fáil was in government because they were never published until my party came into government. The Deputy used to agree with my analysis of Fianna Fáil's healthcare record, but he does not agree with me now, obviously.

Deputy John Brassil: We are all entitled to change our minds.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will remind the Deputies opposite of Fianna Fáil's record in health.

It slashed the health budget. Its leader set up the HSE in a way that did not work. During the Celtic tiger years, it built loads of motorways and deserves credit for that, but it did not build any acute hospitals. That is the record. We are now working constructively on an agreed way forward on Sláintecare, but we need to hear whether Fianna Fáil is in favour of things like the de Buitléir report on taking private practice out of public hospitals. I know Deputy O'Reilly is.

I have heard Deputy Donnelly talk a lot about consultants. He wants to pay them more. They have a legitimate point on pay parity, but Fianna Fáil wants them to work differently. Does Deputy Donnelly believe it is right that private practice is happening in University Hospital Limerick while public patients are waiting on trolleys? I do not; I believe it is absolutely unfair and I want to implement the recommendations of the de Buitléir report. I hope Fianna Fáil will work with me on that.

Deputy O'Reilly is correct that the 60 beds in University Hospital Limerick will not be open this winter and I am certainly not suggesting they will. They are under construction and will open in 2020. That is important. It takes time to build a hospital extension and we now have funding for that.

In the absence of projects like that being ready for this winter, we need to look at how we can shift care into the community and decongest some of the hospitals. When I was in University Hospital Limerick on an unannounced visit recently, staff talked about the need for more home care. I credit Fianna Fáil with engaging on this and providing for more home care in the budget. A significant amount of funding is available for extra home care packages and extra transitional care. This is the earliest in any year the HSE has had clarity on its winter funding. I will meet the emergency department task force today where I expect to get an update on the winter plan and on the position of the chief operations officer in the HSE to finalise those plans in the coming days.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Minister for his reply. I would like to get into the detail. We can go back and forth and make political points, and I am sure we will have plenty of time to do that, but the reality is that we are facing into a winter where a very serious flu is working its way across the world towards us. I heard the Minister this morning quite rightly encouraging people to get the flu vaccine.

Last year was a crisis. This year there already have been more than 10,000 women and men aged over 75 years on trolleys for more than 24 hours. It is a crisis. We are already at overcrowding levels way beyond anything which was seen ten, 20 or 30 years ago.

What is different about this year's winter plan compared to that for last year? A winter plan last year had some limited success, but it was not enough even based on what is happening in our emergency departments today. What is different and better about the winter plan for this year? Does the Minister believe it will work? Why will it work this year when things did not work during the summer? What is different about it that will mean we will not see this crisis continue through the winter?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In response to a question from me, the Minister said that last year 75 public beds were opened. Perhaps we could get an indication as to whether they were left open or will be reopened. People want to know that.

When I say, for example, "The likes of which have never been seen before", they are not my words. Rather, they are the words of a nurse working in Limerick. Does the Minister have a

plan to staff these hospitals? I will not get into a debate about whether a ban on recruitment is a moratorium or something else. At the moment there is difficulty recruiting. Nurse managers will tell the Minister they have difficulty recruiting at local level. Does the Minister have a plan to staff those additional beds?

In response to another question from me, the Minister told me a review on lessons learned to process information, the details of the actions and outputs of the winter plan, including a breakdown of the amount spent and the aspects of the plan, will take place at the end of the winter period. That referred to the money spent on PR.

On the money spent on private beds, the Minister said he would conduct a review. Have those reviews been conducted? Will the Minister share that information with us? Will that learning be incorporated into the winter plan, whenever it is published? I welcome that the Minister said we will have it in the coming days. I assume we will, fingers crossed, have the information before we return here next week.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy O'Reilly knows that when she talks about money spent on PR, it is an attempt to make a connotation which does not exist. Money spent on PR is money spent on campaigns promoting vaccines, including the flu vaccine, and directing people to the appropriate places, including promoting our minor injury units. When I travel around the country, Deputies on all sides of the House bring me to those units and tell me they could be busier if only people knew about them.

As far as I know, the value-for-money reviews have been completed and I am very happy to ask the HSE to share them with Deputy O'Reilly and the health committee. I will also provide the Deputy with a report on the beds opened. To the best of my knowledge, they remained open but I will confirm that in writing for the Deputy.

I note the Deputy does not want to go back and forth on recruitment and we regularly debate the status of recruitment, but the published figures for the end of August 2019 compared to the end of August 2018 show 2,625 additional whole-time equivalent people working in the Irish health service. There are more doctors, nurses and therapists working in the health service than there were last year. Of course there is a need to do more, but more people are working in the health service.

Individual hospital managers, however, are not able to hire and recruit people for posts which are not funded. If we did that, Deputies would ask me on the floor of the Dáil about the size of the supplementary budget and how we arrived at that situation.

Recruitment is ongoing. I am using University Hospital Limerick as an example because it has been referenced today. About 68 additional people have been hired in Limerick in the past five weeks, 48 of whom are, I understand, nurses. We will put together the HSE service plan and the pay and numbers strategy. We have announced 1,000 additional staff for the community, and we will discuss that as Deputy Brassil has a question in that regard. Any beds that have been opened will have to be properly staffed in accordance with the safe staffing framework.

Deputy Donnelly asked what is different this year. In fairness to him, he acknowledged that the HSE made some progress last year in terms of how it co-ordinated its plan. It did not have a hospital and community plan; rather, it had integrated plans. There will be a continued effort to build on that this year, including using the national ambulance service. There is sometimes a challenge whereby people are ready to leave an acute hospital to go to a smaller or less acute

hospital but are waiting for ambulance transfers.

I know Sinn Féin supports the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, which also will be a part of the plan. Last year it gave vouchers for 5,000 diagnostic tests, which helped to take the pressure off emergency departments. We will do more of that this year and I, in conjunction with the HSE, am happy to fully brief the Deputy on the plans once they have been finalised in the coming days.

Primary Care Centres

3. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Minister for Health the status of the decisive shift to primary care pledged in the Programme for Partnership Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41486/19]

Deputy John Brassil: I ask for an update on the decisive shift to primary care pledged in the programme for Government and reiterated in the Sláintecare document. Everybody accepts that the cornerstone of our future health strategy is to fully resource our primary care services and by doing so we may, in some way, make progress in improving our health services. Unfortunately, to date I see no evidence of this decisive shift.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Brassil for his question and work on the Sláintecare strategy where it clearly came to the fore that funding community care and making that decisive shift is absolutely key. I want to assure him that we remain fully committed to the development of primary care. It is recognised that countries with a strong primary care sector have demonstrably better outcomes, lower mortality rates and lower overall health care costs.

As we have seen in recent years, there has been a significant investment in primary care centres around the country and 127 are now open. I want to be clear. They are not busy enough in terms of the volume we could be doing to provide services through primary care. That is not a criticism of the staff, who are excellent. We need to resource them to do more. That is why I am very pleased that in the budget announced this week we have received multiannual funding for 2020 and 2021 to hire 1,000 additional front-line staff to work in primary and community care. That means more public health nurses, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, occupational therapists and the sort of people one would expect to be part of a community team. This will properly staff our network.

In line with Sláintecare, a rough estimate shows that about 4,000 additional staff are needed to work within the community if we are to make the Sláintecare vision a reality. This will enable us to deliver 1,000 additional posts, a quarter of what we actually need. We are committed to delivering the 4,000 additional staff over ten years. To be very clear, I have spoken to the CEO of the HSE about funding and there will be funding to hire staff for the 1,000 posts by the end of this year because of the commitment given by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, on the floor of Dáil Éireann in his budget day speech. In the budget day book at www.budget.gov.ie there is reference to a €60 million full year cost for those staff. Any misinformation or confusion about that need not exist.

As Deputies know, given that I have been questioned about this very regularly, we have also reached a new agreement with our GPs. The agreement sees a decisive shift, in that from January people will be treated in GP clinics, rather than hospitals, for conditions such as asthma,

heart failure and other chronic diseases. I want to do more with pharmacists and I may have an opportunity to talk about that at a future date.

Deputy John Brassil: I wish to bring the Minister back to one figure. He said €60 million was available for the next two years, but only €10 million of that is for 2020. That is putting stuff into the never-never. A figure of €10 million will equate to 160 whole-time equivalents. This is minuscule compared to what is needed. The announcement sounds positive but stretching it out over two years will mean that its immediate effect will be minimal, which is the issue I continually have. We talk about the need for 1,000 extra GPs, 1,200 extra practice nurses and 1,100 public health nurses but we are nowhere near achieving those targets. Every time we make an announcement, it puts something over a period of two years and we just roll on. Who knows where we will be in 2021? The Minister and I might not even be here. We need action now. The figure of €60 million sounds positive but in reality, putting only €10 million into next year is window dressing.

Deputy Simon Harris: Whatever about my future, I am sure the Deputy will be here continuing to make a positive contribution. I assure him that I fully agree with some of the latter end of his contribution because he and the other members of the Sláintecare committee having rightly been putting pressure on the Government to deliver multi-annual funding. If we think we are going to fix the challenges of the health service and bring about Sláintecare by just looking budget to budget, we will fail. That is why one of my biggest asks of the Minister for Finance in budget 2020 was to give me multi-annual funding for Sláintecare. Last year, I succeeded in getting multi-annual funding for the GP contract, which is making that decisive shift and has been accepted by 95% of GPs. My big multi-annual ask this year was for €60 million in a full year. It is not the never-never. As the Deputy is well aware, the recruitment process will mean that all 1,000 posts can be filled by 31 December. We will have 1,000 people there and the full year pay bill for that will be €60 million. If I did not get that full-year cost, the Deputy's criticism would be entirely correct but I have now been able to give Paul Reid, the CEO of the HSE, the certainty that on 31 December 2020, he can have 1,000 additional speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, public health nurses and others on his pay bill for the HSE. That will make a real difference and a decisive shift. The GP contract is already making that decisive shift with more patients, starting with older people, getting appointments with their GPs instead of having to trek to hospital. We must make community and primary care busier, which is what the investment is about.

Deputy John Brassil: I might go back a step. In reply to a parliamentary question from Deputy Donnelly during the summer, it emerged that if one compares the final budget spend for 2018 in primary care with the budget spend projection for 2019, one comes up with a reduction of €7 million. If one breaks it down into the community healthcare organisations, CHOs, one can see that there is a significant reduction in CHOs 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9. I have those figures and will give them to the Minister. They are factual. How can we roll out improved services if the spend of 2019 in every CHO bar two is less? It does not match up.

The Minister referred to the GP contract and the progress there. Stating my obvious conflict of interest in this area, I note that the Minister committed to rolling out a new contract for pharmacists and resolving the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, by 2020. I ask him to hold to that commitment.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will honour that. I had a good conversation with Darragh O'Loughlin, chief executive of the Irish Pharmacy Union, last week when representatives of

the union came in to discuss some very important work it is doing on our Brexit preparedness, for which I thank it. I had hoped to begin initial engagement on some of the issues in pharmacy this year with a view to formal talks starting at the beginning of 2020. Pharmacists are coming up with solutions and ideas. We just need to make sure that what they are offering to do is added value or in other words, it is not duplication. We need to have that discussion about who does what in primary care and I am looking forward to having that discussion with our pharmacies. We must also have a discussion about contraception and the role of pharmacy *vis-à-vis* the role of the GP. I expect to publish the contraception report in the coming days.

Regarding individual figures at the end of the year, out of a budget of €16 billion, €17 billion or €18 billion, people can identify €1 million here and €7 million there - relatively small figures. This highlights the need for a multi-annual approach. We have €220 million for GPs over four years. That is primary care. We have €60 million for Sláintecare funding over 2020 and 2021. More money is going into primary care. We have so many primary care centres in all of our constituencies. We have the bricks and mortar; we must make them work in terms of taking that activity out of the hospitals and putting it into primary care. I genuinely believe that budget 2020, while only a start, is a real start in that shift.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The next question is Question No. 4 in the name of Deputy Barry.

Deputy Mick Barry: I wish to ask the Minister about the cut in the rehabilitation training allowance-----

Deputy Simon Harris: The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is taking the question but is not yet in the Chamber.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Did the Minister speak to the Minister of State this morning?

Deputy Simon Harris: I believe he is due to be here but I do not wish to detain Deputy Barry. The Minister of State has the documentation.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Could we hold on for a minute to see whether the Minister of State arrives?

Deputy Mick Barry: If he will be here in the next ten minutes, we will hold. Otherwise, I need to ask the Minister.

Deputy Simon Harris: Of course. I am more than happy to answer.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I cannot hold up the business of the House for ten minutes. I could give the Minister of State a minute or two to get here.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am happy to go to the next question and wait for the Minister of State's reply later.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Unfortunately, Deputy Connolly has not yet arrived. Does the Deputy want the Minister to take his question?

Deputy Mick Barry: If the arrangement is that the Minister of State will take my question, I am happy to wait for him.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will wait for a short period of time. Deputy Connolly has agreed to take a written reply so she will not be here. Therefore, we will give the Minister of State two minutes to get here. If he is not here by then, I will move on to Other Questions.

Deputy John Brassil: I put down Question No. 25, which I could take now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I have no doubt Deputy Brassil would like to take Question No. 25 but, unfortunately, I cannot-----

Deputy Mick Barry: I have put down Question No. 11, which I could take.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I have Question No. 14.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Perhaps the Deputies should put all the numbers they mentioned into a lotto slip for Saturday night. Seeing as there are no budget discussions today, I thought the Minister of State would be here but, obviously, he has been held up somewhere.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Barry has put down Question No. 11. I suggest we swap the order of the questions so I could take Question No. 11 now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I understand that Deputy O'Loughlin, who has put down Question No. 6, is almost here. If she does not arrive in the next few moments, I have no problem with taking Question 11 but I understand that a number of Deputies are coming so we should give them the chance. I understand Deputy Buckley has permission to take Deputy Jonathan O'Brien's Question No. 10 and will be next, if those Deputies do not turn up.

I need the permission of the House to move on to Ceisteanna Eile, that is from Question No. 6 onward. Is Deputy Brendan Smith willing to put his question to the Minister now?

Deputy Brendan Smith: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will go back to Deputy Barry's question when the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, arrives. Is that agreed? Agreed. I apologise for rushing Deputy Smith on this.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Hospital Waiting Lists

8. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when additional capacity will be provided in orthopaedics to reduce delays in assessments and procedures for patients in counties Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41188/19]

Deputy Brendan Smith: As I have previously outlined to the Minister through representations, debates and parliamentary questions, patients in Cavan and Monaghan experience considerable delays in accessing orthopaedic assessments and follow-up procedures. I am anxious

that additional capacity be provided for those two counties and for the north east in particular. The figures I received at the end of August, unfortunately, indicated a further increase on previous waiting list numbers. What hope is there for additional orthopaedic capacity for patients in Cavan and Monaghan in 2020?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his important question about orthopaedics in the Cavan-Monaghan region. I am conscious that waiting times are often unacceptably long and that this places a burden on patients and their families. We are committed to improving waiting times for hospital appointments and procedures. We have made some progress on hospital operation waiting lists, which have fallen.

The HSE advises that the acute element of the orthopaedic service for this region is currently provided through Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. The elective component of the service is provided via the regional orthopaedic unit in Our Lady's hospital in Navan and consultants also work out of Cavan and Monaghan to provide clinics for orthopaedic patients, which is the germ of the Deputy's question. I understand that the delivery of orthopaedic services in this region is kept under review by the HSE.

More broadly, the Government announced in budget 2020 that it has further increased investment in tackling waiting lists, with funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, increasing to €100 million in 2020. I know that is an issue of importance to the Deputy. This year-on-year increase to the NTPF provides opportunities to further improve waiting times.

My Department is now working with the HSE and the fund to develop the scheduled care access plan for 2020. The HSE service plan for 2020 will set out the planned activity level for the year ahead, while the NTPF will work with the hospital system to provide additionality to improve access to inpatient day case treatment, with a particular focus on hospital outpatient services. I encourage individual hospitals and hospital groups to put forward proposals for that 2020 funding. We now have a significant access fund of €100 million and we will be inviting proposals on what more can be done, whether in Cavan, Monaghan or other parts of the country, of which hospital groups are aware.

I will raise the issues noted in the Deputy's question directly with the NTPF and the HSE. I encourage the hospital group to bring forward proposals because I am happy to do whatever can be done to drive down orthopaedic waiting times in Cavan and Monaghan. I believe we now have the level of funding to make that a reality.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I would be glad to see an improvement in the delivery of both assessments and follow-up procedures where they are necessary. People come to all of us on a weekly basis who are obviously in pain and suffering but who are still waiting on an assessment and follow-up procedure. They are often told that the procedure could be carried out without delay if they were private patients. I welcome the Minister's commitment to make additional funding available to hospitals in the north east with orthopaedic capacity. I sincerely hope that proposals that are put forward are acted upon and additional services and capacity are put in place in early 2020. I do not want to talk this time next year about funding having been provided but not yet drawn down or allocated. I would like an assurance that when hospitals put forward realistic and viable proposals, they will meet with a quick response and that additional capacity will be put in place. Many patients, some of whom may be listening to us, are suffering and in pain. They are often older persons whose mobility is damaged as well. It is important that we address this particular issue as rapidly as possible.

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not disagree with a word the Deputy said. I have been advised that Cavan Monaghan Hospital has not yet submitted any proposals to the NTPF. I take this opportunity to encourage all of our hospitals, hospital groups, and community health organisations, CHOs, to bring forward proposals.

There are excellent management and staff in the Cavan Monaghan Hospital. I have had the pleasure of visiting both hospitals and meeting the Deputy regarding how we can make Monaghan Hospital busier and build its capacity. I urge both hospitals to engage with the hospital group and bring forward proposals to the NTPF, as it has funding going into 2020 that should make new proposals viable.

Cavan Monaghan Hospital currently has no orthopaedic patients on its inpatient day case waiting list, due to the reasons I outlined. There are currently 86 patients living in Cavan or Monaghan on the outpatient day case orthopaedic waiting list. Some 58% of the patients in this area are also on the corrective and preventative action plan, CAPA, list. The latest NTPF list shows that 93% of those on CAPA are waiting nine months or less. We are making progress on the inpatient day cases, but we need to make more progress on outpatient cases and I would welcome proposals on that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the additional funding for the NTPF, for which our party spokesperson advocated strongly. I also welcome the progress that has been made with the cross-Border scheme. Many patients go to Northern Ireland to access services, as I mentioned during a previous debate. Those who read Belfast newspapers, particularly the nationalist ones, as I do on a daily basis, will see advertisements from our private hospitals seeking patients from Northern Ireland to avail of the cross-Border directive. Surely the Department, the Minister, or the HSE could pull this together. If there is capacity to carry out procedures here, let them be carried out here instead of people having to head to Belfast or elsewhere in Northern Ireland. It would cost less if those people could undergo those procedures in our own State. It does not make sense that clinics and hospitals in Northern Ireland are looking to attract our patients while private hospitals in our State are looking to attract patients from Northern Ireland. Surely this can be managed in a much better way for the same money.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy referenced the cross-Border directive. As a Border Deputy, he will be particularly concerned about and pleased with the work we have done in this House to protect reciprocal health arrangements in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The Brexit omnibus Bill we passed in April means that reciprocal healthcare rights, which apply to people travelling between North and South and, indeed, east and west, will continue regardless of the political environment into which a no-deal Brexit could bring us.

I do not disagree with the Deputy about ensuring we utilise all the capacity here, though we are making progress in that regard. The NTPF thankfully no longer just spends its money on private hospitals. It has invested €1 million in Nenagh to open a new cataract theatre, which is bringing real progress in that mid-west. It has also opened theatres in Bantry General Hospital. When I visited Monaghan, I was told at great length that the fund could be doing more there, but the NTPF needs to receive proposals from the hospital and hospital group first. I am satisfied that we, working with Fianna Fáil, have provided the NTPF with a level of funding that should allow it to respond positively to such proposals.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will now return to Priority Question No. 4. I am glad to see that the Minister of State battled through the traffic and got here eventually.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I apologise. I was stuck in traffic.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I ask Deputy Barry to put his question.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is much anticipation.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh (Atógáil) - Priority Questions (Resumed)

Rehabilitative Training Allowance Payments

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the decision to cut the rehabilitative training allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41501/19]

Deputy Mick Barry: The Government cut the rehabilitative training allowance from 1 September, taking €31.80 a week away from young people and school leavers with disabilities. At the time, the Minister of State spoke about alternative plans. However, I did not see any alternative plans in Tuesday's budget. Perhaps they are buried in there and he can explain what he intends to do with that €3.7 million. It should go back to the young people, but I would like to hear his explanation.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I am delighted to have the opportunity to deal with this issue because there has been much misinformation in recent weeks put out by people for political reasons. The Government's priority is to provide access to high quality day services for as many people with disabilities as possible. The HSE funds day services for over 27,000 people with disabilities, including day services and rehabilitative training programmes.

The HSE's New Directions policy seeks to reconfigure and personalise HSE funded adult day services. It offers a flexible and individualised set of supports to enable each person to live a life of their choosing in accordance with their own wishes and needs.

Rehabilitative training programmes are designed to equip participants with basic personal, social and work related skills. Approximately 2,200 people attend rehabilitative training programmes, including the approximately 400 new school leavers who commenced their rehabilitative training programme in September this year. The rehabilitative training bonus payment is payable at a rate of €31.80 per week. It was introduced in 2001, aligned with a similar FÁS training bonus that later became the SOLAS vocational training programme payment. It is important to note that this payment was reduced in 2011 and discontinued in 2012, while, to date, the rehabilitative training bonus has continued to be paid in the health sector. Since September, the rehabilitative training bonus payment no longer applies to new attendees. Rather, the money that would have been spent on the bonus, estimated at approximately €3.7 million over four years, will be used to address unmet needs in day service provision for people with disabilities. There is no cut. The 2,200 people participating in the training programme receive the €31.80 payment per week. We can, therefore, bury that issue.

Members come here and talk about services. I will give them services. The redirected fund-

ing which the HSE has confirmed will be ring-fenced will be used to create – I hope the Deputy will listen to this point - approximately 148 additional full day placements or 370 additional enhanced day places nationally.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Minister of State must conclude and allow Deputy Barry to come back in.

Deputy Finian McGrath: There is no cut in the rehabilitative training bonus payment. There is no cut in the number of rehabilitative training places available.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Minister of State was not listening to me. I must allow Deputy Barry back in.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I apologise.

Deputy Mick Barry: If the Minister of State raises his voice a little louder, he might convince himself. I do not think, however, that he has convinced the trainees and the staff in question. He accused them of giving misinformation. There was no misinformation given by the trainees.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I said it was the Deputy.

Deputy Mick Barry: There was no misinformation given by the staff. It is a fact, as the Minister of State has just admitted, that those who commenced the programme on 1 September, approximately 400, no longer receive the allowance. It is not misinformation that the payment of €31.80 which would otherwise have been used to pay for lunches and travel to the training centres has been taken from new entrants. However, we must focus on the phrase used by the Minister of State, namely, that the €3.7 million taken from trainees will be used to address unmet needs. When will it be used to address unmet needs? The money was taken from the trainees on 1 September and for over a month that money has been sitting in a bank account or somewhere else. Will it be used to address unmet needs next week, next month, next year or the year after? Will the Minister of State be precise in his answer?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I will be precise and very clear. First, there is no cut in the rehabilitative training bonus payment. Second, there is no cut in the number of rehabilitative training places. Third, all rehabilitative training participants are eligible to receive the disability allowance of €203 per week and receive a free travel pass. No expectation of receipt of the rehabilitative training bonus payment has been created by the HSE, or anybody else, for the 2019 participants on rehabilitative training programmes.

On the money that will be reallocated for other services, I take the Deputy's point that some people have concerns. The Minister, Deputy Harris, made representations to ensure the money would be ring-fenced. During the week I received a letter from Mr. Paul Reid, chief executive officer of the HSE, in which he said, "I am happy to confirm that the moneys accrued from the discontinuation of the rehabilitative training bonus payment will be used (1) to provide enhanced disability day services for the current recipients of day services that have been part of time placements and (2) to provide day services for those adults that will require a HSE funded service". He also acknowledged that he would keep in regular contact with the Department of Health. My officials will keep in contact with him to ensure the moneys are spent on front-line services.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister of State has said all trainees who go to rehab centres are eligible for and availing of free travel. Will he reflect on that comment? Will he say whether he stands over it? Is it correct that all trainees are eligible and availing of free travel? Second, I did not ask the Minister of State whether the moneys would be reallocated. I do not care how many letters he reads to me from Mr. Paul Reid or anybody else. The question I asked was when would the moneys be reallocated. The Minister of State has had this saving sitting in a bank account for over a month. Has it been reallocated?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Mick Barry: Will it be reallocated today or in the future and, if so, when?

Deputy Finian McGrath: It has been reallocated. As soon as I receive information on the extra services which have been provided, I will be delighted to forward the information to the Deputy. As part of the budget, an extra €13 million has been provided for day service placements. All participants are eligible for free travel. If the Deputy has some information about somebody who has been excluded, he can forward the details to me and I will check them.

Question No. 5 replied to with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile (Atógáil) - Other Questions (Resumed)

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

6. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Health the status of a day care centre for Monasterevin, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41174/19]

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: The 5,000 people of Monasterevin are playing a waiting game in seeking a new secondary school at St. Paul's, the amalgamation of two primary schools and an announcement on the blueway which we hope will be made next month. In particular, I refer the Minister to the waiting game on the day care centre which closed five years ago in 2014. Thankfully, one of the local football clubs stepped into the breach, meaning that temporary facilities were provided. It is simply not good enough that nothing has been done. It is not just those who avail of the day care centre who have been affected. The Alzheimer Society of Ireland had a place in the Monasterevin day centre that covers all of south Kildare. It subsequently had to move to three locations.

Deputy Simon Harris: The HSE recently published its capital plan for the period 2019 to 2021, outlining projects to be progressed which include the day care centre in Monasterevin, County Kildare. This will be welcome news for people there who, rightly, will want to know what happens next.

The HSE is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructural projects. It has advised me that a design team is progressing stage 1 of the upgrade of the building on Drogheda Street. This will require an application for planning permission to be lodged. There is funding to deliver the project which will be delivered. Obviously, the process is for the design team to

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progress stage 1 and submit a planning application. I will be happy to keep in touch with the Deputy on this matter as it progresses. It is an important issue for the people of Monasterevin. Access to the original building had to be restricted as far back as 2014 owing to health and safety issues. I thank the local GAA club which stepped into the breach, pending completion of the capital works, in providing temporary facilities. The project is listed in the capital plan and will be funded. It is vital that an application for planning permission be submitted. I am sure the design team is working on the application for planning permission for the upgrade of the day care centre. I will be happy to keep in touch with the Deputy as the HSE advises me as it progresses.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister for confirming that the day care centre project is included in the capital plan. That is welcome news. I have had eight different replies to parliamentary questions on this matter which I have put in the past 12 months.

I have had several in the years since I was elected in 2016. One of the replies I received 18 months ago from the HSE stated that planning permission would be sought by the end of 2018. I am concerned that, 12 months later, the planning permission application has still not been made.

The latest reply I received from the HSE, dated 10 October, states:

The design team for the upgrade of the day care centre building on Drogheda Street, Monasterevin, County Kildare, are now progressing Stage (i) to completion. The programme is subject to the grant of planning permission for the project and the availability of capital funding.

Reference to “the availability of capital funding” is something I noted in every one of the replies. The Minister said that project will be in the capital programme and I accept what that but I am concerned that today’s reply states that it is subject to the availability of capital funding.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the follow-up question. I can tell this is an issue she has been pursuing back and forth with the HSE for quite some time. I will certainly engage with the HSE on the timeline for the submission of the planning application and revert directly to her in that regard.

The way the capital planning process works, as she will be aware, is that we need to get through a number of stages and the standard reference to it being subject to the availability of capital is a reference to the fact that this project has yet to receive planning permission. The project is included in the capital plan. That is a commitment from us to deliver the capital to fund that project but, before we get to that point, the project needs to receive planning permission.

The effort must be on getting a planning application submitted as a matter of urgency. Subject to planning permission being granted, I am more than happy to meet the Kildare Deputies to update them on timelines for the delivery.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I accept the Minister’s bona fides in this. I also appreciate that his is willing to expedite this and to meet further on this.

I am still concerned, however, that planning permission and availability are two clearly distinct elements within the reply that I received today. I still do not understand why the planning

permission application, 12 months later, has not been submitted.

Having said that, the news is positive. It is important for the people of Monasterevin who use this service because the budget reflected an agreement that there would be ten new support staff for Alzheimer's services. The Kildare Alzheimer's services use this and are now in their second temporary building. They have to leave at Christmas and they are at the end of their tether in terms of trying to find another place. While providing supports, we must have places where people can go to. I look forward to a resolution on this. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am pleased the Deputy referenced the work of the Alzheimer Society. This is an area of interest she has pursued during her time in the House. I am pleased that in budget 2020 we were able to agree funding, which has been welcomed by the Alzheimer Society, for the appointment of ten additional dementia advisers throughout the country. This means we will be able to ensure that there is a dementia adviser in every county. I want to acknowledge on the record Deputy Butler, Senator Kevin Humphreys and Colette Kelleher and, I am sure, many others who have been working on this issue on a cross-party basis. I hope that will come as welcome news to the Alzheimer's services in Deputy O'Loughlin's county and, indeed, across the country.

I detect and understand her frustration in respect of when the planning application will be submitted. I will further engage with the HSE on that and revert to Kildare Deputies. My understanding is that the centre will be situated in the existing two-storey house that is listed as a protected structure. I can only presume that sometimes it takes a little longer to design planning applications for such structures. The plan is that this house will be renovated and refurbished to ensure that it is fit for purpose. I assure the people of Monasterevin that we will make progress on this, that it is included in the capital plan and that the next phase is planning permission approval.

Mental Health Services Expenditure

7. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when the full allocation for mental health spending in 2019 will be drawn down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41185/19]

Deputy James Browne: I tabled Question No. 7 on the Order Paper to the Minister.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): Budget 2019 made allowance for an additional €55 million for mental health services. This comprised €20 million continuing cost in 2019 of developments initiated in 2018, combined with €35 million for further new developments. Since 2012, the mental health HSE budget has been increased by almost 40%.

This investment has enabled the HSE mental health services to progress initiatives outlined in the National Service Plan 2019. Initiatives such as e-mental health pilot programmes and clinical programmes in areas such as eating disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, continue to be developed and implemented with this funding. Funding is also provided in 2019 to plan for the opening of the new national forensic mental hospital.

To date, the HSE has drawn down €30 million of the foregoing funding, and an application

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for a further €10 million is currently being processed. In addition, €3 million has been paid to Pobal for the community mental health fund.

The management of the remaining €12 million funding for 2019 will be agreed with the HSE in the coming weeks.

I reassure the Deputy that mental health continues to be a priority area for the Government. We recognise that mental health service users are often among the most vulnerable in society and, for this reason, in budget 2020 the Government maintained its commitment to mental health with an allocation of more than €1 billion.

Deputy James Browne: A Mental Health Commission, MHC, report published this morning identifies long-term neglect of people with serious and enduring mental illness in the mental health system. It is another in a regular series of highly critical reports from the Mental Health Commission.

I was not surprised by the report. One of the most difficult and common situations I deal with is persons being released from the department of psychiatry without accommodation and without rehabilitation services who end up in a revolving door system where inevitably, a number of months later, they are back in the department of psychiatry - a type of patch them up and show-them-the-front-door approach.

We are in year 13 of a ten-year mental health strategy and yet barely over 50% of the recommended staff are in place and less than 10% for those with intellectual disabilities, with none in some regions.

Fianna Fáil, through the confidence and supply agreement, secured an additional €105 million for mental health. In budget 2019, €55 million was secured. It was secured previously in 2018. The Department of Health knew that funding was coming. The Minister signed a document to that effect. Some €25 million of that expenditure seems to have been withheld so far this year. This is unconscionable. What is the reason for this funding being unspent and where is the ministerial oversight?

Deputy Jim Daly: I am not sure from where comes this €25 million being withheld by the Government from the HSE. I saw a tweet from Mental Health Reform to that effect yesterday.

Deputy James Browne: A parliamentary reply.

Deputy Jim Daly: The Government is not withholding €25 million from the HSE. The full €55 million that was an order of Government was made available to the HSE to spend. There is a process under which the Department releases the funding as it is needed. The Department does not merely throw the €55 million onto the table and say, "Spend that." It is released as it is being spent and that is the process to which the Deputy refers.

There is not an issue with withholding funding. Some of it relates to recurring expenditure and one-off expenditure.

A sum of €12 million remains to be spent. We still have two and a half months of the year to spend that. I am meeting the HSE and the Department of Health next week to further oversee the expenditure. When the Deputy referred to ministerial oversight, I have overseen the expenditure of that funding, and, indeed, of the entire €1 billion budget, over the past 12 months.

Regarding his issue about rehabilitation and the MHC report, I will refer to it in a later response.

Deputy James Browne: Reference to the funding being withheld came in a parliamentary reply. It stated the funding was unspent. There was a year's preparation available to ensure that this funding would be spent.

The funding is desperately needed in mental health services throughout the country and there is no reason to fail to spend it. The Mental Health Act 2001, which was due to be updated years ago, has still not been updated. Unqualified consultants are practising in mental health - a practice condemned by the President of the High Court. The majority of mental health facilities remain unregulated as they do not come under the MHC's remit. Mental health services in St. Luke's were prosecuted this year, the first time ever a mental health facility had to be prosecuted. Suicide remains the greatest cause of death among those aged between 15 to 24. Primary care psychology is a disaster, with patients three years waiting in my county of Wexford. Anti-depressant prescription is increasing at an alarming rate. The expansion of the Jigsaw service has been held up. When I started here, the Tipperary unit was to be opened within a few months. Three and a half years later, it still has not, yet the Department cannot spend funding. In the Department where most Ministers for Finance seem to suffer from financial incontinence, we have a Minister of State with responsibility for mental health who seems to suffer from financial constipation.

Deputy Jim Daly: Those one-liners might sound good but the reality is that for every challenge in the system, there are many successes.

We have a budget of €1.026 billion this year, up from €711 million when the Government took office in 2012. It represents an increase of almost €400 million in the budget. We also have the refresh of A Vision for Change. In the year to date, we have seen a 20% reduction in the number of children waiting for child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. Today we launched a telephone line which will be used to provide an advisory service to direct people to the most appropriate service. It line went live today on World Mental Health Day. The tele-health pilot schemes for psychology and psychiatry services are up and running. We have introduced 134 assistant psychologists and psychiatrists to create a lower level of infrastructure, particularly for young people, which has reduced substantially the reliance on CAMHS as a specialist service. There are many successes in the mental health service. I acknowledge the roles of the HSE and the Department in bringing them about.

Respite Care Services

9. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the significant fall in the number of overnights, with or without day respite care, accessed by persons with a disability in the Cork South Lee local health office area since 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41226/19]

Deputy Michael McGrath: This question relates to the provision of overnight respite care beds for people with a disability, both children and adults, in particular in CHO 4, Cork South Lee. The figures which I will outline do not paint a good picture. I seek an explanation for them and to know what will be done to reverse the trend of the number of respite care beds falling.

(Deputy Finian McGrath): The Government's ongoing priority is the safeguarding of vulnerable persons in the care of the health service. We are committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives.

As part of its ongoing service provision, this year the HSE national service plan set a target of over 180,000 overnight and 42,500 day respite care sessions to be provided for families in need across the country. The HSE has advised that there are changes to the models of service, including respite care, being provided in the Cork South Lee area, specifically, the number of overnights with or without day respite care accessed by persons with a disability. The changes to the models of service being provided have not been reflected in data captured for key performance indicator, KPI, returns. The greatest variable in the KPI information relates to children's respite care services provided by the Brothers of Charity. In 2015 a respite care Home Share project was developed as an alternative model to the traditional respite care service. It allows children to spend time with host families in a home from home environment. This new model of respite care support is proving very popular and a number of children receive more than the 30 nights annual provision, but that is not reflected in the current KPI returns. Home Share was extended to provide significant levels of support for families through a continuum of care provided by an alternative family. This, in turn, has reduced the number of children who require residential respite care to those with higher complex needs.

CHO 4 opened a respite care house in west Cork in December 2018. It accepts referrals from across County Cork.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. What he seems to be saying is the data Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony received by way of a reply to a parliamentary question do not capture all of the respite care overnights. If that is the case, it is inexplicable. The data I have for the Cork South Lee area are that in 2015 there were 4,084 respite care overnights. In 2018 that number had fallen to just over 2,500. That represents a fall of 38% between 2015 and 2018 and the figure is falling again this year. The Minister of State spoke about a change to the model of care. The provision of respite care in Cork is appalling. It is literally only provided in emergency cases where families simply cannot continue. That is the reality. The hard figures I have in front of me show a 38% fall in the number of respite care overnights. This reply to a parliamentary question does not indicate anything about a change to the model of care and it not being captured in the data. If respite care overnights are being provided in a family setting, it should be set out in the data, but it is not.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I take the Deputy's point and also the point about the data. We have to get to the bottom of that matter and I give a commitment that I will do so. Also, if there are particular needs in the Cork area, I will absolutely deal with them. The reality is that we have been investing in respite care services for the past three years. I will travel to Naas in two weeks' time to open our 12th respite care house, just to let Deputy O'Loughlin know. I have not yet picked a date.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: We have been waiting for it to be opened.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Nationally, the investment in residential, respite care and home services in the past three years has been amazing, but if there are particular gaps in counties, I will listen to the position on them. At national level, the HSE received funding of €5 million to support the development of respite care services. That funding was subsequently allocated among community health organisations in the form of 12 respite care houses. As I mentioned,

a new respite care house run by Kerry Parents and Friends Association was opened in March 2018. The one in west Cork was opened in December 2018. On alternative respite care services, Cork Kerry Community Healthcare received in the region of €220,000. I accept the Deputy's point that we first need to get the data right. If there are particular gaps in Cork, we need to look at them also.

Deputy Michael McGrath: There certainly are particular gaps. Looking at the text of the reply, in addition to the data provided in the table, it acknowledges that there has been reduced provision of respite care overnights. It refers to unmet needs and growing demand. It states beds that had been available to provide respite care in some cases have been transferred for use as long-term residential placements. That is the reality. The numbers are falling. There has been a 38% drop in three years in CHO 4. I raise the wider issue. If we look at all of the metrics and all of the waiting lists, particularly for disability services, the waiting times for assessment for children with special needs and the lack of therapy interventions, CHO 4 seems to be an outlier. Does the HSE and the Minister's Department carry out any performance measurement of the way different CHO areas are performing because to me CHO 4 does not seem to be a strong performer? Again, this is borne out by the evidence given in the reply to a parliamentary question.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I mentioned respite care services. In the context of the budget announced yesterday, in 2020 we will spend approximately €2 billion on social care services. There is a fundamental question to be asked. If there are particular parts of the country - the Deputy is talking about CHO 4 - that are not receiving the relevant services, that is an issue I will examine and monitor closely. I will come back to the Deputy with more details, but the bottom line is we have to see the money invested to deliver respite care services. We cannot have a situation where that is not the case in some counties. I am aware that in Dublin hundreds of letters are sent to parents every day offering extra respite care provision.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Minister of State could send a few to Cork.

Deputy Finian McGrath: That is happening in Dublin. To answer the Deputy's question, the position in CHO 4 has to be looked at and I will do so.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Question No. 10 in the name of Deputy Jonathan O'Brien will be taken by Deputy Buckley.

Hospital Consultant Recruitment

10. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health when a new endocrinologist for the paediatric diabetes service in Cork University Hospital will be appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40957/19]

Deputy Pat Buckley: I ask the Minister for Health to indicate when the new endocrinologist for the paediatric diabetes service in Cork University Hospital will be appointed and if he will make a statement on the matter.

(Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputy for the question he asked on behalf of Deputy Jonathan O'Brien. As the Deputies will be aware, Cork University Hospital is the centre for the treatment of paediatric diabetes for the south-west region. It treats approximately 400 children

with diabetes, with an average of between 45 and 52 new children being diagnosed each year. I assure the Deputy that the Government is committed to further developing and strengthening paediatric diabetic services. The HSE has advised me that an additional permanent consultant paediatric endocrinologist is due to commence duties in Cork University Hospital in January 2020, which will greatly enhance the paediatric diabetic service. We provided funding in the HSE national service plan for 2019 for recruitment to fill that post and I am pleased that the recruitment competition has been successful. We have approximately 125 additional consultants working in the health service already this year. I am pleased to see that the consultant paediatric endocrinologist post has been filled and that the person concerned will commence work in January 2020. It will make a significant difference to the paediatric diabetic service we can offer children in the south west.

The HSE has further advised me that while Cork University Hospital awaits the appointment of this permanent consultant, a locum consultant paediatrician is in place, alongside a part-time consultant paediatric endocrinologist to support additional clinics to target long waiters and patients who had appointments cancelled in the past. This is a very welcome development not only for people in Cork but also in quite a large catchment area which includes the whole of counties Limerick, Clare, Tipperary, Waterford and Kilkenny. We provided approval to recruit these additional posts. It was not only approval for the extra consultant who will be in place from January. The national service plan also provided funding for a new psychologist, social worker and dietitian to work as part of that wider paediatric diabetes service in Cork. These posts will also support the delivery of the model of care. I hope this is welcome news and I look forward to people taking up these posts at the start of the new year.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister and welcome the news. It is to be hoped such provision will progress. I welcome that there is an increase in the number of psychologists and dietitians because key findings were made recently and staffing deficits were also identified across other disciplines with a national working time equivalent percentage deficit of 95% in psychologists, 74% deficit in dietitians and a 19% deficit in specialist diabetes nursing. Any improvement in the Cork-Kerry region must be welcomed.

There probably are more than 100 teenagers making the transition to adulthood. Has HSE management done any forward planning to progress their access to services?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his detailed questions in this regard. I do not disagree with him that there is a further body of work we need to do to make sure we increase capacity in all of these teams. I very much welcome the fact that when the Deputy spoke about this issue, he referred to a range of healthcare professionals. Sometimes, in the media and political commentary, people tend to talk about consultants and nurses. While both are important key staff within the health service, the way we are delivering health services now and the way we must do so in the future is very much around a multidisciplinary team where the roles of a dietitian, social worker, psychologist and all the different roles coming together is what will lead to the best possible outcomes and to shifts in the model of care.

On the Deputy's question on children transitioning from childhood to adulthood, I will have the HSE or my Department revert to him on it directly. We have developed a new national clinical programme in paediatrics and neonatology, called the new national model of care for paediatric healthcare services in Ireland. We talk a great deal in this House about the building of the children's hospital in terms of bricks and mortar but this will transform the delivery of healthcare for children and I will send the Deputy a copy of that also.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the Minister's commitment to addressing provision for teenagers transitioning to adulthood. I look forward to receiving a reply on behalf of Deputy Jonathan O'Brien and Cork University Hospital.

Health Services Provision

11. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the implementation of the recommendation by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution for the availability of free contraception; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41358/19]

72. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the implementation of his plans to provide free contraception; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41365/19]

Deputy Mick Barry: I heard the Minister mention earlier that he would have a contraception report in the next few days and perhaps it is timely to ask him to report on the implementation of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eight Amendment of the Constitution for the availability of free contraception. I look forward to hearing his comments on that matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to answer Questions Nos. 11 and 72 together.

Deputy Barry was up early this morning as well. I thank him for his timely question regarding contraception. I reiterate on the record of this House my view that we need to make contraception free for all women in our country. We have made very significant progress regarding male contraception in terms of condoms. We have very significantly increased the amount of condoms being distributed. We are putting vending machines into a number of locations throughout the country and our sexual health strategy very much aligns with this both in terms of reducing crisis pregnancy and in terms of reducing sexually transmitted infections, STIs, which are at a worrying level in our country.

The question of access to contraception is an important one. That is why, following on from the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, I established a working group within my Department to examine the range of policy, regulatory and legislative issues because there are issues in each of those areas which arise with respect to improving access to contraception. I established the group in April and it has overseen a public consultation exercise. It received many public submissions and submissions from stakeholders. It has undertaken a review of research and met a number of stakeholders directly. I am pleased to say the group has just finalised its report and it has submitted to me in recent days for consideration.

It goes without saying that I intend to fully consider the detail of the report but, in doing so, I do not intend to sit on it. I would like to publish it and will do so this month. It might be very helpful for the Joint Committee on Health to see it also and to be able to consider some of these issues. We know, however, that there can be barriers to accessing contraception and that cost can be an issue. Most forms of contraception, including long-acting reversible contraceptives, LARCs, are provided free of charge to those with medical cards, so we are not starting from a point of nobody having free access. Many people already have free access to contraception. I have already mentioned the national condom distribution service, which supports free access to

contraception among those who may be at increased risk of negative sexual health outcomes. The working group examined other means by which the costs involved in accessing contraception can be reduced and it has come up with a range of recommendations as well.

I intend to publish the report shortly. I suggest we will have a body of work to do in terms of legislation and policy options and we should get on and do that.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister stated that the report will be published in the month of October. I would have liked to have seen it published before the announcement of budget rather than after it, which brings me to my first supplementary question. Has the Minister made provision in the budget arrangements for 2020 to provide the funding necessary to provide free contraception for all in this State in the year 2020. As he is aware, Ireland is an outlier in terms of maintaining a cost barrier for women to have access to contraception. I am sure he will agree that the sooner that cost barrier is removed the better. Is there funding in the budget to provide free contraception in this State in 2020?

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy that it would have been useful to have the report published in advance of the budget. However, I remind the House that we are framing a budget in the context of a no-deal Brexit where there is a range of priority issues we needed to address, including making sure we address home care services, mental health services and a number of other issues that have been raised in this House this morning. When people see the report, I think it will become very clear to the Deputy that if we as an Oireachtas were to press “go” on this, and I hope we do, much of 2020 would be taken up with the need to legislate in this area, as well as the need to engage with the healthcare professionals involved. They may need engagement regarding fees as well. I suggest that the cost in 2020 would be minimal because, if we are being honest with each other, this will really arise as a 2021 issue, but I would like this Oireachtas and Government to set the policy direction shortly. I would like to publish the report this month.

The Deputy referred to our county lagging behind in this area. The European contraception atlas for this year ranked Ireland 12 of 46 countries and gave the Government a rating of 65% for our policies and access to contraceptive supplies, family planning counselling and the provision of online information on contraception, so we are making progress in this regard. A third of our population hold a medical card. That means 124,379 clients availed of contraceptive drugs and special services through the General Medical Services, GMS, scheme last year.

Deputy Mick Barry: My view is that it would have been best if we had free contraception available in 2020. I take it from the Minister’s reply that is not the intention of the Government. He seemed to indicate it is his intention for 2021. Specifically, is the Minister saying that he aims to see the introduction of free contraception in this State in 2021? I ask him to comment on that. Currently, in terms of free contraception, there are prescription costs and GP fees. GP fees and prescription costs need to be removed from the equation. It should not be necessary to go to a GP to get a prescription to avail of contraception in many cases. Is it a definite aim to have free contraception in 2021? What about the question of GP fees and prescription costs?

Deputy Simon Harris: My position on this is not in any way ambiguous. I signed up fully to all the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution and applied rigour to trying to progress a number of them working across this House and I will continue to do so. I believe contraception should be free for men and women. We should talk about men as well. It is not just a woman’s issue. Men obviously have a role to play in

reducing crisis pregnancies and in helping around these issues as well. We have made progress on the national condom distribution service this year. When it comes to the female side of contraception, it will require dealing with regulatory issues, legal issues, policy issues and, possibly, fee negotiation. When the report is published, and it will be published this month, I will be very happy to debate it in this House and to talk about it at the health committee. It is my policy objective to make contraception free in 2021 and that is what I would like to see happen.

The Deputy talked about our record on some of these issues. We are also making PrEP available from 4 November. These are real, concrete steps that are taking place in regard to sexual health in our country. When it comes to female contraception, a woman's choice will be important because, as the Deputy knows, there are a variety of methods available.

Hospital Services

12. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the status of the diabetes service in Sligo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41165/19]

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are back here again. This is the umpteenth time I have asked this question around Sligo diabetic services, particularly with regard to people with type 1 diabetes and access to the insulin pump. I gave the Minister a letter earlier which stated that, back in June, 30 adults were waiting to get access to this service, but they cannot get access to it because there is no specialist diabetic nurse in place to train them or to provide them with the service. It is over a year since I began raising this and I have raised it with the Minister umpteen times. I had a Topical Issue on the matter and the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, came in and read out a pile of waffle to me one night. I got angry with her and I said that the people who were blocking the service should be sacked. I do not think anyone has been sacked since and I do not think the service has been put in place since.

I have always had a good relationship with the Minister and always found him to be an honourable person. However, in this case, he is letting people down hugely. It is outrageous that there are up to 40 people who cannot get access to this service in the north-west.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Kenny and, in fairness, I acknowledge and understand his frustration in this regard because it is an issue he has pursued on multiple occasions in this House. I accept his sincerity and bona fides in this regard.

The diabetes service at Sligo University Hospital, as the Deputy knows better than I, is a well-established integrated service, operating on a multidisciplinary team basis in the hospital and the community. This shared care approach is supported by a team of specialist diabetic nurses and an advanced nurse practitioner in both the hospital and the community, as well as a full range of support staff. In addition, there is a pregnancy diabetes service, inpatient ward-based consultation service and inpatient and outpatient podiatry service. The adult diabetes service at Sligo University Hospital is currently led by two consultant endocrinologists and includes an insulin pump service. There is also a paediatric diabetes specialist service which provides a regional insulin pump service for children across the north-west region. Both the adult and paediatric pump services have experienced considerable growth in referrals - which is a real challenge in regard to diabetes - both from new patients commencing treatment, as well as repatriation of patients from national tertiary centres.

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We are committed to the further development of services for people with diabetes. A project funded under the Sláintecare integration fund only in recent weeks will give diabetes patients across Sligo, Leitrim and west Cavan expanded access to diabetes services through their GP and primary care settings, and I will send the Deputy information in that regard. We also see that the development of the diabetes day unit is now proceeding to build stage, with contractors appointed and building due to start next week. The project is expected to take 12 months and will meet the needs of the paediatric and adult diabetes services for patients from Sligo University Hospital.

I accept the Deputy's point on the need to do more in this regard. He has given me a letter this morning from the chairperson of the Sligo branch of Diabetes Ireland. In recognition of the fact that the Deputy has raised this on multiple occasions, and in an effort to resolve the matter, I suggest that I would happily host a meeting here with representatives of the Sligo branch of Diabetes Ireland, Deputy Kenny and his Oireachtas colleagues, a manager from the hospital and the HSE. I will arrange that within the next month.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that offer of a meeting and, undoubtedly, that will be taken up. I also gave the Minister a letter from Grainne McCann, the manager of Sligo University Hospital, in response to a young woman of 18 years who has been recommended to use the insulin pump. Her letter stated:

Unfortunately, we do not have the resources to facilitate commencement of the pump therapy at this time. In order to do so, the person involved will need to attend a specific programme and have follow-up support by a nurse specialist dietician in order to safely manage the patients on insulin pumps. We have a number of patients awaiting this programme and we are trying to identify funding streams for this service requirement.

The issue is that the specialist diabetic nurse is not in place. The diabetic nurse is there and still works in the hospital but was seconded away from service to another part of the hospital and was not replaced. This has gone on for almost two years now. I understand that, when talking about the national children's hospital, it is a situation that involves huge money. However, this situation in Sligo is not a big one to resolve, which is why I and these patients are so frustrated. It takes so little to solve it, yet it seems to be impossible.

Deputy Simon Harris: Every time a Deputy raises the issue of the national children's hospital and suggests in some way, shape or form that it is a hospital for Dublin-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: I did not suggest that.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----I am going to make the point, and it is not particular to Deputy Kenny, that children from Sligo will benefit from this massive investment we are making in children's healthcare, which was promised years ago and debated but about which nothing was done. We are now getting on with delivering it.

In regard to the adult insulin pump services, in fairness to Deputy Kenny, he and Grainne McCann, the manager in Sligo University Hospital, have highlighted an issue. The issue is that, in order to run an adult insulin pump service, there is a requirement for a dietician and for a clinical nurse specialist. We are in the process, after budget 2020 this week, of preparing the HSE budget, service level agreements, allocations to hospital groups and the like for 2020. Therefore, it could be timely to engage with the Oireachtas Members for Sligo, the hospital and the HSE to see if this is something we can progress.

As I said, I accept the Deputy's sincerity and he has raised the issue many times. There are 30 adults who could benefit from this and I will work with him constructively to see if we can assist Sligo University Hospital to make progress on this in the coming weeks.

Question No. 13 replied to with Written Answers.

Hospitals Building Programme

14. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if a design team has been appointed for the relocation of the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital to the St. James's site; if so, the progress made to date including the funding has been allocated in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41263/19]

Deputy Simon Harris: In line with best international practice, it is Government policy, as set out in the National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026, that stand-alone maternity hospitals should be co-located with acute adult hospitals. The national maternity strategy, the first ever national maternity strategy in Ireland - it baffles me that we never had one before - reaffirms the commitment to tri-location of maternity, paediatric and acute adult hospital services on the St. James's site campus by relocating the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital to the campus following the development of the new children's hospital. The development of the maternity hospital on this site is acknowledged as a key service objective by the principal stakeholders in order to provide the infrastructure to support implementation of the national maternity strategy.

All capital development proposals, including the relocation of the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital to the St. James's site, must progress through a number of approval stages, in line with the public spending code, including detailed appraisal, planning, design and procurement, before funding for each stage can be confirmed.

A site capacity study was undertaken to demonstrate in general terms that the overall St. James's campus has the ability to accommodate the proposed maternity hospital facilities and achieve the intended configuration. This capacity study was included in the planning application documents for the children's hospital. It identifies a location on the campus for development, and the likely decant and enabling works requirement.

The recently published HSE capital plan provides for the project brief to be progressed as part of the strategic assessment stage. The appointment of a design team will be considered on completion of the project brief and the assessment stage.

To cut through all of that, although Deputy Donnelly and myself go hammer and tongs at each other on some issues, he made a valid point on this, namely, that we should be doing some of the preparatory work for the Coombe to move to St. James's while the children's hospital is being built. I do not disagree with that. In the HSE capital plan that was recently published, we decided to go ahead and appoint a project brief team. Once it concludes its work, we should then be in a position to consider the appointment of a design team. I am very favourably disposed towards this. When the project brief is concluded, I will come back and interact with Deputy Donnelly further on it.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Minister. It is a sensible suggestion from Deputy Don-

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nelly that the preparatory work would be put in place so that, when the Coombe proceeds to move to the St. James's site, it would be ready to proceed as quickly as possible. The national maternity strategy is a good strategy but there are concerns there is a lack of progress in the implementation of that strategy.

Question No. 15 replied to with Written Answers.

Hospitals Building Programme

16. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Health the status of the allocation of funding for additional and urgently needed medical beds at Sligo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41173/19]

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I want to ask the Minister the status of the allocation of funding for additional and urgently needed medical beds at Sligo University Hospital, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: Just minutes ago, I was talking about the works on the new diabetes facility for Sligo which is starting next week, and I know that is news the Deputy will welcome.

The HSE recently published its capital plan for the next three years, outlining projects to be progressed over the three-year period. The capital plan includes a new ward block development and additional bed capacity at Sligo University Hospital and this is currently at design stage. The HSE is responsible for the delivery of infrastructure projects and it has advised me that preliminary design work and site investigations have been carried out for this new development at Sligo University Hospital. Planning approval was granted in July 2019 and the project is currently at the detailed design stage. I will be happy to keep the Deputy informed as it progresses further. I visited Sligo and I very much see the need for this facility. It is included in the capital plan and its current status is that it is at the detailed design stage.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I thank the Minister for his response. As he knows, our hospital is one of the worst in the country at this stage for patients on trolleys. It is important, therefore, that the issue be followed up as quickly as possible.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the Finance (Tax Appeals and Prospectus Regulation) Bill 2019 and made amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: Extraordinary reports are emerging of a High Court case held earlier this week about the payment of money by contractors to criminals to secure protection at a housing scheme, in this case, a social housing scheme. The details are extraordinary and the reports read like something from a mafia documentary or “The Sopranos”. A message must be sent from this House that there is zero tolerance of any such behaviour. As I am very conscious that the case is before the courts, I will not delve into the details of it. However, if the Tánaiste has not done so, I suggest he do so to get a sense of the absolute madness of what is going on.

There are political ramifications for the sharing of information on these cases within government. What we know is that Dublin City Council states it did not pay out any council money, but one of the builders says they were advised by a Dublin City Council official to pay criminals. The Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, was informed of this by Deputy Ó Snodaigh and says she passed on the information to the Garda. She has not said, however, whether she passed it on to the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, who said the first he had heard of it was yesterday. We also know, as of this morning, that the office of the then Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald, was informed of the case and that an acknowledgement was issued that the letter had been received. She did not, however, follow it up with a meeting. Again, this suggests there was knowledge in government of a problem at Dublin City Council and that nothing was done about it.

In September 2016 the *Evening Herald* carried a front page story about the issue. It led with the headline, BLOODBATH MOB GUARD COUNCIL SITE. The Tánaiste was Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in September 2016. Did he not follow up on the story? Is this common practice within the local authorities? Has the Government done anything in the past 48 hours to get a sense from Dublin City Council of what is happening and what went on? Does the Tánaiste think it is appropriate for Dublin City Council to carry out its own investigation, or should the Government appoint an outside investigator to get to the bottom of the matter?

What is going on at the heart of Government? Ministers are not exchanging very important information with one another. Surely the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, who seems to have history with the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, on other developments, should have brought the case to the attention of her political colleagues also? Surely, given the engagement the Minister and the Minister of State have had on other housing developments, opportunities were presented to her to raise the issue with the Minister to bring this practice to his attention. One would imagine the issue would come up in discussion in planning for and the financing of social housing.

Will the Tánaiste to reflect on these questions and give me the up-to-date position on the Government’s understanding of what was revealed in the case?

The Tánaiste: Contributing financially to criminality of any kind should never be condoned in any circumstance. Although it was, in fact, private contractors who paid funds to the individuals concerned, I appreciate that issues were raised in the proceedings in respect of Dublin City Council officials. It is a matter for the council to investigate fully the role of its staff in the matter. The council indicated in a press statement yesterday that it was arranging for an independent investigation to be carried out into all aspects of its involvement in the matter. My colleague, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy,

has stated he was not aware of the issue. He has publicly condemned any such practice and asked that the investigation be conducted quickly. Both he and his Department are following developments closely. The outcome of the investigation will inform further actions, if needed. The Minister has also spoken to the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, about the matter.

At this point the new homes concerned have been built and are largely tenanted, with the final tenants expected to move in in the coming days. I understand why Deputy Calleary would have questions, but we are trying to establish what happened and when, who sent emails to whom and what action was taken as a result. As the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, I can say there was certainly email correspondence with the Department of Justice and Equality through various email traffic routes. My office was cc'd in some of that email traffic, but the first I heard of the issue was yesterday. We are now trying to establish the communication lines for the email traffic, but one thing is clear: the concerns expressed and accusations made were matters for An Garda Síochána. The then Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald, responded comprehensively to Deputy Ó Snodaigh who was raising the issue and confirmed that it was a matter for An Garda Síochána, that an investigation was ongoing and that if people had concerns, they should talk to the Garda about them. I have the email in front of me. Because of the accusations made and their seriousness, we need a completely independent investigation by Dublin City Council to establish exactly what happened and when and who knew what in order that we can be sure we understand what happened and that it will not happen again.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Government, not Dublin City Council, needs to appoint a completely independent investigator. The Tánaiste has confirmed that his office was cc'd in an email. Will he state the date on which this happened? The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, also needs to become involved because the payment of this money is absolutely not on and never was. Unfortunately, it has happened. Is it happening in other parts of the country and on other contracts, either housing contracts or other local authority or State contracts? Are contractors being advised informally or formally by State or local authority employees on the need to pay this money? How endemic is the practice within the State system? The Minister, Deputy Flanagan, needs to become involved and find out. The case raises issues for Dublin City Council and the way in which the Government has handled the matter. When will it be in a position to publish the full chain of emails and notifications received by various Ministers and outline the full sequence of acts that followed?

The Tánaiste: They are fair questions, but all I can give the Deputy is an honest assessment of what I know. I only learned about the issue yesterday and, to be honest, only focused on it this morning when I asked for the email traffic into and from Ministers' offices and so on. As I said, Deputy Ó Snodaigh raised the issue. The email he sent was cc'd to a series of people. He did not copy it to me, as the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, but when one of the people who received the email, in Co-operative Housing Ireland, responded to him, my office was cc'd in that email. I am trying to establish what happened in that regard, but what I know for sure is that the then Minister for Justice and Equality sent a comprehensive response to the Deputy. She was the appropriate line Minister. This was an illegal act. Intimidation was going on and serious concerns were raised legitimately by colleagues in this House. Yesterday was the first I heard of it and we will now follow the trail of who knew what and when, as well as the responses. The appropriate Minister responded and this is a Garda matter. With regard to the extent of this activity, I certainly hope it is not com-

mon practice on other sites. It is something for An Garda Síochána to deal with.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On Christmas Eve 2016, my colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, sent correspondence to the Garda; the then Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald; the then Minister of State with responsibility for communities, Deputy Catherine Byrne; Dublin City Council and the current Tánaiste, who was then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. The correspondence related to the construction of 73 social housing units in Cherry Orchard and informed the Tánaiste and the rest of the recipients that construction had halted on the site following a sustained campaign of intimidation, with building site workers and security staff under threat. He stated it was clear that the intimidation has been orchestrated by criminals who had vowed that no work on any Cherry Orchard site would go ahead unless they get the security contracts or receive moneys from the builder. He continued in the correspondence to the Tánaiste and others by stating:

It is my firm belief that if this work does not progress then we are condemning Cherry Orchard to a future of dereliction and abandonment. No homes or services will be built until this criminality is comprehensively tackled.

Although he made clear that extra Garda resources were essential and requested a meeting before the new year, my colleague received no response from the Tánaiste to the correspondence.

On 5 January 2017, Deputy Ó Snodaigh again wrote to Co-operative Housing Ireland, Dublin City Council, the then Minister for Justice and Equality, the then Minister of State with responsibility for communities, the Garda and the Tánaiste in his former position of Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. The correspondence was directly addressed to the Minister. Deputy Ó Snodaigh informed all recipients that matters had escalated, with criminal elements setting out conditions of commencement of construction works, with the Garda and Dublin City Council both aware of it. He again requested a meeting with the Minister for Justice and Equality, the local superintendents and others to ensure the site would not be compromised and that the demands of criminals would not be accepted. He requested that a Garda task force be set up to ensure work on the site could commence without workers, security staff or the Cherry Orchard development being held to ransom by criminal demands.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh stated in his letter that he was of the firm belief that if there was submission to the demands of these criminal elements, there would be contagion, not only for other sites in Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard, but throughout the city as word of capitulation would spread. On 13 January 2017, more than two weeks after my colleague's initial letter, the then Minister for Justice and Equality declined a meeting, with no response from the Tánaiste in his then role of Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government or acknowledgement of either letter sent to him directly.

On Tuesday, approximately three years after my colleague's request for engagement with the Departments dealing with housing and justice, as well as the Garda, the High Court was told that Dublin City Council either paid or instructed contractors to pay protection money totalling more than €500,000 on three separate sites, including the Cherry Orchard site. The Criminal Assets Bureau has stated that a council official arranged payments, with the council denying the allegation. We have heard the court has opened an initial investigation but that does not go far enough. We need to know what others knew and why so many, including the then Minister for Justice and Equality and the current Tánaiste, did nothing despite being warned of the in-

timidation against site staff by these criminal elements as early as 2016. That was before over €500,000 was paid.

The current Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has stated he only learned about this the day before yesterday. The Tánaiste, however, was informed about this by Deputy Ó Snodaigh on Christmas Eve 2016, as well as on 5 January. The Tánaiste also received a letter from Housing Co-operative Ireland stating that it agreed with the concerns of Deputy Ó Snodaigh and his request to meet the Tánaiste and other Ministers to take on this issue. We have now learned that criminal elements have been paid €500,000 from the public purse. Will the Tánaiste explain to this House his inaction on this serious matter?

The Tánaiste: The matters raised by Deputy Ó Snodaigh were serious and he got a detailed response from the Minister for Justice and Equality of the time, as it was an issue pertaining to justice. I will read the response, which was detailed. It is not true to say she refused to meet people but rather there was an ongoing Garda investigation. The then Minister stated:

I am advised by the Commissioner that gardaí are pursuing a thorough investigation of the incident in question and are engaging with all relevant parties with a view to facilitating the safe return of contractors to the site.

I understand that following local protests, construction work had been temporarily suspended to allow for discussion of the issues in dispute. While gardaí encouraged all parties to resolve their differences, there was continuing opposition when works resumed and it was at this juncture, on 19 December, that the shocking petrol bomb attack took place. I am advised that Dublin City Council, quite understandably, felt it was necessary to suspend work on the site.

I am further advised that local Garda management has instituted a specific crime prevention initiative, with regular patrols on the Oranmore Road, Cherry Orchard and Croftwood areas, including the construction site. I also understand that a meeting has been arranged for today, Friday 13 January, between local gardaí, Co-operative Housing Ireland, Dublin City Council and the security firm which is contracted for the construction project.

With reference to the suggestion that criminal elements may be attempting to extract protection money, I am advised that gardaí have not received complaints to this effect. Needless to say, I would urge anyone who may have relevant information to support such a serious criminal allegation to provide full details to the Garda without delay.

In view of the foregoing, An Garda Síochána is clearly the most appropriate authority to deal with the present situation and, especially as a Garda investigation is ongoing, I do not feel that a meeting between us would be appropriate at this time. You will appreciate that it is not open to me to intervene in particular Garda investigations.

This was a Garda matter and the then Minister for Justice and Equality responded quite comprehensively on the matter. As of this morning, I am trying to understand the response that did or did not come from my previous Department and the reasons. If the matter had been raised with me, I would have raised it with the Minister for Justice and Equality, which would have been appropriate. I do not recall doing so as the matter was not raised with me. All I can do is give the facts as I understand them at this point. We will understand more as the investigation takes place.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The matter was raised with the Tánaiste when he was the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. We have the email from Christmas Eve 2016 and it is addressed to the email address of the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. As there was no action arising from that, a further email was issued on 5 January, again address to the Minister. A letter from Co-operative Housing Ireland was addressed to Deputy Simon Coveney, the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, and it stated how it would like to join in asking the Minister for any and all assistance. The Tánaiste mentioned the response from the former Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald but there was absolutely no response from the Tánaiste, who was then the Minister with responsibility for housing. We now know from what is happening in court that €500,000 was paid to these criminal elements from the public purse because of what happened when the housing development was built in this area.

The Tánaiste has said there was a comprehensive response from Frances Fitzgerald. She spoke about a Garda investigation into the attack on the JCB, which was absolutely appalling. Deputy Ó Snodaigh raised the matter with the Tánaiste and Deputies Frances Fitzgerald and Catherine Byrne, in their role as Ministers, as well as the Garda. We have correspondence indicating that on three occasions, the Garda was informed about this. This was not investigated and no action was taken by any Minister in response to attempts at extortion from this company. We now know the money was eventually paid through Dublin City Council.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh offered to meet local gardaí and the Minister in person to provide further information but all this fell on a deaf ear. The Minister for Justice and Equality stated that the Garda did not receive any complaints but we have correspondence to the Garda that demonstrates it was aware of the matter.

I want assurances from the Tánaiste that the House can be satisfied this is not happening on any other building site. As Deputy Ó Snodaigh pointed out, that would lead to contagion. He is not the only Sinn Féin Deputy who has raised this issue or similar issues in Dublin city with the Garda relating to extortion.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Unfortunately, the Government is not making the appropriate response to this matter.

The Tánaiste: I do not dispute much of what the Deputy is saying. Deputy Ó Snodaigh did good work here and raised issues that were genuine. What I am saying is that I was not aware of it. If I was, I would have raised it with the Minister for Justice and Equality. I am not saying emails were not sent to my office. I am trying to understand what happened in this regard. However, I am also saying that the appropriate response was from the Minister for Justice and Equality. This is a Garda issue, and was a Garda issue at the time. That is what I read out in the context of the response that the Tánaiste at that point, Frances Fitzgerald, made. I am not disputing that this a serious issue. It was raised and sent to my office. We did not respond to the Deputy, as far as I am aware. That is because I was not involved. Whether I should have been is a different issue, but I did not have this issue raised with me and, therefore, I did not speak to the Deputy or respond to him. The issue was responded to by Government and by the appropriate Minister because these are criminal allegations and have subsequently proven to be very serious.

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The Deputy asked whether we can provide assurance that this is not happening on any other sites.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister for Justice and Equality refused to meet the Deputy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have to move on.

The Tánaiste: But she explained why. If there is an ongoing Garda investigation-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a separate matter. He actually said there was no allegation of extortion.

The Tánaiste: I read into the record what her official response was and why it was made.

The Deputy asked whether there is contagion on an issue like this onto other sites. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government will, of course, ensure that is not the case.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste will have to conclude. I call Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: During his Budget Statement last Tuesday, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, spoke about “building a global and a robust tax architecture that works for all into the future ... [and] “a stable international tax framework”. I am referring to those words in the light of the OECD-led work programme to develop a consensus-based solution.

The issue I raise is the need for comprehensive tax reform that would stop corporate tax dodging and limit tax competition. It is important that Ireland represents a strong voice that is committed at the OECD and at home to addressing the challenges of taxing multinationals in the digital area, to putting a stop to corporate tax dodging, to ending the race to the bottom in corporate tax and incentives and, especially, to generating additional revenues where the economic activity takes place. It is particularly important for Ireland to be that voice because of our commitment to the least developed countries.

The current system does not benefit developing countries, some of which are our partner countries. They need the income from corporate tax to provide badly-needed services in health, education and agriculture as well as to mitigate the effects of climate change. If the corporate tax system is not fair to them - we know it is not - then we are depriving those countries of the ability and capacity to raise revenue through income tax and other taxes. This is totally at odds with our policies as conveyed in A Better World.

Multiple loopholes in the international tax system allow for artificial profit-shifting to tax aggressive jurisdictions. Profits generated from sales and other digital activities in one territory can be largely untaxed. The loopholes mean there is little profit to the countries where the production of goods takes place. They allow countries to offer lower and lower corporate taxes to be attractive to investors. One example is tax holidays because of pressure from foreign nationals. Another example relates to the pharmaceutical industry. In seven developing countries, four of the big US pharmaceutical companies avoid an estimated €96 million every year. Some of them pay little tax on profits in Ireland even though they make significant profits here. Multinational corporations are paying less tax than they did before the crash in 2008. They continue to shift as much as 40% of their foreign profits to tax havens. The International Monetary Fund, IMF, put a figure of \$456 billion on the losses to governments because of corporate tax shifting.

The least developed countries are especially under-represented on the inclusive framing steering group. As we are committed to A Better World and as we have a strong reputation for humanitarian work, will we also commit to supporting a minimum effective tax rate in every country? That would mean an end to tax havens and it would benefit the world.

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

The Tánaiste: I will try to do the same. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has consistently stated that further change to the international tax framework is necessary to ensure we reach a stable global consensus for how and where companies should be taxed. Change is coming to the international tax system. The ongoing work at the OECD will result in further substantial alterations to the international tax architecture. The challenge before us is to build a global and robust tax architecture that works for all into the future. As part of this work the OECD secretariat has published a consultation paper this week on its proposals. The paper outlines a potential approach for making changes to the international corporate tax system. These changes would be designed to reflect the changing nature of where profits are generated in the modern digitised economy. Ireland welcomes the launch of this publication. It is important that all interested parties are able to contribute to this important work.

Ireland is actively involved in this ongoing work at the OECD to reach a global consensus on addressing the tax challenges of digitisation. Much work remains to be done before an agreement can be reached at the OECD. I note some speculation today on the potential impact on Ireland of any changes. It is far too early at this stage in the process to work out the revenue implications for different countries. These issues are discussed in the fiscal vulnerabilities paper published with the budget on Tuesday. As the Minister for Finance said in his Budget Statement earlier this week, it is in the interests of Ireland and all countries that this work is successful at ensuring the continuation of a stable and consensus-based international tax framework into the future. Ireland will continue to engage in this work at the OECD as well as taking actions domestically in line with the corporate tax roadmap.

The point the Deputy O'Sullivan made is that we need to try to have a level playing field in respect of tax rules and transparency through the OECD. I agree with that. We have always had an issue with the EU going alone in this regard because of what is happening in other parts of the world. If we can build consensus, and if Ireland can be part of designing it, that is our clear preference in terms of tax reform into the future.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: The Tánaiste mentioned Ireland and all countries but it must be acknowledged that all countries have not had a fair deal to date. The base erosion and profit-shifting, BEPS, initiative has had some significant benefits, but it does not go far enough. Multinationals continue to benefit from transfer pricing. The double tax agreements favour residence-based over source-based arrangements. This results in capital flows from the developing countries to the developed countries instead of the other way around. It was disappointing to learn that the concerns of officials in the Tánaiste's Department were ignored when it came to the Ghana agreement. Prior to that agreement, Ghana could levy 15% on royalty payments and 20% on technical fees but the following the agreement, the figures were 8% on royalties and 10% on technical fees. Irish companies, therefore, investing in Ghana and other countries will benefit from lower rates of tax. That has to be at odds with our national plan on business and human rights. I reiterate that we are so respected in one area that we have to be also respected for supporting fair corporate tax reform in order that those in the developing world can raise the income they need. At the end of the day, we need an approach that would eventually mean a

reduction in overseas aid if they can raise the money they need for services.

The Tánaiste: Deputy O'Sullivan approaches this from a perspective of global fairness, and I can understand that. Through the OECD, we have to reflect the changes in terms of the global economy that are taking place rapidly, especially around the digitisation of economies. This is far more rapid in some countries than others. Ultimately, we need to try to build consensus across the developed and developing world about how to have a transparent and fair tax system that allows countries to derive competitive advantage. However, they need to do that in an open and transparent way and make those choices.

There are consequences to those choices. This is about striking a balance between allowing countries to make domestic decisions on taxation and how Government expenditure is funded while also closing tax loopholes that should not be there and that create inequality and unfairness. Ireland has bought in to the BEPS process and will continue to see that through to a successful outcome. Hopefully, consensus will be reached.

Deputy Michael Harty: My question relates to the dysfunction in the health service and, in particular, to the Sláintecare report and the reforms that flow from it. A key recommendation of the report was that legislation be introduced in 2018 to place guarantees on access to care on a statutory footing. Such legislation should provide that patients will be seen within 12 weeks for an inpatient procedure, ten weeks for an outpatient appointment and ten days for a diagnostic test. When will that legislation be introduced to meet those targets?

The Tánaiste: With respect, the Deputy will have to ask the Minister for Health that question, although I can ask on his behalf and revert to him if that is helpful.

Our focus is to implement Sláintecare, which will take about ten years. We are two years into that process now. For the first time ever, we have cross-party consensus on the kind of reform needed throughout the health system. We are putting significant resources behind the plan to get it done but it is not going to be done overnight. As we provide services, we also hope to be able to introduce new legislation to maintain those services in terms of timelines, standards and so on. Next year's health budget will be €1 billion more than this year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: No, it will not. The figure is €600 million.

The Tánaiste: That includes some of the additional spend this year that had not been budgeted for, which I accept that, but it is still well above €650 million extra next year for health-care, reflecting the capital and current expenditure pressures that we face.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: We are running to stand still.

The Tánaiste: We are making progress here. We are spending more money and introducing a reform programme that everybody in this House buys into. We would like to do it as fast as possible but it is going to take time. We are in year two of a ten-year plan.

Deputy Michael Harty: I understand that the Tánaiste is not the Minister for Health and I do not expect him to have a specific answer to my question. The point I am trying to make is that targets will not be met unless there is legislation to underpin them. Targets will not be reached voluntarily. The Government must provide an incentive so that targets will be met. Of course, Sláintecare cannot be delivered overnight but the question is whether the Government

is willing to introduce legislation that will demand that targets are met. Outpatient numbers are increasing and the demand for elective care is also increasing. Soon the only elective care that will be delivered in our acute hospitals will be for trauma, emergencies or cancer. Elective care is slowly being pushed off our hospital waiting lists. Soon we will have a winter initiative under which elective care will be cancelled for between six weeks and two months, which will only add to the lengthening lists. When a patient moves from an outpatient list, having eventually been seen, to the inpatient list, he or she moves to the bottom rung of that list. Legislation must be introduced to impose targets and to demand, by way of statute, that care is delivered in a timely fashion. When will that legislation be introduced?

The Tánaiste: If there is clarity on that in the Minister's office, I will forward it to the Deputy but if we are going to pass legislation, we must make sure resources are available to deliver it, otherwise, something will be passed that cannot be delivered, which does not make sense. If we introduce legislation to protect patients and ensure that targets are met, we must also make sure the resources are in place, including both human and capital resources, to make it happen. This budget will result in 1,000 additional staff based in the community. Recently, an additional €20 million was provided for the Sláintecare integration fund. There is also a significantly increased input from GPs in improving community care and keeping people out of hospital so that we can create space for the kinds of elective treatment to which the Deputy Harty referred. That reform is under way and those funds are supporting the reform programme. In the context of the legislation to which he referred, we must make sure that if we are going to pass laws, we have the resources in place to ensure compliance with them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: To ensure that all parties and groups get their fair allocation of time this week, there are two additional slots today, as there were yesterday. I invite Sinn Féin to pose a second question.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I wish to take this opportunity to express the condolences of Members on this side of the House to the family of Ms Frances Devlin from Ballinacurra, Midleton, Cork, as well as to her extended family and friends, at this very sad time. I thank everyone who assisted with the search over the past four days and who worked so hard to bring Frances Devlin home. May she rest in peace.

Today is World Mental Health Day and I ask the Tánaiste to bear that in mind when he responds to my question. Of all days, today is the day to tell the truth about mental health. It is time to be honest with the people who depend on our mental health services, with their loved ones who support them and with campaigners and the people at large who want something to be done. These are the same people the Government is trying to fool and gaslight. Since I was elected to the House in 2016, the Government has talked out of both sides of its mouth with regard to mental health. I feel sorry for the two junior Ministers in the Department of Health who, I believe, are genuine but who have been forced to defend the crumbs off their table afforded to them each year, which they must know by now will never fully materialise. Last Tuesday's Budget Statement contains just three mentions of mental health. These include a reference to the reinstatement of capital funding that was earmarked years ago, a meaningless platitude and, worst of all, for the third year running, just pure bull. The Government claims that it is providing €39 million of new money for new services but this cannot be true. Up to this month, €25 million of the allocation announced in 2018 had not been spent, but not for the lack of need. Every year more money has been promised, withheld, re-announced, withheld again and so on. According to the Budget Statement, mental health spending in 2020 will be €1.03 billion. Last week in the Dáil, reiterating the spin of 2018, the Minister of State at the Department of Health,

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Deputy Jim Daly, said that more than €1 billion would be spent in 2019. If €39 million is added to more than €1 billion, it comes to a lot more than €1.03 billion, unless the numbers are false or there is a fabrication. Yesterday at a meeting with Mental Health Reform, the Minister said that out of the €39 million, there is absolutely nothing new. There is no new money.

Deputy Jim Daly: That is not true.

Deputy Pat Buckley: There is €26 million for pay increases and €13 million for the Portrane unit and nothing else. There is nothing for Rehab, CAMHS, A Vision for Change or counselling - absolutely nothing.

This Government is supported by Fianna Fáil. I do not intend to let its members get away with this either because they are propping up the Government. What is the truth? The only conclusion that can be reached on the basis of all of these inconsistencies is that nothing honest is being said on either side of this House when it comes to mental health.

I ask the Tánaiste, on World Mental Health Day, to tell the people the truth. What does he have to say today?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and acknowledge that he consistently raises mental health in this House. Mental health continues to be a priority area for the Government. In budget 2020, the Government maintained its commitment to mental health by increasing funding by €39 million to €1.026 billion. This increase includes €13 million for new developments and €26 million for pay, which will help to ensure that existing initiatives are maintained and enhanced. Since 2012, the HSE mental health budget has increased by approximately 44% from €711 million to well over €1 billion next year. Budget 2019 made allowance for an additional €55 million for mental health services to build on the existing services. It comprised €20 million for the continuing cost in 2019 of developments initiated in 2018, combined with €35 million for further new developments. The investment has enabled the HSE mental health service to progress initiatives agreed in the national service plan 2019, such as e-mental health pilot programmes, and clinical programmes in areas such as eating disorders and ADHD continue to be developed and implemented. The relocation of the national forensic mental health service to Portrane is another significant investment undertaken by HSE mental health services.

To date, €33 million of the funding has been drawn down and an application for a further €10 million is being processed. The management of the remaining €12 million funding for 2019 will be agreed with the HSE in the coming weeks. This money will also be available for new developments in 2020, for which a total of €25 million will be available. The extra funding has delivered the recruitment of 114 assistant psychologists and 20 psychologists in primary care since 2018, as well as ten advanced nurse practitioners in child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, who are currently in training.

It is important to state that CAMHS waiting lists, which were and are a priority for the Government, have been reduced by 20% this year. The August figure was 2,038, reduced from 2,517 in December 2018. I understand that the Deputy wants the Government to continue to prioritise mental health services through financial provision, increased staffing and better services, particularly in the community. That is happening and it will continue to be a priority.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply, but I am very sceptical of his claims. It is more spin. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Daly, told

the media at a press conference yesterday that CAMHS waiting lists have been impressively reduced by 20%. The latest data we have, which were published in *The Irish Times* on Monday, 9 September, indicate that more than 2,500 children and teenagers were on mental health service waiting lists. The HSE figures for June 2019 and July 2017 are almost identical, at 2,440. Some 267 children, many of them in County Cork, have been waiting for more than a year, an 11% increase. Who is telling the truth on this matter? How do we get to a point such that the Government will invest sufficiently?

The Tánaiste referred to the recruitment of 114 assistant psychologists. I have been told that some of them have already left their posts. I made that point at a recent meeting of the Committee on Health. The last person to leave cancelled 300 appointments. The Tánaiste is not telling the truth.

Sinn Féin, working with Mental Health Reform, managed to clarify that only €15 million of additional money was spent in 2017. The €20 million that was left over was re-announced in 2017, when an increase of €35 million was again touted. In 2018, funding of €55 million was announced, but we know that the real figure was only €30 million. We have constantly tried to highlight that the Government is sloughing this over. The Mental Health Commission stated that it met the Minister and it was confirmed that €26 million of the €39 million is earmarked for pay increases. The Tánaiste referred to an additional €13 million for services but that will be spent on Portrane. There is nothing new. Is there new money for mental health services or are we just wasting our time?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was going to compliment the Deputy for adhering to the time limit, but he did not do so.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He restrained his language.

The Tánaiste: I assure the Deputy that we are not wasting our time. The investment in Portrane is necessary and will improve services. Extra investment in pay is necessary and allows us to take on more staff.

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Government is unable to do so.

The Tánaiste: That is what is required. The CAMHS waiting lists are too long but we are making progress on them. The list has reduced by 20% this year. The figure in August was 2,038, reduced from 2,517 in December 2018. The number waiting more than 12 months reduced to 201 in August, down from 314 in December 2018. The HSE service plan 2019 aims to improve CAMHS out-of-hours and seven-days-a-week cover, as well as provision for eating disorders, specialist services and prevention and early intervention services. The Minister of State, Deputy Daly, has invested heavily in early intervention services to treat mental illness symptoms as early as possible, thus reducing the need to escalate cases to CAMH services. The number of CAMHS teams increased from 49 in 2008 to 70 today, as well as three paediatric liaison teams. In 2008, there were 350 whole-time equivalent clinical posts in CAMHS. That figure is now 645. We are investing in more people and better infrastructure. I accept that we are not where we need to be, but the charge that we are not prioritising this area for increased investment is simply not true.

Deputy Pat Buckley: One person dies every 40 seconds.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I asked a particular question during the budget debate on Tues-

day evening but I did not get a reply, so I will now ask it of the Tánaiste. Has the budget been poverty-proofed? Several features of the budget are clearly regressive, particularly the failure to index-link social welfare payments. Although the Government flagged that there would be no standard increase of €5 in welfare and pension payments, most Deputies expected that, at a minimum, welfare payments would be index-linked. The failure to do so, when combined with an inflation rate of, at least, 1.3% or 1.4% next year, with a strong likelihood that it will be more than that, amounts to an effective cut in payments to State pension or social welfare recipients. For example, there will be an effective cut of €6.12 in the weekly income of a couple on the contributory State pension.

The proposals related to carbon tax and the decisions taken in that regard in the House on Tuesday night are also regressive. I refer to the additional €6 per tonne in carbon tax. In promoting this measure, the Government referred at length to the recommendations of the all-party Joint Committee on Climate Action. It is important to bear in mind that the committee also requested a review of energy policy but, in spite of many promises, such a review has not been produced. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul stated that the measures to offset the impact of carbon tax on low-income households are inadequate and that many households will struggle with increased energy costs, notwithstanding the increase in the fuel allowance. Of course, the fuel allowance is only payable to one in five households in this country. On what basis was it decided that the increase in the allowance was an adequate response to the serious problem of fuel poverty? How did the Government come to the conclusion that it was sufficient to address the issue of fuel poverty?

There has been a failure to reform the existing grant schemes. A carbon tax should act to encourage people to change their behaviour but a very large number of people cannot afford to change their behaviour because of the way the grant schemes are structured. One needs money upfront to take advantage of them, but many low-income households simply do not have such money upfront. Will there be a commitment to roll out at an early stage a pay-as-you-go or pay-as-you-save scheme? Will the Government reform the warmer homes scheme, which is currently only available to those in receipt of fuel allowance, and make it more widely available? There is a very strict limit such that if one has one's attic insulated, one is not entitled to a further grant.

The Tánaiste: I sometimes think that when the Deputy comments on the Government's budgetary strategy, she fails to accept that choices must be made. We have had to make a choice this year to assume the worst possible outcome to the Brexit negotiations. This has been necessary to ensure we have a resilient budget for next year. The Deputy's response to the budget largely ignores all of that. We have put in place a social welfare package which increases the social welfare spend by €170 million next year. We have deliberately prioritised and targeted the most vulnerable people for these extra supports. The Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, has repeatedly outlined where they are. We are ensuring the overall budget is fit for purpose for next year. For the past three years in a row, we have had annual increases of €5 in social welfare and pensions across the board. This was well ahead of inflation. We took this approach deliberately because we wanted to give back some money while the country could afford to do it. We will get back into that space again when we know we can afford to do it. We felt that rather than giving small increases across the board, it was more appropriate to target the lowest-income households, people living alone and people on fuel allowance.

We chose to protect the people on the lowest incomes because we knew they would be affected by Government policy, including the increase in carbon tax. We gave them the support

they need to reflect that. That is what we did. We do not pretend otherwise. We had to make difficult choices in the context of the economic challenges that may well be on the horizon. Clearly, Deputy Shortall does not seem to be willing to make those choices. The idea that we should not introduce a carbon tax increase is counter to what practically every climate change expert on the planet is saying. Nobody is saying that increasing carbon tax will solve the climate change issue on its own. By giving a clear direction of the charges that are to be imposed over the next ten years as a means of placing a value on carbon into the future, we are giving society an indication of the kind of change it needs to accommodate. It is a modest enough increase, but it is a signal of the direction we are taking for the next ten years. We have put in place measures to compensate the lowest-income families for that. It is not true to say one cannot draw down grant aid unless one has resources. Some €53 million is being provided for the warmer homes scheme, which is targeted at people on fuel allowance. The poorest people are those who will get support from the State.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Of course everybody understands that choices have to be made.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy does not.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: This Government has chosen to hit low-income workers, pensioners and people on social welfare. That is the effect of the choices it has made. These people will take the brunt of Brexit, just as they took the brunt of the recession. The Government has chosen to hit those people.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is a choice.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On the other side of the equation, it has extended the special assignee relief programme and introduced a range of tax cuts for business, while failing to introduce taxes that could have been imposed on the richest people in this country. The Government made those choices, just as choices were made during the recession. That is the problem. That is the issue. Basically, Fine Gael is not interested in the issue of poverty. I will repeat the question I put to the Tánaiste. Has this budget been poverty-proofed? I have another question I would like him to answer. Where is the anti-poverty strategy the Government promised two years ago? We are still waiting to see it.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy seems to be suggesting that we should do nothing to promote economic growth.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I have asked two questions. I would like the Tánaiste to answer them.

The Tánaiste: If we had followed the Deputy's mindset in terms of economic management-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is the Tánaiste going to answer the two questions?

The Tánaiste: -----we would not be in a position-----

Deputy Mick Barry: The Tánaiste should answer the questions.

The Tánaiste: -----and we would not have been in a position-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Was the budget poverty-proofed?

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The Tánaiste: I did not interrupt the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I have asked the question three times now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall, you have no right to-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I have a right to an answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You must listen. The Tánaiste did not interrupt you, so give him a hearing.

The Tánaiste: As a result of the economic choices that have been made by this Government over many years-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Was it poverty-proofed?

The Tánaiste: -----we can now afford to spend money on supporting the most vulnerable in a way we would not otherwise have been able to do.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Did the Government poverty-proof it?

The Tánaiste: We can now afford to borrow substantial sums of money to protect this country in the context of the challenges and the disruption we may face.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is that a “No”?

Deputy Mick Barry: Did the Government poverty-proof the budget?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Barry, I did not know you had joined the Social Democrats.

The Tánaiste: In each budget we have introduced, we have committed to support and target the most vulnerable people in the context of poverty.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Tánaiste has been asked two straight questions about poverty. Can he not answer either of them?

The Tánaiste: I have answered the questions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall, you are in this House long enough to know the rules.

The Tánaiste: I have answered.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No, you have not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are going to move on.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Was the budget poverty-proofed?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You do not have to-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Where is the anti-poverty strategy?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall, have some respect for your colleagues.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I think the Tánaiste should have some respect for people who ask questions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Listen, you are around long enough here. You have got your soundbite.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I have asked three times whether the budget was poverty-proofed.

The Tánaiste: The supports are focused at the people with the lowest incomes.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Was it poverty-proofed?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste, you do not have to respond.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Can the Tánaiste tell us what page it is on?

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Dara Calleary: This week's budget had a clear focus on Brexit. The cost of insurance is another threat to the viability of many small businesses, community festivals and - increasingly - charitable organisations. Earlier this week, I dealt with the case of a small business that employs approximately 20 people and has seen its insurance premium increase by 150% from €19,000 to €49,600. This money has had to be paid to ensure the business will not have to close. This increase will have ramifications and consequences for hours of employment. I have mentioned one of the many cases that are coming up all over the country. The President signed the Judicial Council Act 2019 on 23 July last. Will the Tánaiste give the House an absolute guarantee that the judicial council will be established and will be up and running by the end of this calendar year? This is necessary to enable it to do its work, which involves addressing awards in this jurisdiction.

The Tánaiste: We share the concerns outlined by the Deputy regarding the cost of insurance for many businesses, particularly in certain sectors where there are issues with personal injury claims. The Chief Justice outlined in a speech last week that he wishes to have the judicial council in place before the end of the year, subject to conditions, including the necessary resources, being right for its establishment. In this context, I am pleased to see that €1 million has been provided for the judicial council in the budget for next year. We hope it will be in place by the end of the year, with the necessary financial resources also being in place for it to function next year.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Yesterday, the Turkish military invaded northern Syria with the aim of occupying Kurdish areas and attacking the Kurdish-led SDF, which bravely fought and defeated ISIS in the region. The SDF liberated areas under ISIS control, rescued tens of thousands of captured Yazidis and established democratic political structures that respect the rights of minorities. It is now under attack by the second largest army in NATO. We have already seen the human rights violations that the Turkish army has committed against Kurds in south-east Turkey. It is clear that these brutal tactics will be replicated in northern Syria. Turkey's attacks will destabilise the region and hamper the fight against ISIS. This is not completely surprising, given that there are many questions surrounding Turkey's covert support for radical

jihadist groups in the region. Will the Tánaiste condemn the military operation and outline what Ireland's response to that will be?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As I said yesterday, I am deeply troubled by Turkey's announcement yesterday that it had launched a military operation in north-east Syria. I issued a statement yesterday noting that the fight against ISIS made decisive progress earlier this year. I said that any unilateral military action against groups that played a decisive front-line role in the fight against ISIS risked undermining that progress and could lead to further protracted instability and have serious humanitarian consequences. I urged Turkey, as I do again today, to refrain from this action. While we understand Turkey's security concerns regarding its own territory, unilateral military action cannot be condoned. The protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law must be paramount. The EU has issued a statement making similar points, which I fully support.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Among the budget documentation released by the Government this week was a report by the OECD on equality budgeting in Ireland. The three recommendations in the report were that we should develop a set of national equality goals and indicators as a performance budgeting framework; that we should expand equality budgeting beyond performance measurements to link to other policies, such as poverty-proofing; and that we should build our capacity to gather analytical data in support of equality budgeting. In 2017 I brought forward the Genuine Progress Indicators and National Distributional Accounts Bill which passed on Second Stage in this House in March 2018. Some 18 months later, it is one of many Bills trapped in legislative limbo while waiting to progress to Committee Stage. Will the Tánaiste consider the Bill in the light of the OECD's report and the need for equality budgeting? Will he allow it to be passed and enacted?

The Tánaiste: I understand it is awaiting a money message. I also understand a decision on it has not yet been made. I can try to come back to the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It has been 18 months.

The Tánaiste: I do not have a decision on it.

Deputy Mick Barry: Back in the day there was a vicious form of corporal punishment known as birching. We heard about a new form of it today. AIB has a project named Project Birch. It is a plan to sell in early 2020 thousands of distressed mortgages secured on family homes. This is a majority State-owned bank. Does the Government stand over this plan? It should stop the sale. Vulture funds should be kept far away from family homes. There are alternatives. Loans could be restructured for those who might be able to pay. For those who will never be able to pay, the properties can be taken into public ownership and given to local authorities, which would mean that people could be kept in their homes knowing that they would be secure as renters. Is the Government prepared to stop the sale and keep family homes out of the hands of vulture funds?

The Tánaiste: AIB is a bank listed in the Irish Stock Exchange and the London Stock Exchange. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on media speculation at this stage because that is all it is.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It received loads of taxpayers' money.

The Tánaiste: This issue has been raised in the House many times. Our job is to make sure

extensive protections are in place to ensure customers' contractual rights are not altered when loans are transferred from one financial organisation to another. That is what we will continue to do. It would not be appropriate for me to speculate on something in the media today.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why would it not be appropriate?

Deputy Michael Harty: I refer to an issue I have raised on a number of occasions about the housing crisis and the commitment given in A Programme for a Partnership Government to address it, that is, a voluntary relocation scheme under which people on housing lists or in high pressure areas would be offered the opportunity to relocate to towns and villages in which there is a surplus of accommodation. There should be a scheme to encourage people who wish to move, on a voluntary basis, to towns and villages and allow them to integrate into those societies. The Peter McVerry Trust is very interested in supporting people who would make that move by putting in place supports to help them. Does the Government intend to actively pursue putting in place such a voluntary relocation scheme?

The Tánaiste: I have been involved with the Peter McVerry Trust on schemes such as this, under which premises have been built or purchased and people who were homeless moved from other counties or cities to new areas successfully. I am not aware that there is a formal scheme to which local authorities can apply, but it something at which we have looked. I will check with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and come back to the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: This is a question for the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly. I refer to the promise to address home care waiting lists. We know that 7,200 older people who have been approved for home care packages are on waiting lists and being denied that right. We also know that many of those on waiting lists are in hospital and that the question of efficiency in hospitals is affected by this. The budget provided for the allocation of an additional 1 million hours, but that is less than one quarter of what is required to clear the waiting lists. How does the Government propose to address the remaining three quarters on waiting lists?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I thank the Deputy. The reality is that if we had four times the amount of money provided for in the budget, we would still not have the personnel required to deliver services. The figure for this year is €52 million. That is why I have committed to developing a statutory home care scheme to be unveiled in January 2020. Next year the pilot statutory home care scheme will begin. The only way we will address the waiting lists for home help is by having the scheme underpinned by statute, proper conditions for those who deliver the service, a centralised database to effectively manage the delivery of the service and a regulatory aspect. The statutory scheme is under Sláintecare and is committed to in 2021. In the meantime we have added 1 million home help hours in an attempt to alleviate the issues in hand.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I return to the issue of mental health services. The Inspector of Mental Health Services has made a damning comment on where we are with the services. There has been little or no improvement in the past ten years. The special inquiry in Roscommon made 27 recommendations. My information is that, to date, very few of the recommendations have been put in place. It is also the case that 10,000 people self-harmed last year. The figure includes only those who turned up at hospitals; others do not turn up. When will we take mental health services seriously and deal with the crisis on our doorstep? The improvement is minimal. We need to take this matter very seriously.

Deputy Jim Daly: I can assure the Deputy that we are taking it very seriously. This is World Mental Health Day and I am delighted to announce that the mental health telephone line about which I have talked since I became a Minister of State has gone live today. The number is 1800 742 444 which I hope people will promote and put on their phones. It is a service which will direct callers to the most appropriate service. There are 1,027 services the length and breadth of the country funded by the HSE. I am not sure whether people know where they should go in a time of need. The Deputy will be interested in knowing that I have pledged in the budget allocation for next year to make the Rosalie unit a hub in the development of telehealth. As the House knows, there are many other initiatives, to which the Tánaiste made reference, including the initiative aimed at decreasing waiting lists.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I am very disappointed that the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, made a decision yesterday to delay further the granting of the licence for coursing for the 2019-20 season, in spite of the fact that the Irish Coursing Club had prepared a very scientific report which clearly showed that there was no danger to the hare population in allowing coursing to commence this season.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is for the hares.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The RHD2 virus has been present in Irish wildlife since 2016 and there is clear scientific evidence that the disease does not transfer from hare to hare. I, therefore, ask the Tánaiste to request the Minister to grant the licence as quickly as possible to allow coursing to commence this year.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I ask that we expedite a resolution of this matter. It is ironic that one of the first reported sightings of hares with RHD2 was in Wexford, given that an open day on North Slob is being advertised by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I thank Deputies Cahill and O’Keeffe for raising this matter which is of significant interest to a number of Members of the House and many outside it. Deputy Cahill deliberately refuses to acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy Madigan, issued the licence but was subsequently confronted by scientific evidence on the RHD2 virus. Her Department and mine, in terms of the expertise of the veterinary laboratory services in Backweston, have worked with the ICC to find a way to restore a licence at the earliest possible date. It may well be a restricted form of licence which will enable us to monitor the development and transmission of the virus between species. I can assure the Deputy and, more particularly, the coursing fraternity outside the House that every effort is being made by the Minister, Deputy Madigan, and my Department to bring about a successful resolution of this issue.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: There are commitments in the programme for Government relating to small family-run businesses, many of which are experiencing significant difficulties with local authorities and the Valuation Office regarding accruals of rates on properties that continue to be rated despite the fact that many of them are no longer in use or are not fit for purpose. The Valuation Office uses the phrase “fit for beneficial use” to describe these properties. I ask that some clear direction be given to local authorities about how these accruals of rates are being dealt with. While I acknowledge we passed a rates Bill in July, this situation is unfair to businesses with properties that they are not using that need to be de-rated. The Valuation Office is not doing this.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy is aware, the new rates Bill was enacted in July. It gives local authorities more flexibility in terms of the application of rates. The point of that Bill, and I remember it because I was the Minister when we were designing it initially, was to permit more local input into how rates are designed within certain counties.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: The situation pertaining to school transport in Cork South-West this year has been nothing short of a "Carry On" film. Unfortunately, for many people in Ballineen, this "Carry On"-like scenario continues. I welcome the introduction of a larger bus this week but at least ten families are still affected, although there may be more, as there may be families that have not approached my office. I know of at least ten children who are literally stranded with no school bus to get to school. Can the Government get a larger bus than the one introduced this week or else put on a second bus? It is not rocket science and is very easily sorted out.

The Tánaiste: I am quite familiar with this issue. The Minister of State, Deputy Daly, and Senator Lombard have both raised the issue, which is why there have been efforts to get a larger and more appropriate vehicle to deal with the numbers concerned. I can only assume that these efforts will continue.

Deputy Brian Stanley: My question concerns the national broadband plan. We learned this week that the process has again been stalled. The Taoiseach said that a challenge to the national broadband plan has been brought and has held it up. He said that Imagine provides a service in many parts of rural Ireland and has challenged the intervention area. Sean Bolger of Imagine has said that company is merely informing the Government of its existing and planned commercial investments. He goes on to say that Imagine is merely setting out the data regarding infrastructural development for the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which it is required to do under law. This plan, which has been promised since 2012 by this Government and the previous one, is being held up. What is happening with the national broadband plan? Are the tendering process and the gap model completely banjaxed? Where is it at?

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I know Deputy Stanley does not support this project but I can assure him that we are proceeding with it and are carrying out the necessary due diligence. As he rightly noted, one of the elements one must do is open the map to allow other applicants to make a submission, which was done. That was closed at the end of September. Any application lodged by a company will be assessed, as is required. We will then proceed to make decisions with regard to completing the due diligence and state aid elements and sign the contracts at that point. There is no undue delay. This is being proceeded with on target.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The migration of participating securities Bill is promised legislation. It is related somewhat to Brexit. When will that legislation go through the Houses of the Oireachtas to facilitate its intended purposes?

The Tánaiste: It is planned for this session.

Deputy Robert Troy: When the Government set up Irish Water, it did so with the rationale that it was needed so that it could borrow off balance sheet to make the necessary investment in its water infrastructure. That clearly has not happened. Irish Water is charging punitive connection charges and is not providing a service. What is the role of the Department of Housing,

Planning and Local Government regarding the prioritisation of water schemes? Athlone in County Westmeath has been told it will be three years before a much-needed upgrade will happen despite the fact that water is being turned off two or three nights per week because the treatment plant simply does not have the capacity to deal with the demands placed on it. What role has the Department with regard to the prioritisation of schemes? Will the Tánaiste refer this to the relevant Minister, who can revert to me to see whether we can accelerate this scheme?

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy knows only too well, this House changed the model for Irish Water, so the plan to ensure that much of the borrowing could have been off-balance sheet no longer applies. He understands or should understand only too well why. It is a different model now. It is still a much better model than what obtained previously. I must ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to get back to the Deputy about the prioritisation of schemes. These are primarily decisions for Irish Water but, obviously, it must make decisions that, by and large, are consistent with the national planning framework.

Deputy James Browne: The programme for Government commits to developing the blue economy as a priority. The fishing industry is of major importance to the economy of Wexford. It is one of the most dangerous occupations. There is a duty to protect our fishing industry, which has had a number of tough winters. Brexit poses an existential threat to parts of our fishing industry. People are very concerned about their livelihoods. I ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine or Tánaiste to tell me the specific measures that will be introduced to safeguard the livelihoods of fishermen in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the fisheries sector is high likely to be a very fractious manifestation of a hard Brexit. Our exposure to UK fishing waters is quite pronounced in terms of our most valuable stock, 60% of which is caught in UK waters along with 40% of our second most valuable stock. One third of our overall fishing effort takes place in UK territorial waters so a no-deal Brexit is a real challenge for the sector. As a consequence, under the budget, a provision in tranche one, and I emphasise that it is in tranche one, of the €650 million project involves an identification of the fishing industry as being in need of significant financial assistance. I am also working at EU level with eight like-minded member states that share our analysis of the fishing industry and have been informing the Barnier task force in terms of ensuring we inextricably link the resolution of the broader trade environment with the fishing industry so it is part of the overall resolution, rather being dealt with on a silo basis.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Page 40 of the programme for Government talks about reducing poverty levels by supporting an increase in the minimum wage to €10.50 per hour over the next five years. It states that the Government will rely on the annual recommendation of the Low Pay Commission regarding the level of adjustment every year. There was no mention of the minimum wage in the contributions of either the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance to the budget. I understand that this is the first time that a recommendation by the Low Pay Commission has not been accepted by Government. This has come as a terrible blow and shock to the 137,000 people on the minimum wage and their families who are struggling. The Low Pay Commission does not allude or refer to the words “delay” or “defer”. It recommends that the Government increase the minimum wage by €0.30. It says quite clearly that the Government is hiding behind the issue of Brexit. The commission acknowledges that in the event of a hard Brexit, the Government may need to review the recommended rate, but that it should still implement the 30 cent increase. Will the Tánaiste agree to raise it as requested?

The Tánaiste: There is no difference in view between the commission's recommendation and the Government's decision. We accept that decision but the commission has made it clear that the recommended increase is subject to achieving a Brexit deal. The Government has supported that recommendation this week.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is not what it is saying; it is saying the Government might repeal it afterwards.

The Tánaiste: It is.

Deputy Martin Kenny: A single mother in my constituency has to bring her very ill child to a Dublin hospital once or sometimes twice a month and is struggling to get any assistance. Numerous people are in this position. They are ill and in receipt of illness benefit or some other allowance, but receive no assistance for the travel they have to undertake to attend hospital appointments. There used to be a mobility allowance and other schemes for this but they have all been taken away. There was nothing in the budget for these people. I want a commitment from the Government at this point. Can something be done to assist people in these circumstances who are struggling?

The Tánaiste: If people are experiencing financial hardship due to having to travel to access healthcare, they should contact their community welfare officer.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The community welfare officers will not deal with them. They say, "No". I have it in writing.

The Tánaiste: If there are genuine hardship cases, they have the discretion to deal with them and they should do so.

Deputy Martin Kenny: They will not do it. They say they do not have the money.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I raise the issue of the missing millions in the education capital budget. Last year, there was a projected education capital budget of €941 million. This year, following discussions with the Tánaiste's colleagues, we expected a small increase on that to €942 million. However, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, was not able to deliver on the budget, and in his discussions with the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, it was reduced to €922 million. What happened between both Ministers? This is coming at a time when the number of permanent school places provided by the Department is reducing, an overspend on sites has been highlighted by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the cost per square metre of schools has increased dramatically. New projects in further education are being cancelled throughout the country, including Dunboyne college of further education in my constituency. Lismullen national school has also been waiting a long time. Given these circumstances, why was the education capital budget cut by the Government at the last minute?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I wanted to raise the same issue. We had a budget debate in this House, and it then emerged the following day that there was a gaping hole in the capital budget. How did this happen? Young, growing constituencies such as mine will be severely hit by this. We heard the argument that it is about the front line versus capital. The front line is the building in which one goes to school. Four school buildings in Dublin West need to be repaired because of the Western Buildings Systems fiasco, namely, Luttrellstown community college, St. Patrick's national school, Gaelscoil Thulach na nÓg and Broombridge Educate Together

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national school, ETNS. Will they be repaired? Will Pelletstown ETNS, Edmund Rice college, Cabra community college, and Danu community special school, which were all promised by the Taoiseach, go ahead or will they be cut? This is a country that is refusing to collect taxes from Apple.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is a question on Estimates for the Minister for Education and Skills.

The Tánaiste: It is a question on the Estimates. I can give a long detailed answer-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We would like that.

The Tánaiste: ----- but I suspect the Deputies have received that from Deputy McHugh.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: No. Can the Tánaiste give us the detailed answer?

The Tánaiste: I reassure Deputies that the allocation for the school buildings programme is broadly in line with last year's allocation.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is lower.

The Tánaiste: In 2019, the allocation was €622 million. The allocation envisaged for the programme for next year is €620 million, which is more or less the same figure.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Many schools have to be fixed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There is a €20 million reduction in the education capital budget between third levels-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It has been cut by €19 million-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputies might not be happy with the answer, but two other Deputies are waiting patiently. Did Deputy O'Reilly want to come in on the education question?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I did but it is fine.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can we discuss it as a Topical Issue matter on Tuesday?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I requested that for today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will come back to the Deputies on that. I call Deputy Rabbitte.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My question relates to the urgently needed gambling regulations. I am raising this on the back of the programme that aired on TG4 last night about Tony O'Reilly. I am particularly interested in online regulations and those relating to youths and vulnerable adults. What is the status of the gambling regulation Bill and when will it come before the House?

The Tánaiste: The Gaming and Lotteries (Amendment) Bill 2019 is currently going through the House and is on Report Stage at the moment. However, I think the Deputy is referring to separate legislation, which is not due this session.

Deputy Seán Crowe: A total of 6,480 children are waiting for various treatments or assessments in the CHO 7 area, of which my constituency of Dublin South-West has the highest proportion. It would be appropriate to send a message to the families waiting for those assessments on World Mental Health day, particularly to the many parents who are going through the courts to try to get an assessment. They believe they will then get the supports they need. Unfortunately, children are not getting these supports because of key shortages and staffing cuts in the area. The waiting list is getting longer and, unfortunately, many people do not want to work in that area because of the problems in it. Can the Minister of State give a commitment that he will look at this area? I have raised this matter frequently over the past 12 months.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State has the question.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Will the Minister of State have a look at the area and see what the problem is? I ask him to talk to the staff and see for himself-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Crowe is stretching it.

Deputy Seán Crowe: -----the key staff that are missing. He should try to do something about it rather than giving us the same bland answer, that the Government is looking into it, all the time. We need early intervention which is not happening here.

Deputy Jim Daly: We are much more than lucky. Last year's budget committed to 100 additional therapists to deal with this specific issue. That recruitment is finalised and those 100 therapists are in place, so we expect that to have an impact. Furthermore, as the Tánaiste mentioned earlier, 1,000 additional community posts, which will include many therapists, will also be provided next year as a result of the Sláintecare budget.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Minister of State gave a commitment that those therapists would go this area.

Deputy Jim Daly: I cannot specify where they are going to go. That is a matter for the HSE, which will recruit in accordance to need.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Today is World Mental Health Day, and the Minister of State earlier referenced the HSE's mental health helpline. That phone number is not a replacement for the face-to-face care people need, and should never be advertised as such by anyone, although I am not suggesting that is what the Minister of State was doing. My fear is that that helpline will refer people to waiting lists. It is supposed to tell people about the supports and services available but we have been hearing in this Chamber and all through the budget debate that the services are not available. What are the people answering the phone going to tell people with mental ill-health who are distressed and have nowhere else to go? My colleague, Deputy Buckley, spoke about this subject with passion earlier because he knows about it first-hand. Where are these people when they ring the helpline? Where are they going to be directed? Are they going to be directed to a waiting list? They are already desperate and they do not need to be directed to a waiting list.

Deputy Jim Daly: I have stated repeatedly that I do not know how anyone in a mentally distressed state can know what organisation to turn to, and whether they should go to Alone, Aware, Jigsaw, Pieta House, or CAMHS. How are they to know who does what or where to go? Some 1,027 different services are funded by the HSE, and they are trying to promote themselves individually with flyers and brochures about their services. That phone number, 1800

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742 444, has been established through the National Ambulance Service and went live today. I would appreciate it if Deputies would promote that number, as it will give people in need a direction and an opportunity to be advised on where to go when they need that help. It is important that that infrastructure is there to give people guidance on where to reach out when they are reaching out. It is not a panacea but it is an essential tool.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I inadvertently overlooked Deputy McGuinness but I know he will be very orderly with his brief question.

Deputy John McGuinness: Can the Minister of State give any indication as to when the vacant posts of occupational therapist and home care personnel will be filled in counties Carlow and Kilkenny? There is a significant backlog and apparently there are difficulties in getting people to fill the positions. Will the Minister of State allocate the services of other counties to ensure the people of counties Carlow and Kilkenny can receive the services they require immediately? It is a big issue.

1 o'clock

Deputy Jim Daly: I do not have the local information sought. On home care services, I referred to the statutory scheme and what we were planning to do to address the lack of personnel. The recruitment of 100 additional therapists has just been completed and will have an impact. I do not know offhand how many are in the Deputy's area, but if he wants me to find out, I will follow up on the matter for him.

Equitable Beef Pricing Bill 2019: First Stage

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move:

That leave be given to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to ensure the provision of an equitable price for beef to farmers operating in that sector in order to ensure that it is a sustainable means for them to earn a livelihood; to abolish the 30-month rule concerning cattle; and to provide for related matters.

Rural Ireland is in crisis. The average wage of a beef farmer in the State is €8,000, which is less than the State pension. The only reason it is €8,000 is the subsidy the farmer receives. Without it, the farmer would be incurring a loss of €5,000. By working day and night, producing food on which we all live and participating in a massively profitable sector, beef farmers are expected to make a loss of €5,000. We would not expect that in any other sector and it is all the more shocking, given the fact that the other participants in the sector are creaming it. One factory made €170 million in profit last year. The factory's owner is tax resident in Luxembourg and pays 0.5% tax on that profit. To date, that owner has amassed assets of €3.5 billion, yet the company expects farmers to bring their cattle to the factory gate at a price below cost. It is unbelievable.

The factories are not alone in doing this. The supermarket multiples are making massive profits in this sector. They are participating in a form of competition which is beating down prices, yet they remained unscathed in the beef crisis which gripped the country over the summer.

The reason for the imbalance is the sector is extremely distorted and dysfunctional. The

Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, has some experience of economics and must understand the beef sector is asymmetrical. On one side, we have a small number of large companies which have massive buying power. On the flipside, there are a large number of small farmers who have no influence whatsoever on any of the terms and conditions of sale.

It is not unusual for the Government to preside over distorted markets. The housing and insurance markets are other examples. The problem I have is that the Government has a *laissez-faire* attitude towards getting involved in the beef market. Thousands of farmers have spent thousands of hours at beef factory gates across the country. It would be a mistake for the Government to think the crisis is over and that the farmers have gone away. They have not, nor will they go away until this issue is resolved.

One major problem the farmers have indicated is the refusal of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to intervene in the crisis in rural Ireland. At the recent National Ploughing Championships people told me that the beef protests were an insurrection in rural Ireland as they were frustrated by a Government that was Dublin-centric. People have described the budget to me as a Ross O'Carroll-Kelly budget, namely, that it is focused solely on Dublin, in the process forgetting about the rest of the country.

All we are trying to do with the Bill is to ensure farmers can make a living. I note that the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, is shaking his head. A senior Fine Gael Deputy told me that it was unreasonable for farmers to expect a price above the cost of production and that it was also unreasonable for them to participate in a market that would involve some profit from their actions. People should make no mistake. The number of farmers in the country is reducing rapidly. Teagasc stated one third of farmers were being pushed into poverty and debt, while another one third were only functioning within the market because they were supplementing their income by working off-farm.

The Bill seeks to make it illegal to sell below the cost of production on an interim basis. It is to have a floor in the market at break-even point which would be determined by Teagasc. Its aim is to send the message loud and clear to the beef factories that they must negotiate properly and that to date they have been well short of the mark. It is to create balance within the sector. At the same time, we need the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to do the necessary work to tackle the oligopoly in this market. We want to have a profitable beef sector, with all elements of the supply chain being able to make a living and be profitable. We also want to make sure the farmers involved can make a simple living.

I accept that the Bill is not perfect. It has the support of the Beef Plan movement, as well as Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. Will the Government ensure it does not die a death on Committee Stage?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Financial Resolutions

Financial Resolution No. 9: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government)

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I am sharing time with Deputy McGuinness.

I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on budget 2020 which was unprecedented and unusual in its nature. It was essentially a no-policy-change budget, mostly uneventful, with little for anybody to be enthused about. It was, as the Minister for Finance outlined, a Brexit budget, meaning that there would be no significant changes to taxation and a modest welfare package, with some minor tweaks elsewhere.

Brexit continues to loom large over the country. As a small open economy, we stand to be severely and significantly affected in the event that there is a no-deal Brexit, which appears to be the most likely outcome. Talks continue today, but the mood music is more sombre. The enthusiasm and optimism displayed among all of the negotiating partners seem to be wearing thin. We are relying on there being a Brexit extension after 31 October. While there may very well be an extension of perhaps three or six months, what then? We may have no agreement, with a no-deal Brexit on the horizon. We appear to be playing a high stakes game and gambling on the outcome of the next British general election. It is a gamble which risks people's jobs and opportunities. It is one that makes me deeply uncomfortable and all of us seriously concerned.

Considering the grave risk the country faces and the extreme challenges facing the economy, it is only right and proper that the budget for next year was framed in that context. It is right that we try as best we can to make provision in the State finances to protect jobs and help the most vulnerable sectors, namely, agriculture and tourism. I note, however, that much of the Brexit support funding announced in budget 2020 will be borrowed. It will not come from the available fiscal space. The borrowing will be in the region of €650 million. Accordingly, instead of running a surplus of 1.4%, we are looking at running a deficit of 0.5% next year. This is despite the fact that the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council advised the Government that Brexit support funding should come from the available fiscal space. This advice has been completely ignored.

The council also gave evidence at the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight that surpluses should have been run within the State finances since 2015. When the money was

available, we should have put some more aside to leave the State in a better position to deal with the challenges of Brexit and other shocks to the economy. Unfortunately, the State finances are not in as good a position as they could have been. This is not Fianna Fáil saying it; the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council said it. The €40 million that is to be made available to the tourism sector will not be enough to protect the 10,000 jobs that have been identified by Tourism Ireland as being at risk in the event of a no-deal Brexit. In agrifood, we are looking at potential job losses in the region of 12,500. What is being made available needs to be targeted at those vulnerable sectors and loan schemes, while they have their place, will not be enough. There must be grant aid to smaller operators as they will not be able to afford to borrow to save their business. Across both sectors mentioned, agrifood and tourism, we are facing the prospect of 22,500 job losses, and these are the two biggest employers in rural areas. Agrifood and tourism sustain rural communities right across the country and job losses on this scale would devastate rural areas, in particular the west and north-west region. I see nothing in this budget that focuses on the west and north west, which is worrying and disappointing given that this is the most disadvantaged region in the country.

Leaving Brexit aside, there are a couple of key issues I wish to address in the context of budget 2020. The first is the Defence Forces. The Government only saw fit to allocate €34 million to the defence budget. This is despite all of the Government rhetoric about its commitment to the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann. This amount is paltry and an insult to those who are serving. It is deeply offensive and the reaction from the defence community reflects that. The Minister of State at the Department of Defence has yet again, for another year running, failed to do his job and advocate for the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces are in crisis and haemorrhaging their best talent at an alarming rate, and this is all the Government could manage. “Disappointing” does not even begin to cover it and until we have a change in government, we can expect little else.

Carbon tax remains a contentious issue in this budget. It is the first time we have seen an increase in the carbon tax in many years. People are genuinely concerned about the impact this will have on those vulnerable to fuel poverty. It must be acknowledged that carbon tax is particularly impactful in rural areas. There is no public transport in rural communities and people need their cars to get around. Electric vehicles are nice if one can afford one but they are out of the reach of most people for now and there is no second-hand market to avail of. We need to see transparency in how this tax is collected and in how it is spent. Government policy, forced by Fianna Fáil, is that it must be ring-fenced for green initiatives. People will need to see in their communities where that carbon tax is spent, be it on retrofitting homes, on helping people to make the changes to a low-carbon economy and on green initiatives, such as greenways, across those communities. People will need to see that to know that funding is being well spent. We also need to protect people at risk of fuel poverty. I welcome the €2 increase per week in the fuel allowance. Hopefully, this will go some way towards protecting those at risk of falling into fuel poverty.

We also need to see Government investment in rural transport. We see lots of investment in metro north and in the Luas, lots of funding for transport in the urban centres but nothing in rural areas. People in rural communities want transport too and if we are looking for them to change from using their cars, there needs to be something to change to.

I acknowledge the work done by my colleagues, Deputies Cowen and Michael McGrath, in ensuring that there is a just transition fund for the Bord na Móna workers in the midlands and west. With funding of €6 million for next year amounting to €30 million overall, it should help

those communities that will be most affected. Job losses in the thousands for a region like that are a significant threat to the region and the local economy and that was a key focus for Fianna Fáil in this budget.

One of the small positives to take out of this, which again was a key Fianna Fáil policy, was the increase in home help hours of 1 million hours. That sounds like a lot of hours and sounds like significant progress that will go some way towards addressing the genuine hardship being faced by people, but it is worth putting it in context. With over 7,000 people waiting to get home help hours, if one divides out the 1 million extra home help hours being made available next year it works out at merely three hours per person per week. While it is some help, it will not solve the problems we are facing. Those who need and are getting some home help hours are not getting enough. I have seen at first hand people who have had their home help hours taken from them in order that they can be divvied out among others who are waiting. Home help hours allow people to stay in their homes longer. What we do not want is a situation where elderly people who are able to stay in their own homes and in their communities feel as though they are forced into nursing home care before they are ready to go and when they do not need to. Nursing home care costs the State far more. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to force people towards nursing home care when a few hours per week could be all that is needed to help them stay in their homes. What we are seeing now is people getting half an hour or, perhaps, three quarters of an hour a day, enough barely to get somebody out of bed and make him or her a cup of tea before the home help person has to go. It is such a level of cuts to home help and the small divisions of hours available that create the hardship many face.

I also welcome the increase in Garda numbers, also a key Fianna Fáil policy. We focus on this because crime is becoming an increasing problem in our communities and people see that a visible increase in police presence is the only way that we can tackle this and make people feel safer. The 700 new gardaí announced will go some way towards that. It will not be enough but it is a start. It was a key focus of Fianna Fáil in this budget to deal with community policing and having more police on the street. I note An Garda Síochána appreciates the extra allocation.

There are many other issues to discuss but my time has run out. I focus on this as being a Brexit budget. It was quite a sombre budget, and one with which we all identified and realise that there is a difficult year facing the country ahead.

Deputy John McGuinness: No doubt the focus of the budget was on Brexit and fairly large amounts were allocated to the various areas that will be affected directly by Brexit. Given the Brexit argument, which was used by the Government to scare people and focus their minds on something that will happen generally to the economy while not addressing what is already happening in the economy, the Government probably has to that extent succeeded. If the cat had kittens, the Government would blame it on Brexit. That is the way people feel about it. The Government has used it as a cover.

In examining the budget expenditure, one must look at what else is happening in the economy to the people who we represent. Today, for example, is World Mental Health Day. Around this time, in Windgap, in County Kilkenny, a young 23 year old, who was in the care of the department of psychiatry, is being buried. There was another one yesterday in Kilkenny. I ask that the HSE, in the context of that €1 billion expenditure on the mental health system and the delivery of mental health services, investigate the department of psychiatry in Kilkenny and examine why the services are not being delivered in the way that they should be to the people who need them today. There should be no more waiting lists in the context of mental health ser-

vices. We do not have the personnel. We seemingly do not have the infrastructure to deal with the issues arising on a regular basis in this area and funding and investment in infrastructure are needed now. I would like to see the Government respond more adequately to these issues. Some €1 billion in a budget is simply not enough.

The general issue in the budget is that the system has not changed. The Minister allocates the same large amounts to the various Departments but the manner in which that funding is spent has not changed. We should be debating in this House - it would be a challenge for the Government to arrange this - the 900-page report of the Comptroller and Auditor General pointing out the failures of the State in terms of saving money, making money go further, getting value for money and reforming the systems of the State that allow so much overspending to go on unchecked.

We have a responsibility in the House to give leadership in respect of that reform. Instead of giving leadership through the various budgets the Minister was responsible for over the past ten years, he has simply funded the *status quo*, throwing money into the deep holes that exist across the economic structure of Departments representing the activities in this State. As long as that is the case, he will always have increased funding in every Department with very little outcome of which to be proud. That still goes on.

For example, it is reported that the Supplementary Estimate for health was approximately €350 million. The reality, as the Minister of State knows, is that it was far in excess of that and that services were cut back so radically in recent months, we had no occupational therapy services in Kilkenny and Carlow. People have been written to asking if they are still in need of the service. Having been referred to the service by the various medical people, it simply is not available. Where are the home help hours we were promised in the 2019 budget? All of those hours and services, and the overspend, will have to be caught up through the 2020 spend and the Government seems to have no bother telling people who need a service today that they will have to wait for six months or two years.

In the context of the budget, excluding the Brexit element, the Minister for Finance has failed miserably to provide what is necessary for the care of people up and down the country. He should be ashamed of some of the decisions he has made. For example, he refused to tax the vulture funds enough to take substantial money from them. He refused to tax the banks. He can give them a ceiling on their losses brought forward but the banks should be taxed. He should have considered that option. If he had and had taxed them, how much more could he have delivered then to the people? Would the building programme for education be affected the way it was if he had to tax those who have the most money and who can afford to pay?

The way the Minister treated the elderly, those who are on pensions, those in fuel poverty and those who have major issues in their homes was shameful. He refused to acknowledge all the debate that has taken place in this House not just last year but since Fine Gael first came into office nearly ten years ago. He ignored it. He refused to address the issues that were brought to his attention by various Members and he turned a deaf ear to them. That is not just foolish of the Minister but it shows disrespect for the fact that on this side of the House we have supported, against the wishes of some supporters and certainly mine, the confidence and supply arrangement. I believe that arrangement has given the Minister the flexibility to provide cover for the inadequacies and inefficiencies of some Ministers and certainly the Government as a whole.

The overspend on the children's hospital is talked about up and down the country. It is

blamed for everything, but there are overspends in other areas and other things that happen in the economy where value for the taxpayer has not been secured. In this budget, the Minister heaped further costs on the haulage industry, increasing the cost of diesel and fuel. That means that when their costs increase at some stage, that will be passed on to the consumer again.

The Minister has done nothing to look at issues differently in that area. He has done nothing to prepare small businesses for the significant challenge that Brexit will bring to their door. He has added cost to everything. I acknowledge he increased the carbon tax but, as Deputy Lisa Chambers rightly pointed out, in rural Ireland that means there will still be no bus service and, therefore, people will still have to use their cars at a greater cost. There is an insufficient number of electrical points across the country to help people transition to a different type of vehicle.

In the context of cost, the V6 engine operating in most of the trucks hauliers use is cleaner than clean yet there is no recognition of that. Going the whole hog with this would mean that the truck would double in price. If we look at the small vehicles used by couriers and so on, we will see the same trend. There has been a doubling of the price with no real infrastructure to carry on the transition that all of us want to see. The Minister has not put a plan in place. He has not put the means in place for those hauliers. He has simply pushed down on the people who pay their taxes and on the people who cannot afford to opt for public transport because there is no public transport. He has done nothing in real terms to assist them to get out of the trap they are in.

I refer again to the older people in our society, those who rely on their pensions and those in poverty who were hoping for an increase. It is shameful that the Minister has not dealt with that issue because those same people are on hospital waiting lists. They are waiting for services that they need today, not tomorrow, and he has done nothing for them. The country's hospital infrastructure is creaking and under pressure, and there has been no system change in that regard.

I urge the Minister to look at the system that is spending his money - the taxpayers' money - and to do something to ensure that we get greater transparency and accountability with value for the tax man.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The next speaker is Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick. Is the Deputy sharing time?

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am supposed to be sharing time but we will see if the Deputy turns up.

Whether we like it or not, Brexit will affect everyone on this island of Ireland, everybody in the UK and everybody in Europe. This process has been going on for the past three years. It has been part of every conversation in every household in the country. Tuesday's budget was preparation for a no-deal Brexit but it was also preparation for the next general election. I agree that Brexit will pose a major risk to the economy in Ireland. It will also create a problem with employment.

I welcome the €1.2 billion response to Brexit. I commend the recruitment of 750 additional staff in key areas and the availability of €650 million to support the agriculture, enterprise and tourism sectors. However, I am disappointed with one aspect concerning the tourism sector. The Minister had an opportunity to reinstate the 9% VAT rate. When there was trouble in the tourism sector, the Government reduced the rate from 13.5% to 9% but with the uncertainty of Brexit and the possibility of a no-deal outcome, and with 275,000 employed in that sector and

more than 10 million tourists coming here per year, it is an area that the Government has let down. We took our eye off that market. I appeal to the Minister of State to talk to the Minister for Finance to see if we can get the 9% rate reinstated.

I support the carbon tax on auto fuel, which is a step in the right direction in terms of climate change, but, again, the Government seems to be targeting the same people all the time. The Government has targeted pensioners who were hoping to get a €5 increase in their pension benefit. It has also targeted childcare recipients who were also hopeful they would get an increase in benefit. It always seems to hit the wrong people.

I come from Dundalk, County Louth. If one drew a line from Omeath to Cullaville, there would be 50 Border crossings in what is a small area. We are very concerned about what will happen post Brexit. We welcome the €81 million the Government has given to recruit 700 new gardaí, but the new recruits will not be ready to be deployed for a while. The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland stated the PSNI would not patrol the Border. The Garda Commissioner has stated he does not have enough resources to do so. While I welcome the €81 million increase in the budget of An Garda Síochána, there is a big hole in the resources needed to police the area stretching from Dundalk to County Donegal. It is important something be done quickly to address that issue.

Dundalk has done really well since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, but like ever other town in Ireland, it seeks more teachers, special needs assistants, houses, therapists and so on. We have Louth County Hospital which is called the “Gen”. It has been open since the 1950s, but its emergency department was closed suddenly in 2010. There are capacity pressures in hospitals, with many patients being treated on trolleys, but we have a fantastic hospital in Dundalk which is open 12 hours a day, seven days a week. It is time the Government considered restoring acute services in it. Since the Government took office, we have been promised a primary care unit and the provision of more therapists. We seem to have been promised a great deal. We have a hospital in Dundalk that is crying out to provide services and there is no reason it cannot be open 24 hours a day. The Government should seriously consider this.

Many constituents who come to my office raise serious issues about their children who may be autistic or have a disability and need assistance. In fairness, the Government has done a good enough job, especially in introducing an investment of €1.9 billion in special needs education in schools. I welcome the provision for the employment of an additional 400 special needs teachers and 1,000 special needs assistants. It will definitely help families. However, I hope it will not stop the building of new schools and the upgrading of existing schools as education is the way forward. It is very important that children be properly educated.

The health budget of €17.4 billion, the largest we have ever had, is being increased by €1 billion. I hope the money will be spent in the right areas. We know about the trolley crisis, the waiting times for treatment, the shortage of occupational therapists, consultants and doctors. There is not a day that passes without a constituent coming into my office to complain about the health service. It is said we have one of the biggest health spends per head of population in the world, but there still seems to be a problem in looking after the health needs of the people. Therefore, we have a serious problem. Throwing more and more money at health services will not help to solve the problem. It is time we sat down with all of the professionals to sort out the problems which have been ongoing for far too long. There are solutions and it is just a matter of getting them right. The money is available to do so.

I was very disappointed by the overspend on the national children's hospital project. We are not talking about an overspend of hundreds of thousands of euro but billions of euro. A few good opportunities were presented, including the offering of a free site to build the hospital on the grounds of Connolly Hospital, but that offer was not taken up. There was no good reason not to take it up and that it does not make sense. Those involved in the health service are business people, but I do not think they understand what they are doing. A site for the hospital was offered just off the M50. There are 32 counties in Ireland. Having the national children's hospital located on a site just off the M50 would make much more sense. I have spoken to doctors and nurses who work in St. James's Hospital and they have told me that they cannot park their cars anywhere in the vicinity of the hospital. They have to get a taxi or take the train to get to work. I cannot understand how the national children's hospital has ended up being located on the St. James's Hospital campus, especially given the free offer of a site at Connolly Hospital. I ask that those in government talk to professional people to get some advice. I welcome the provision of the GP card for children aged under eight years and the medical card for those aged over 70, including couples and single people. That is good. However, it is important that we communicate with people. I ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to engage with professionals who know how to run a business and do things right, even if it means bringing in professionals to give him advice. There is no point in throwing €17.4 million at the health service next year and then seeking a Supplementary Estimate, or saying this, that or the other. We have an opportunity to do something right in the sector.

The Government has spent €6.6 billion during the past four years in dealing with the housing issue. Budget 2019 was all based on addressing it, but it is the worst it has ever been. More than 10,000 people are homeless, of whom 4,000 are children. The Government has promised that there will be 11,000 new homes in 2020 and 12,000 in 2021. Where did the €6.6 billion go? In the budget announced on Tuesday there was a promise of a further €2.5 billion for housing, of which €1.5 billion would be for social housing. They are great figures, but no progress is being made. What annoys me is that the middle class is being caught. A professional couple, both of whom are working, would have to earn approximately €95,000 a year to buy a three-bedroom standard house in Dublin. What chance do they have with the way the Government is dealing with the issue? There is no way they can afford to buy a house. I know people who are caught in the middle. They are earning good money, €60,000 to €70,000 a year, but they are paying between €1,200 and €1,500 a month in rent. They cannot get a mortgage and the reason they cannot is they have been told that they cannot afford it. If one gets a mortgage from a bank or a building society for €300,000 or €400,000, one pays less per month in mortgage repayments than in rent. Therefore, it does not make sense to rent. The Government will have to help the people concerned.

Many of the people to whom I refer are not entitled to be placed on a council housing waiting list. The reason for this is the Government or whatever is provided for in legislation specifies that one must earn below €34,000 or €35,000 a year. The people concerned are caught in the middle with two, three or four children. It is time the Government spoke to the local authorities to give them an opportunity. As the Taoiseach said, they are the people who get up early in the morning to go to work. They are the people who are entitled to receive something. They are not looking for handouts and want to work. What is happening makes no sense.

More than €21 billion is being spent on social welfare payments. In 2011, 16% of the population were unemployed. In fairness, the percentage unemployed has fallen to 5.3%, but we need to keep the figure at that percentage. We, therefore, need to encourage people to work.

The Government needs to help the working person by helping him or her to find a house.

The Government seems to target the wrong people. I refer to elderly people. A recipient of the contributory State pension in 2019 receives €248.30 per week. He or she will receive the same amount in 2020. A recipient of non-contributory pension in 2019 receives €237 per week. He or she will receive the same amount in 2020. A recipient of the farm assist payment receives €203 per week in 2019. He or she will receive the same amount in 2020. In fairness, a recipient of the living alone allowance will receive a €5 increase in 2020. Carers do a fantastic job, be it in looking after an elderly person or a person with disabilities. They save the State a fortune. They receive a benefit payment of €220 per week in 2019. They will receive the same amount in 2020. Recipients of disability benefit receive €234 in 2019. They will receive the same amount in 2020. Recipients of jobseeker's benefit and maternity benefit will receive the same payment in 2020 as they do in 2019. The back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance for each qualified child between the ages of four and 11 years will be €150. For those who cannot afford to send their children to school, the Government is not giving them anything. The allowance for children over the age of 12 years is €275 in 2019. The amount will be the same in 2020.

This country has done a fantastic job in recent years and every household has been affected by what has happened. However, Brexit has taken over. In fairness, there has been a cross-party effort and we have to thank Fianna Fáil, in particular Deputy Micheál Martin, and others for working together. I hope today's meeting of the Taoiseach with the UK Prime Minister goes well. If the UK looks for an extension, it should be given an extension. However, it is going to have to come to a halt at some stage.

If things go well with Brexit, it is very important that we have a supplementary budget in the new year to give the people what they are entitled to. We did not do too much with regard to climate change and that is something we will have to do as we go forward. We are all working together and we all want Ireland to prosper. It is very important that we all go the same way.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I wish to share time with the Minister, Deputy Zappone, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Finian McGrath and Doyle.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Minister for Finance outlined, this budget has been framed in a particularly unusual situation, with the threat of Brexit, on the one hand, but also the threat that I am responsible for, which is the imminent threat we are all facing of climate change, and the climate action we need to take. I will deal with this second issue.

This budget marks a significant watershed in respect of our approach to climate. It implements the approach, on which there has been wide agreement in the House, that we should have carbon pricing. It is starting with the €6 increase and the intention is that there will be a steady increase over the period such that we get to €80 per tonne in 2030. The reason for a steady increase is so those who face difficulty in making the adjustment are not hit with a sudden jolt and have an opportunity to plan.

The other significant element is that every cent being raised from the carbon tax will be given back to people. The Minister for Finance rightly views three categories as important. The first is that we must protect those most exposed, in particular those like the Bord na Móna

workers or others who are directly affected, and who rightly expect that there should be a just transition for them.

The second group are the people who are least well equipped to make changes in this transition. This has been a central feature of the budget. Not only are 22% protected with the €2 per week fuel allowance increase, but even more significant is the allocation of €53 million this year, double what we had last year, for the warmer homes scheme, with which many Deputies will be familiar. That scheme means those on fuel schemes can get permanent improvements made to their home. On average, those permanent improvements will deliver €1,200 in savings per year in the energy bills of those directly affected. We are, therefore, providing €56 per week under the fuel allowance scheme to protect people but those who participate in the warmer homes scheme will also receive a €1,200 per year improvement. This shows we have to make structural changes to help people who are in fuel poverty.

The third element is to maintain the momentum that we are beginning to see in the context of getting people to retrofit their homes and to buy electric vehicles, and getting the electricity system to switch to renewable power. In 2020, the spend on retrofitting will be four times what it was in 2016. There will be a significant ramp-up in the investment we make, which is a significant part of the journey. The purchase of electric vehicles this year and next year will be 12 times what it was in 2016. We are beginning to see a serious penetration of electric vehicles and we are building out a charging network with the resources being made available. What is also significant next year is that we will have an auction for renewable energy on the grid and this will represent a 60% increase in the amount of renewable energy on the grid in one auction, which is a significant expansion. This is providing momentum behind the climate action plan.

I want to conclude by addressing the issue of just transition. We face serious threats in respect of the midlands. I thank the Minister for Finance for the constructive way in which he has approached this. We are in a position to plan between the special aggregated model of retrofitting that we will have in the midlands and the additional allocation of funds to allow the National Parks and Wildlife Service to restore bogs and create employment opportunities, while there is also Bord na Móna itself and its capacity to diversify. With the just transition fund of €6 million, we will, through a just transition commissioner, work with communities in the midlands to ensure that we respond in appropriate ways. I would also draw attention to the fact that in the national development plan we set aside €1 billion for an urban fund, €1 billion for a rural fund and €500 million for a climate action fund. All of these funds are dedicated to the journey to a low-carbon economy. I believe that by working with interests in the midlands, we can exploit those funds.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Budget 2020 represents another significant and visible commitment to children and families by this Government and I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I welcome the budget, the fourth I have been involved in as Minister and the fourth that is progressive, where the poorest have gained proportionately more than the richest.

We continue to provide additional resources to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people. I particularly welcome the increases in the expansion of the one-parent family payment and jobseekers' transition payments, and the increase to the living alone allowance. These changes, and other measures, will improve the lives of many of our citizens, even while we are making every effort to ready ourselves for a potential no-deal Brexit and the difficulties this would cause for so many people and businesses.

I now turn to the budget 2020 provisions for my own Department. I am especially pleased to advise the House that the gross funding being made available to my Department in 2020 will be €1.604 billion, which represents an increase of 6% over its allocation for 2019. Approximately half of that funding is targeted at public services to protect our children and to provide for their welfare, and the other significant portion is to continue the journey to build an accessible, affordable and high quality childcare system.

In a few weeks, we will launch the new national childcare scheme, sometimes referred to as the NCS. In March, I signalled a target timeframe of 29 October for the launch. The IT system has been built and is being piloted at the moment. It is the objective of any pilot to identify any snags and a minor snag has been identified, which means the scheme will now open for applications in November. Payments to parents, as I have previously advised, will still flow from November.

The introduction of the NCS is a landmark moment for making high quality childcare more affordable and more accessible to families. As many in this House will be aware, since I became Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, my ambition has been to move Ireland from being one of the most expensive countries in the world for childcare to being one of the best. This ambition has focused on three strands - quality, affordability and accessibility - and budget 2020 moves us another step on that journey.

I have allocated an additional €54.5 million to childcare for 2020. This brings the budget to €628 million per annum and represents a 9.3% increase over the 2019 allocation and a 138% increase since 2014. It is a substantive investment that will deliver significant changes. Taking time to pick up and drop off children while commuting to work, and then doing a day's work, is stressful and this is especially true in a lone-parent family. From September 2020, therefore, all parents will be able to avail of an additional five hours of subsidised childcare, whether working or studying. Budget 2020 has also allowed me to increase by 25% the funding available for preschool access for children who need targeted supports under the access and inclusion model, AIM. This is an incredibly important programme. It provides a range of measures to support children with disabilities to take part in the ECCE free preschool programme in mainstream settings and to help make preschool services more inclusive, benefiting all children in those services.

Another key area of my Department's responsibility is Tusla. I strongly support Tusla's important work in protecting some of the most vulnerable children and families in our increasingly complex and diverse society. These additional resources secured are necessary to deliver on a significant programme of service reform and have also allowed for targeted development of key service areas.

I was delighted yesterday morning to meet some of the young protestors from Extinction Rebellion on Merrion Square. We have a long way to go to reduce Ireland's emissions, but the increase in carbon tax, to which the Minister, Deputy Bruton, referred, will allow us invest more in our just transition agenda. Every budget from now on must focus on climate justice, and our young protestors, and all of society, must be involved in contributing to a just transition to a low-carbon future.

Budget negotiations are by their nature tough and there are many competing demands, but I welcome the recognition that the measures I have put forward to reduce poverty, protect and support the vulnerable and support families must be addressed. I commend budget 2020 to the

House.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): In May 2016, I had the great honour of being appointed Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, the first such Minister of State to sit at the Cabinet table. Not only did I consider it an honour but I also viewed it as a challenge. I set myself three goals: to reform, to invest and to put the person with the disability at the centre of our thinking and planning.

I wish to take the opportunity to highlight one of those areas, namely investment, without which we will struggle to reform. In my three years as Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, I have secured additional funding of more than €500 million for disability issues. This is a figure one will not hear from the Opposition or in our national media. This has not been easy in the context of many other competing priorities across government. The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities that will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. I am pleased to have been able both to build on significant existing resources and to obtain additional funding for disability services in the 2020 budget. With these additional moneys, the overall budget for disability services in 2020 will be in excess of €2 billion. The increased level of funding in 2020 will enable us to continue to provide residential services to more than 8,600 people with disabilities at more than 1,240 locations.

On taking office, one of my priorities was to ensure that all young adults leaving school or Rehab training would have access to supports and services that met their needs at one of the most crucial transition points in their lives. Additional funding of €13 million will provide supports and day services to approximately 1,600 young people with disabilities who leave school and training programmes next year. I recognise the critical importance of respite for the loved ones and families of those with a disability. I am pleased to confirm that an additional €5 million will be provided in 2020 to build the capacity of our respite services in order that we can better respond to the changing needs of service users and their families. In the coming weeks, I will open our 12th respite house in Naas, County Kildare. Specifically, this funding will provide intensive support packages for children and young people in response to the changing needs of service users and their families. This initiative will include intensive in-home visiting support, planned overnight, specialist behavioural support and extended day-weekend and day-based activities for families. Sláintecare is centred on providing services and supports at the lowest level of complexity. An additional €5 million in this budget is provided for emergency protocols to support people with disabilities who have high support needs. This includes funding for emergency placements and the provision of intensive in-home support and respite packages, which are intended to delay the need for residential care for vulnerable service users.

An additional €2 million will be provided in 2020 to support implementation of the autism plan, which includes a range of measures to improve services for people with autism and their families. A 100% Christmas bonus will be paid to those on invalidity pension, blind pension, disability allowance, carer's allowance, carer's benefit and domiciliary care allowance, to name but a few. The carer's support grant of €1,700, which we restored, will be paid in 2020 to more than 126,000 users. In addition, the number of hours per week that carers can work outside the home will be increased from 15 to 18.5 from January 2020. More than 1,200 carers are expected to benefit from this. The blind welfare allowance will be exempt from the means assessment for social welfare schemes. Some 12,000 housing adaptation grants will be provided at a cost of €59 million to help people with disabilities.

The budget is about being person-centred, ensuring that the person with the disability and, where appropriate, his or her carer are to the forefront of our thinking and planning. This budget, the fourth in which I have been involved as Minister of State, has demonstrated my commitment in this regard.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): Against the background of Brexit uncertainty, it was vital that the Government framed a prudent budget for 2020. I will focus on the key areas of my responsibility, namely, forestry, horticulture, organics and the greyhound sector.

The continued support for the development of forestry in Ireland is reinforced with an allocation of €103 million, including a capital carryover, for 2020. This allocation reflects our commitment to planting 8,000 ha in 2020, an ambitious target contained in the climate action plan. This level of planting will be challenging and will require shared action from the private sector, public bodies and local communities, but the Government is committed to achieving it. The budget also provides funding for the direct implementation of a number of other actions under the climate action plan, including the mobilisation of the private timber resource in Ireland, a substantial investment in forest roads, continued support for knowledge transfer groups and the promotion of timber products.

In 2019, funding for capital investment in the commercial horticulture sector was increased by €1 million to €6 million. In response to continuing strong demand for investment by the sector, budget 2020 has maintained this allocation. Ireland's horticulture faces a number of challenges in the context of Brexit; however, the sector still has significant potential for development. Budget 2020 continues to provide significant resources to maximise the industry's competitiveness.

The greyhound sector has undergone a series of reforms in recent times, including the enactment of the Greyhound Racing Act 2019. This legislation strengthens the legal basis for the industry, with a view to fortifying the integrity of the greyhound racing sector and improving provision for greyhound traceability. I am pleased to announce the Government's commitment to the Horse and Greyhound Fund for 2020, which will maintain expenditure at 2 o'clock €16.8 million next year for Bord na gCon. This sector is an important contributor to the economy and provides employment in both rural and urban areas. A significant portion of the fund will be spent on care and welfare. Bord na gCon has put in place a range of such initiatives for greyhounds in recent months. I welcome the establishment of the care fund to fund programmes and initiatives for the care and welfare of racing greyhounds. The fund will support a variety of initiatives in the area of rehoming, welfare, traceability and a greyhound injury support scheme. I have received assurances from the board of Bord na gCon that it remains committed to the protection of the integrity of the industry and to promoting the welfare of greyhounds. With this new legislation in place, together with the maintenance of the funding, I am confident that Bord na gCon will have the tools to reform and strengthen the industry.

Funding for the organic farming scheme has been increased this year to €12 million, with a further €1.2 million provided for development of the organic sector.

The €1 million increase in the organic scheme budget for 2020 highlights the Government's ongoing commitment to the development of the organic sector. The higher targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, budget for 2020 will also directly benefit organic farmers as

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they are direct beneficiaries under this scheme for organic investments. This will help build on the record volume of Irish land under organic production, which we have delivered under the current rural development programme. This higher investment is key to the implementation of the strategy for the organic food sector for 2019 to 2025.

I welcome the provision of an additional €1 million to bring the 2020 allocation for Horse Sport Ireland to €4 million to assist with the strategic development of the sector. It is an area in which I have a personal interest. This extra funding will assist in providing further incentives for breeding high-quality young horses and developing a structure for producers and breeders towards producing a horse from the foal stage to competing at high-level competition. I am delighted that the €850,000 under the equine infrastructures grant scheme could be maintained.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the budget, delivered by Fine Gael and supported by its colleagues in Fianna Fáil, which has failed again to ease the burden on working families. It is a takeaway budget rather than a giveaway.

The budget could have been so much better for the people of rural Ireland and across this State by putting money back in people's pockets but it has failed to deliver. It has failed to improve public services. The Government failed to tackle the rip-off practices in childcare and car insurance, and it is still like the wild west in the rental sector. Families in rural Ireland will face increased charges as a result. The Government has decided to go against the poorest workers in the State by not providing even one cent of an increase in the national minimum wage. Everyone expected something to be done for those on the minimum wage but that has not happened and action is being deferred until after Brexit. I wonder who requested that. There was no deferral of corporation tax or multimillionaires' income tax breaks until after Brexit. Why are the Government and Fianna Fáil only choosing to punish the lowest paid workers in our society?

Some have called this a nothing budget but is more cruel than that. Perhaps the meanest and most harmful decision made by the Government was the increase in the carbon tax. That decision will hurt the poorest and most rural constituents. It is not just Sinn Féin saying it, as many organisations that have analysed the budget have come to that conclusion. That will push more people over the poverty line having to put up with the cold this winter. The Government has said in its defence that the increase in carbon tax is on the grounds of climate action. That does not hold up when we crunch the numbers as we have had a carbon tax for the past nine years and it has not had an impact on climate action. Despite the fact that the Government has taken the decision to increase the carbon tax by an additional €6 to a total of €26 per tonne, only a fraction of this will be reinvested in climate action.

The carbon tax is expected to bring in approximately €540 million to €550 million next year, based on budget figures, and yet only €6 million has been allocated for a Bord na Móna transition plan. If we ever needed proof of Fine Gael greenwashing, that is it. What the Government intends to deliver to the people of the midlands in particular falls well short of anything substantial. It is meagre and there is no vision. I have not seen anything about creating a biomass supply chain industry required to supply the three midlands power stations or anything relating to biogas or microgeneration. A miserly €6 million has been allocated for bog rehabilitation while the greyhound industry got €16 million. Rural bogs have the potential to serve as carbon sinks, as well as educational and tourism resources, but that has been overlooked. The current afforestation grant scheme is a joke and unfit for purpose. It is also underfunded.

There is nothing in the budget for rural transport. How can one expect people to use less

fuel if we do not provide alternatives? Are the people in counties Laois and Offaly meant to buy electric cars and install their own charging points? Sinn Féin argued for almost a doubling of the rural transport budget. We are trying to provide solutions but the reality is that this was not a giveaway budget but a takeaway budget. Ordinary people, particularly those in rural Ireland, will be worse off after this budget. We advocated measures to tackle rip-off insurance costs, increasing the minimum wage and €10 million for the retraining of Bord na Móna workers, with funding to support the agriculture sector, especially in the face of Brexit. As I mentioned, we would almost double the funding for local bus services but we would not have increased the carbon tax. Ultimately, this budget will not work for working families or rural Ireland. It will increase pressure on low-income families and people living in rural Ireland. It is a missed opportunity by the Government.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This budget has been a major disappointment for the vast majority of people who are struggling and are working hard to pay their mortgage or rent. They may face an occasional crisis in life, whether it is a car or washing machine breaking down, but there is nothing in the budget for them. The difficulty is there is no effort to recognise that a large section of people simply cannot survive in the system, as it stands.

I will focus mainly on my portfolio of justice. There was an exchange today in the Chamber about people extorting money by intimidating people working on building sites in Dublin. Deputy Ó Snodaigh wrote to Ministers informing them of it but nothing was done. Apart from the clear and obvious problem, it struck me that a Fine Gael Government that prides itself on being tough on crime did nothing when it was told about it. Now we have a scandal. I am sure the Minister of State knows that very many people who are victims of crime do not go to the Garda because they do not trust the Garda to solve those problems. Why did the contractor in this case not go to the Garda and why did senior officials in Dublin City Council consider it appropriate to advise the contractor to co-operate with the criminal rather than go to the Garda and get it sorted out? People clearly believe the Garda is not up for the job. It is the experience of very many people the length and breadth of the country, including in my constituency.

Walking on the streets of Dublin any night of a weekend after midnight, one might search high and low without finding a garda. They are not walking the streets or protecting people. When people come out of pubs and try to get a taxi home, they are afraid of their lives if they have to hang around for very long. I spoke to a woman the other day who told me she got off a bus in the north inner city one evening last week at approximately 7.30 p.m. and a car was doing doughnuts. That was near Ballybough, where around the corner Fitzgibbon Street Garda station has been closed, with a hoarding around it, for the past four years. Leinster House is 300 years old and there was a commitment to have it renovated; it was done in less time than was originally envisaged because of that commitment. However, the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, went to the north inner city and promised to do something, but what happened? Fitzgibbon Street Garda station is still closed with the hoarding around it because there was no commitment to refurbish it. It is the reality for many people around the country.

It is a similar position in my constituency. There are small rural towns with small gangs of people involved in the drug trade who are attacking their neighbours and intimidating them. The Garda simply is not up for the job. I have seen this myself and spoken to people about it. They found that when they went to the Garda, there was sympathy and the Garda members took a note before they were sent away. No other effort was made because the Garda does not have the required resources unless there is a crisis. An armed response unit has recently been placed in Cavan and now there are three of them in the Border region, which is welcome. They

are meant to respond to a crisis. The problem is the resources are not there to avoid that crisis developing in the first place. It is the major factor in discussing justice and so many other issues in the budget. The resources have not been put in place to deal with problems.

The Government has told us this is about making the right choice. As the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has said, he only has so much money. The problem is the Government is prepared to make choices to benefit the people at the very top. We still have tax breaks for executives from abroad living in Dublin. We still have tax breaks for some people at some of the major international corporations here. We still have a major tax break for the banks. AIB and Bank of Ireland are making more than €1 billion per year but are paying no tax. The Minister of State should tell publicans in rural Ireland that they can pay no tax because they have made no money in recent years. That is the excuse the banks make. Would that wash? Bloody sure it would not wash, but this Government allowed it to happen for the banks. These same banks have absolutely persecuted people throughout the country. They are driving people to the road in many cases and evicting them, yet we are doing this.

Some weeks ago, I picked up a book I read many years ago called *The Republic*, which was written by Plato 2,000 years ago. It states that three things are vital for a state to survive, namely, an adequate justice system, an adequate health system and an adequate education system. If we think of it, all the other things we have are subsidiaries of those three things, yet we are not dealing with those central issues in our society in this day and age. It is a scandal that this Government continues to hide behind numbers by saying Brexit is coming or that it only has so much money. There is every excuse but there is no excuse for the unfortunate people who feel afraid in their homes because of the situation in this city and throughout rural Ireland.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: As the party spokesperson on children and youth affairs, I will focus on that area of the budget initially and then will raise some other points.

While some of the parts of the children and youth affairs budget are welcome, unfortunately it was lacking in many other areas, especially in the detail on the early years and childcare sector. We need a radical new approach for the early years childcare sector. The current system is broken and completely unsustainable for staff. It is also financially crippling for thousands of parents. Families are being squeezed every which way through unaffordable rents and mortgages. We have a high cost of living and childcare costs that amount to a second mortgage or a second rent in some instances.

In our alternative budget, which was published on 1 October, one of the points we made was that we would commence a five-year programme of reform to ensure that early years and childcare staff are properly paid. That is absolutely crucial to the sector. We also need to see a slashing of fees for parents, which also was part of our proposal. It would cost €28 million in the first year and the full-year cost would be €85 million. Our proposals would reduce fees throughout the State significantly for parents over a five-year period, starting with a reduction of 13%. The reduction would increase to 66% by the end of the fifth year. The initial 13% reduction would amount to approximately €100 per month on a monthly crèche fee of €800.

We would also introduce a proper pay scale for all workers in the sector, starting with the current living wage of €12.30. This would increase year upon year over a five-year period for all staff across the entire childcare and early years sector. This is something we have long advocated. It is an issue about which I feel especially passionate. In 2017, I was involved in a report at committee level. We brought forward a motion about the wages and the terms and

conditions in the sector. It is frustrating that although Deputies and Senators from all parties, as well as Independent Members and everyone else, recently were getting their picture taken at a launch by SIPTU about the terms and conditions for workers and their wages, we have a budget that completely failed to deliver on that commitment. Workers need to be financially supported and encouraged to upskill and remain in the sector. At the moment we are seeing burnout and people are not staying in the sector. That is causing major issues because there will be a staffing crisis. As with everything in this country, it has to get to a crisis before anyone starts to pay attention.

As it stands, the market model that we have for the childcare and early years sector risks being reduced to businesses designed solely for profit. We have all seen the revelations over the summer relating to the Hyde and Seek crèche reported by the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. We all know how horrifying that was and how horrible it was to watch. The reality is that if we do not address the issue of fees for parents, as well as terms and conditions and proper decent wages for workers, then the problem is basically going to continue. There is no point in saying anything different.

I wish to touch on the allocation for Tusla. No detail has been given on the number of social workers, aftercare workers or administrative workers that will be put into place to relieve the administrative burden on social workers. There are no numbers whatsoever. A Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, report was published last week specifically relating to the Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary areas. It showed a major percentage of children who had no social workers. HIQA did an investigation on the issue. Many children were only appointed a social worker one or two months prior to the investigation. There are major issues in that part of the country, yet the budget does not say how many new social workers will be appointed. That makes me think the money will simply go to plug the current gaps in the system and is not actual new money.

I wish to mention an issue about housing. It is one of the biggest issues that almost all Deputies deal with in their constituencies. We have become totally desensitised to the homeless situation. It has become normal. That is the only conclusion that I can come to in respect of homelessness. We talk about it so often here, yet absolutely nothing constructive is being done. The Good Shepherd Centre for the homeless in Kilkenny announced yesterday that there was no new money in this budget for the centre. It is doing fantastic work, as do other places both in my constituency and throughout the country, but no additional help is being given to it.

The school completion programme also falls within the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It specifically focuses on the needs of the child. It is in place in certain schools and not every school has it. It provides counselling, play therapy, homework clubs and many services for children who are seen to be potentially at risk of dropping out of school. There is no new money for the programme. Its funding has been cut since 2008 and it operates on a shoestring budget. Those involved operate a great service, yet in a few years’ time when it closes down because of the lack of money, everyone will be here throwing their hands up and asking how we let that happen. We let it happen because we are not putting the money into the services. That is what happens. It is as my colleague has said: it is about political choice and whether we want to help people who are currently struggling or whether we want to keep rewarding the people at the top. I think we have seen this Government for enough years to know exactly where its priorities lie.

That last point I want to make relates to the carbon tax. There obviously are urban areas

where I live but we have many rural areas and there is no public transport. I drive here every day because that is the only choice I have. The last train that goes to my home town is at 6.25 p.m. As we all know, the House often sits far longer than that. People do not have the choice to use public transport. The Government cannot penalise them with a carbon tax if they do not have that choice. It is fine if they have the choice of public transport but we do not have that choice in so many areas. It is cruel. A significant number of people are already panicking over the carbon tax. People do not know how they are going to pay for coal and oil.

They do not have the option of changing to newer heating systems. They do not have the money. Currently, they barely make ends meet. Many families every week must choose between paying the heating bill or the electricity bill. That is the reality. If the Minister of State does not believe that is the reality, he should go out to some of the constituencies and talk to people. Their reaction since Tuesday and the announcement of the carbon tax is telling. People say they will cut back on this or that or something else in order that they can afford the heating as we come into winter. It is totally unacceptable that we are allowing that to happen in this day and age. We are being told that everyone needs to upgrade to electric cars. That is great. Is the Government going to subsidise all these cars for people? That is not the reality for most people. They cannot afford to make those changes. We cannot penalise someone who does not have the option. That is exactly what this tax is doing. It is a fast revenue-raising measure. It is not anything to do with the environment or climate change. That is the last point I will make.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, is next, and he will be sharing time.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I wish to share time with the Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development, Deputy Canney, the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan, and Deputy Corcoran Kennedy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is no problem for me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I would share the Chair with the Deputy but I cannot see him taking it.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Boyd Barrett knows there was never any problem with him.

I am pleased to inform the House that I have secured €2.7 billion to fund projects and programmes throughout the transport, tourism and sports sectors in 2020. It is a measure of the Government's commitment to capital investment that the capital budget for my Department has increased by €357 million despite the difficult challenges created by Brexit. It will allow my Department to continue to finance core priorities and address short and long-term needs that fall within its remit. Beyond the immediate impacts of Brexit, one of the most important challenges facing us is reducing excess carbon dioxide emissions which are the main cause of climate change. One of the keys to tackling excess emissions is the development of sustainable public transport to provide the option, wherever possible, for car users to leave their cars at home. As a result, 37% of the budget this year is devoted to public transport, an increase of €235 million on the figure for last year. It brings total investment in public transport in both current and capital expenditure to over €1 billion for the first time. We will commence building the national train control centre, continue to invest heavily in rail maintenance to improve intercity rail services,

station accessibility and invest €80 million to support enhanced walking and cycling facilities across all major urban centres. We will continue to support fleet operators via the PSO system, incentivising passengers to switch to public transport by ensuring fares remain competitive. We will support continued investment in greenways, with a 21% increase in funding. In Dublin the budget will support progress on two major infrastructural projects, namely, BusConnects and MetroLink. It will also allow us to commence the transition to hybrid vehicles in the Dublin Bus fleet and assist in delivering on the commitment to provide 200 km of mostly segregated cycle lanes as part of the BusConnects project.

I recognise that transitioning to a low carbon economy will take time as it is the biggest industrial transformation in our lifetime. I do not want to lose sight of the vital and traditional importance of the road network in the daily lives of citizens and commuters, particularly outside urban areas. As a result, we will invest €1.12 billion in roads, including the N5, Westport to Turlough, road; the N22, Ballyvourney to Macroom, road; the Dunkettle interchange and the Listowel and Moycullen bypasses. Additionally, my Department is investing €1.5 million in electric vehicle charging infrastructure, with funds ring fenced from carbon tax revenues.

In 2020 we will invest €125 million in sport and €186 million in tourism. We have secured funding to support the qualifying teams for the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020, the hosting of four matches in the Euro 2020 championships next June and commence preparations to host the Ryder Cup in 2026. As the full impacts of Brexit are likely to make themselves felt in 2020, we have secured a commitment to a significant package of up to €40 million to support a wide range of measures that will be undertaken by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland. It will help to ensure we continue to have a strong and positive presence in international tourism markets.

Since the formation of the Government in May 2016, the overall departmental budget has increased from €1.7 billion to €2.7 billion, with 87% of the increase represented by Project Ireland 2040 investment. It enhances the value of capital stock in the country and addresses vital infrastructure requirements, improving our standard of living and international competitiveness. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is proud of the fact that the portfolio has been given such prominence and priority by the Government.

The Independent Alliance supports the prudent approach taken to the budget. However, this approach does not mean that those who are more vulnerable have been neglected. It is welcome that many more people will be eligible for medical cards as a result of measures taken in the budget, at the encouragement and urging of the Independent Alliance. I also acknowledge the willingness of the Minister for Finance to increase the threshold for inheritance tax by €15,000 for the second year in a row. This is part of a trend linked with a pledge in the programme for Government which holds that people, particularly those on modest incomes, should be able to leave their houses to their children in certain circumstances. We are not talking about particularly affluent people, with the amount in question increasing to approximately €335,000. Inheritance tax is something that adversely affects people with various assets, particularly those whose sole asset is the family home. They will now be relieved of some of the burden borne heretofore.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): In the area of local government the funding announced in the budget on Tuesday amounts to €156 million paid directly by the local government section into the local authority structure throughout the country, in which there are 31 local authorities. The Local Government Fund supports a range of local government initiatives and services across

the country, with which Members of this House will be familiar. I am delighted with the increase in support of €12.5 million for capital investment in fire and emergency services. This money will be used to provide vital new fire service vehicles and refurbish existing fire stations. I also welcome the increased capital funding of €2.4 million for the Valuation Office which will go towards its 2020 IT systems upgrade project. The Government has made €17 million available to Ordnance Survey Ireland for 2020, an increase of €2 million on the figure for last year. It will allow the office to develop geo-spatial activities in support of Government policy and strategy, thus allowing it to take on additional public sector tasks in 2021 and 2022. Thanks to these important supports, I am confident that the local government sector and the Tailte Éireann group of agencies will be strongly resourced into 2020.

Taking account of the variation decisions made by local authorities recently, the 2020 LPT allocations amount to €516.8 million, compared to €503 million in 2019. A total of 19 local authorities varied their LPT rates upwards for 2020, providing €19.7 million in additional LPT income for their own use. This compares to a gain of €3.4 million in 2019 for the same authorities. This trend illustrates that the majority of local authorities are now prepared to use the LPT variation mechanism to generate additional funding locally for critical and strategic programmes and services.

In 2018 the commercial rates collected by each local authority across the country amounted to just short of €1.4 billion, a very significant sum which is the largest funding stream for local authorities across the country. Income raised in 2018 by local authorities through development levies amounted to €222 million. I have already given the figure for LPT income.

In terms of other provisions made by the local government section for local authorities across the country, €9 million has been allocated under what are termed miscellaneous schemes, including funding for European Committee of the Regions membership, which comprises eight full members and eight substitute members. These are county councillors from all across the country who sit on that EU-wide body. Funding is also provided for the National Oversight and Audit Committee which was established in 2014 to ensure the efficient application of resources by each local authority across the country. There is also an allocation for local partnership initiatives and local government development initiatives. In recent years we have also made allocations related to the participation of women in public office at local government level and those funds are derived from the miscellaneous schemes.

On the matter of the broader budget, we live in extremely interesting times. We are still awaiting clarity on the outcome of the Brexit process, but the position in which the Government found itself in drafting a budget was such that prudence was deemed to be the most appropriate course in the allocation of resources. However, I particularly welcome the increased funding for home help hours, an issue every Member of this House has come across in the course of his or her constituency work. Home help support is crucial in ensuring older people can remain in their homes and communities for longer. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, on the extra allocation in that regard.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): I want to speak about the budget from the perspective of an independent rural Deputy. I begin by speaking about my role in the Departments of Rural and Community Development and Communications, Climate Action and Environment. I welcome the allocation of €190 million for the national broadband plan in 2020. This is a clear indication of the Government's intention to get the plan in place. It will get the 1.1 million people, includ-

ing farmers and small businesses, who do not have broadband back on track and bring them into the digital age, ensuring no one is left behind. The €8 million fund for the digital skills initiative will provide for 25,000 citizens and SMEs to be upskilled to ensure they are ready for digitalisation. As a rural Deputy, I am aware of the sporadic roll-out of broadband in rural areas and how some people are left behind or left out for no apparent reason. The private sector has failed to provide for such people. The national broadband plan is the only way it will be done.

On climate action, the biggest measure is the €146 million, an increase of €29 million, made available to upgrade 24,000 homes and businesses. There are several positive aspects to this initiative, foremost among which is the fact that it will lead to people living in comfortable houses and having to spend less on energy. The average saving per household will be in the region of €1,200 per annum once the upgrades are completed. It is important that it is carried out. A new retrofitting model will deliver upgrades to a large number of houses at the same time such that we create economies of scale to reduce costs and get more for the money we spend. Another important measure is that those in fuel poverty or in receipt of fuel allowance will receive a grant to cover 100% of the cost of the upgrades, which is vital.

On rural and community development, the increase of €17 million in funding has been a major success, as €10 million of it will be added to the LEADER fund. Every Deputy is aware of the importance of the LEADER programme, its impact on community facilities and engagement and that it creates spaces where people can live, work, enjoy life and have an equal opportunity to that enjoyed by those who live in more updated urban areas. The allocation is to be welcomed. In addition, there is a €3 million package of targeted supports for the community and voluntary sector. As Members are aware, the voluntary sector is vital and we need to continue to support it. I look forward to the publication of the volunteering strategy on which we are working to supplement that. Another significant measure for towns and villages in rural Ireland is the investment of an additional €1 million in library services. These supports are very important to rural Ireland and, most importantly, will reach every citizen.

It is important to point out that we have had to protect our most vulnerable in the context of the budget. We are facing our biggest challenge since the founding of the State. It is important that young people are being looked after and that care hours are being increased such that we can care for our most vulnerable people, who made the country what it is. We must show respect for the elderly and provide care hours for them.

I welcome the extension of the help-to-buy scheme, which assists young people who are trying to save to buy a home. It is challenging to try to save a deposit while renting. The help-to-buy scheme is vital for such people and I am delighted that it has been extended for two years.

On education, I welcome that small rural schools will receive additional supports, including a better capitation grant, while those with four classrooms or fewer will be allocated a lower pupil-teacher ratio, which will help them in the fight to get additional teachers.

I commend the budget to the House. I am delighted and proud of what we have achieved in the prevailing difficult circumstances.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on budget 2020. For some time, Deputies have been aware of the Government's plan for a budget premised on a hard Brexit. There has been much criticism of this approach but I believe it reinforces that Fine Gael takes a prudent approach to the public finances. The twin themes of the budget, namely,

Brexit and climate action, were well flagged in recent weeks.

The budget delivered for Offaly and the midlands. Although there has been some negativity regarding the increase in the carbon tax, I am delighted that the funds it raises will be ring-fenced to protect the most vulnerable and invested in agri-environmental schemes and our low-carbon future. I am pleased that my Government colleagues recognised the uniquely challenging impact of the country's decarbonisation transition on Offaly in the context of Bord na Móna's transition away from the harvesting of peat in order to generate power for the ESB. I have had intense discussions with the Taoiseach, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, over the 12 months since Bord na Móna announced its decarbonisation strategy from brown to green. I thank and acknowledge the Minister, Deputy Bruton, in particular for his accessibility and responsiveness at all times, especially in recent months following the decision of An Bord Pleanála on Shannonbridge and the uncertainty created as a result. I emphasised the immediate need for the Government to respond with concrete measures and am delighted with the announcement that a just transition commissioner will be appointed shortly. Engagement with all stakeholders, workers, companies, communities and local authorities, particularly Offaly County Council, will be vital to ensure correct usage of the €6 million just transition fund targeted at the midlands to support retraining and reskilling of workers and to assist local communities and businesses adjust to the low-carbon transition. Consultation with the structures in place in the midlands, including the midlands transition team, must take place on the best approach to target the funding.

The €5 million for bog restoration and rehabilitation which will restore bogs to their natural habitat is particularly welcome. Bord na Móna workers I recently visited were adamant they could carry out this work. Although I understand that the programme will support the National Parks and Wildlife Service, I sincerely hope a role will be found for these workers, especially those who are not at retirement age but are not young enough to wish to retrain or go into further education. The recently announced forestry planting collaboration by Bord na Móna and Coillte will provide further opportunity for Bord na Móna workers and I hope that is explored.

The allocation of €20 million to deliver group housing retrofitting as set out in the climate action plan is a welcome development. I understand it is to be targeted at the midlands. I suggest, as I previously suggested to the Minister, Deputy Bruton, in the House, that Offaly be prioritised as it is the county that will be impacted most by decarbonisation. These measures will make a significant difference in my constituency by generating economic activity and creating environmentally sustainable jobs to replace those lost in the short term at Bord na Móna. I welcome the fact that people in fuel poverty will be taken into consideration and that funding from the carbon tax will be used to increase the fuel allowance by €2 per week. I also welcome the additional €13 million which will be ring fenced from that money to support the warmer homes scheme and will be targeted at energy-efficient upgrades for those at risk of fuel poverty.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is not and never has been sufficiently funded. Even though its funding was increased in the budget, it is still not sufficient. We use the arts to sell the country around the globe. The work being done by the Heritage Council is brilliant and should have received more funding. That said, I welcome the much-needed increase of €1 million for special areas of conservation or special protection areas. Farmers are operating under significant constraints in my area. It is a start.

The provision of an additional 1 million home help hours is a start and will be a tremendous

asset to carers and others in that role. I acknowledge the additional funding for tourism and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I recognise the fantastic work being done by the Department of Rural and Community Development. The allocation of €15 million to the Department will enable further investment in town and village renewal. It is great news for rural Ireland. I refer to the E-hive in Edenderry, County Offaly. It is a new, modern co-working hub owned by Offaly County Council. The project is at the centre of the town and is an illustration of how correctly-directed funding can be of significant benefit to rural Ireland.

Debate adjourned.

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 Kevin O’Keeffe - to discuss the study route of the M20 between Cork and Limerick; (2) Deputy Joan Burton - to discuss the future of Huntstown community centre in Dublin 15, which is in need of essential fire safety and structural remedial works; (3) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss relief road proposals to alleviate traffic congestion in Maynooth, County Kildare; (4) Deputy Louise O’Reilly - to discuss the need for additional school places in north County Dublin; and (5) Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Gino Kenny - to discuss Ireland’s position regarding Turkish military aggression in northern Syria.

The matters raised by Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Gino Kenny, Joan Burton and Kevin O’Keeffe have been selected for discussion.

Financial Resolutions 2019

Financial Resolution No. 9: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government)

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I will share time with Deputy Marc MacSharry.

It is widely understood economic prudence is at the forefront of this budget, given the possible impact of the UK leaving the EU without a deal in the coming weeks. As this is the first budget since the declaration of a climate and biodiversity emergency, the Government will

equally be judged on the priority it gives to taking action in the face of this defining challenge. This is clear from the major protests taking place outside this House today. We have had many such protests in the past and I suspect we will have more of them in the future. The budget has not moved Ireland from laggard to leader on climate action. This was dubbed a climate budget. The Minister called it “a watershed moment”. Ireland’s laggard status stems from Fine Gael’s decision to abandon the climate legislation proposed by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party when we were in government together. Subsequently, the Government failed to introduce any sort of coherent climate plan until this year.

The Government has a long way to go. The State will have to pay millions of euro for failing to meet its EU 2020 climate commitments. Our 2030 targets are at significant risk, even at this stage. This budget is very much the start and not the finishing line when it comes to climate and biodiversity loss. The Government has merely started facing in the right direction. Its decision to focus on climate action, energy poverty and just transition is years overdue. Carbon taxation is a small subset of overall climate action. Responsibility for climate leadership cannot be regarded as resting with individuals. As the carbon tax trajectory increases, it is vital that we see an increasing and urgent delivery of transparent and progressive measures in accordance with the landmark report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action. In this context, I call on the Minister to commit to enacting before the next election the necessary legislation to introduce a net zero target by 2050 and to ensure improved accountability across the Government.

We have to be clear that from a strict climate perspective, the €6 per tonne increase in the rate of carbon tax is relatively modest. It is the first increase in years. Following the excellent work of the joint committee, which achieved a consensus across a majority of its members, it is important that citizens, businesses and stakeholders are clear that we are moving towards a carbon price of €80 per tonne by 2030. We welcome the Government’s decision to support Fianna Fáil’s approach to new revenues raised by the increase in carbon taxes. Such revenues will be ring-fenced to pay for climate action measures and ensure vulnerable households are better protected. Perhaps it would have been more sensible if the Government, having placed such weight on consensus at the joint committee, acknowledged that this approach to the use of these revenues was not its own. The Taoiseach seems to be taking full responsibility for this policy approach. Up to a number of days ago, he had a completely different idea on how the moneys collected from the carbon tax would be spent.

Fianna Fáil is mindful of the impact of the carbon tax increase on low-income households and on people who are at risk of fuel poverty, particularly those in rural areas who might not always have ready alternatives. I appreciate and commend the expert analysis of the ESRI and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, both of which made important inputs at the Joint Committee on Climate Action. If we are to ensure the Government’s approach to decarbonisation is rooted in climate justice, such independent and transparent assessment must continue. It is concerning that the Government failed to produce a review of energy poverty prior to the carbon tax increase. Such a review was demanded of it and was a requirement of the joint committee. However, it is welcome that €21 million has been allocated to the fuel allowance scheme to increase the weekly allowance by €2 per week. Given that we have a trajectory towards the €80 per tonne price, it is important that we also see an increasing trajectory of support. This, again, has to be the start; it must not be seen as the finish line. The Government should be clear that the protection of the most vulnerable people is a first-order priority and will remain so throughout the introduction of additional protective measures.

Ring-fencing is important because it provides transparency that moneys are being used spe-

cifically to support climate action on the ground. It is important that we have additional investment for home insulation, particularly in the case of social housing. We welcome the additional €13 million that will be allocated to the warmer homes scheme to facilitate the retrofitting and insulation of the homes of people who are living in, or are at risk of, energy poverty. It is important for the Government to come forward with detailed plans to ensure the SEAI is in position to assess applications and co-ordinate delivery in a timely manner. We are clear that this is a small step. We have not yet seen the sort of scaled-up investment that would allow for the delivery of a real national retrofitting programme. Ring-fencing will also allow for additional investment in new electric vehicle charging infrastructure, cycling, peatlands rehabilitation and greenways, all of which are important elements of the joined-up approach to climate action. It is particularly important that we get a transparent breakdown of the exact nature and level of the support for all of these activities. We cannot have a repeat of the Government's climate plan, which was hot on announcements but cold on steps and on the funding to deliver them.

The transition to a decarbonised society in Ireland must be made in a just and fair manner. We need to be much more ambitious and responsive in helping the industries and communities affected by this transition. A just transition is a key element of a climate justice approach. A just transition means policies that are focused on providing security and opportunity to citizens. A just transition model means new jobs, new industries, new skills and new investment. Fianna Fáil has placed particular importance on the need for a just transition, starting with the midlands. We believe just transition measures must support regions where fossil fuels are being phased out, including the Moneypoint area. I am disappointed that the Minister did not include in his Budget Statement any funding for the transition away from the burning of coal at Moneypoint. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that he will recognise the merits of including Moneypoint in subsequent announcements this year. The community there has suffered significantly. Significant job losses have taken place and all of this is having a negative impact on spending in local communities.

I have mentioned some of the initial steps that are recommended within the next six months. The Government's response has been characterised by a refusal to engage. We are, therefore, calling for the establishment of a just transition commissioner as soon as possible. The just transition fund, which is a litmus test for how this Government supports communities that are highly dependent on fossil fuels, must be used to support other areas that will be affected by decarbonisation. I have mentioned Moneypoint, which is relevant in this context. As decarbonisation proceeds, I am sure there will be job losses in places where equipment is made, etc. We need to be mindful of that. The allocation of funding must be targeted and transparent to prevent the politicisation of grant making. The major priorities for this funding are training and support for the affected communities and investment in retrofitting, renewables, community energy and public transport for rural areas. There needs to be a focus on vulnerable and lower-income families at all times.

I will move on to the area of communications. Despite the fanfare with which the national broadband plan, NBP, was again announced in May, it was not even deemed worthy of mention in the Minister for Finance's Budget Statement. The repeated claim that the project will start within weeks is simply no longer believable. The Taoiseach said there will be another delay in the project because maps for the plan are covering areas already covered by other providers. If just under half of the premises within the intervention area are covered by a commercial roll-out, as some people have claimed, this will be a major challenge and not a minor one. What will happen if a broadband provider that is planning to roll out to the intervention area refuses to

enter into a concession agreement with the Department but instead continues its roll-out? What will happen if a challenge is made by a company that believes the State is supporting a company to compete unfairly with a commercial roll-out? How long would rural broadband be delayed by such a case? The €119 million that is provided for in budget 2020 is less than the amount considered necessary for the provision of this service. I have great reservations about when or if we will ever see broadband rolled out, notwithstanding the numerous announcements that have been made by the Government.

It appears that the crisis in public service broadcasting will not be addressed by budget 2020. While Fianna Fáil recognises that some reforms will result from the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2019, it appears that no concerted help is on the way for the public service broadcasting sector. Some reforms of the licence fee are due in the coming months, but the fundamental challenge has not been tackled. RTÉ has made it clear that it is in a financial crisis. I understand that it needs to do some restructuring but it must move beyond voluntary redundancy. It is going to have to look at compulsory redundancy. In return, the Government will have to put appropriate funding in place. If we believe in the principle of public journalism and broadcasting, then we must pay for it. The licence fee is not enough to meet that challenge and commercial advertising has collapsed. We in the House have a responsibility to stand by independent journalism, protect democracy and not be in the say of the big conglomerates, which drive the social media agenda and have a negative impact on democracy through their failure to reduce or eliminate the fake news that circulates in those environments. I would like to have seen money set aside for a digital safety commissioner, but the document does not seem to have any information whatsoever on the matter.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am glad to have an opportunity to make some points on the budget. As Fianna Fáil spokesperson on transport, tourism and sport, I will focus on those areas. Needless to say, if it was not for the Brexit pantomime and debacle, this budget would not have been facilitated by Fianna Fáil. I yearn for the day when the Government is out of office because the sentence which captures its performance is that the Cabinet sees itself as a group of non-executive directors. The Minister, Deputy Ross, is clearly on a lesser rate because he is only available a couple of days per month for work on behalf of the Government. While I know he was probably busy and had to attend to other things, he spoke earlier. I am still wondering what is in the transport, tourism and sport budget.

The reality is that based on the mid-year expenditure review, we expected €2.058 billion in capital expenditure and €756 million in current expenditure, but that has not materialised. We are getting €27 million in current expenditure and we are €150 million worse off in terms of capital expenditure, which will involve the lovely word of which the Government are kings, namely, “reprofiling” certain projects. The public wants to know what projects are being shafted in the year ahead. What public transport programmes which we were expecting and were, no doubt, announced with fanfare and press releases will not be funded?

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: The Ardee bypass is one.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am happy to support the Deputy on the Ardee bypass, but there are Ardee bypasses all over the country. We need to be truthful with the people and tell them what is being cut. The budget does not represent an increase. The additional €350 million is to keep existing projects going forward, but we can assume that no new projects will start because no money is available. The Minister needs to outline which capital projects are now receiving lower allocations than previously indicated and what the knock-on effects of that will

be to us as a nation.

There is nothing new in the budget in terms of public transport. If anything, it appears that the allocation of capital funding and public transport projects are being delayed. At the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts today, we had the benefit of hearing from the National Transport Authority, NTA, which was able to confirm to me that there will be no additional rail capacity at all for a minimum of two full years. As things stand, there is no plan to provide additional budgets on rail routes. Hard-pressed commuters who are being stuffed into carriages will not be facilitated with a comfortable journey to their destination.

While we support the concept of embracing a carbon tax to encourage all of us to change our behaviour, what options do we have when the Government is telling us to use public transport but is not funding it or any additional capacity? It was clear from the meeting that the Minister is presiding over a public transport system that is already stuffed and will have no capacity for a further two years when, please God, he will be long gone from the Government benches.

Similarly the Minister, in his non-executive role, said everything is a matter for everybody except him. Under Bus Éireann's commercial mandate, it is permitted by the Minister to fleece hard-pressed commuters who have already made the switch from cars to public transport. People living in Dungarvan, County Waterford, who want to get the bus to work in Cork city will pay €9 for an adult return ticket. The bus travels through Youghal and their work colleagues who live there and will travel half of the journey will pay twice the price, that is, €19 for a return ticket. This is the kind of activity the Minister supports while enjoying photocalls. He is much better than I could ever be at them but when it comes to the ground hurling, that is, the business of representing people on a daily basis and using the money that is available to his Department to provide value for money and the services we need, he is failing miserably.

Even were 100% of the budget of €520 million for the maintenance and construction of regional and local roads to go towards maintenance, which is highly unlikely, it falls far short of the Department's estimate of the cost of maintaining them. A Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport analysis shows that about €580 million is needed just to keep roads in an acceptable condition. This does not account for the very considerable backlog of works in all counties that need to be carried out. The latest National Oversight and Audit Commission, NOAC, report on the condition of roads found that 70% had surface or structural difficulties, which is a significant health and safety concern.

On the sports side, there is no doubt that the amount of photocalls and medal winning chasing, to which my colleague, Deputy Cowen, referred on budget day, will increase in the year ahead. However, I am afraid that when it comes to supporting sport, the cupboard is bare. He did a nice three-card trick in terms of reducing capital expenditure on sport for the next year and putting that money onto the current expenditure side to fund the photocalls for Euro 2020 and Tokyo 2020. That is simply robbing Peter to pay Paul.

We have heard €9 million has been allocated for greenways and new urban cycling projects. As we are all aware, Fianna Fáil proposed the use of carbon tax revenues to provide infrastructure to help people reduce their carbon emissions, but this money is coming from tourism. What tangible action is the Minister taking to encourage people who can commute by cycling to do so? What tax measures is he considering to try to get people onto ebikes? Other countries which have successfully done this have schemes which write off up to 120% of the cost. We have seen no suggestion of any initiative in that regard.

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Earlier this week, Fine Gael Senator Tim Lombard stated in a press release that 2020 allocates a total budget of around €114 million for cycling compared with €61 million last year. Will the Minister, please, detail exactly how that increase has been brought about? His Department's press release does not provide details of this funding increase.

We support the diesel rebate scheme but there is concern among hauliers that despite the Minister's stated intentions in his budget speech that there will be full compensation for the haulage industry in the first year, the reality for the industry is that there is no such compensatory measure and the effective rebate rate will be reduced from 7.5 cent per litre to 5.8 cent per litre. We will deal with the Finance Bill next week and I ask the Minister and the Government to outline in detail how the haulage industry is to be supported in the context of the rebate scheme. According to the speech the other day, the industry is assuming a full compensatory write-off for it to be available. How will that be achieved?

We welcome the increase in tourism but the non-executive nature of the Minister, Deputy Ross, in that regard is very evident. The numbers of tourists from the UK are down, with 80% of hoteliers telling us there are fewer visitors from the UK. Research carried out by the Restaurant Association of Ireland found that tourists who come to Ireland are staying for fewer days and spending less money. This is, of course, a concern. The Chinese market comprises the people who spend the most internationally on tourism, a vast sum of €277 billion per year. That market is so important to the Minister that the tourism action plan 2019 to 2021 does not once mention China.

These are just some examples of the non-executive nature embraced by the Minister with regard to his role. There is nothing in this budget that suggests anything other than that in his role as Minister, this man - this is not a personal attack - continues to reduce the level of tangible input he should have in an executive position on behalf of the people to improve people's lives. In that regard, the transport budget is a failure.

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Once again, the Government is demonstrating its commitment to the Defence Forces by increasing defence spending year on year, providing more money for pay and pensions and significantly increasing the capital investment in barracks, equipment and force protection.

Budget 2020 provides an additional €32.3 million towards our continual investment in the Defence Forces - people and infrastructure. For the second successive year, I have secured more than €1 billion for defence. The overall total of €1.04 billion includes €780.4 million for Vote 36 - Defence, which is an increase of €22.3 million on the 2019 provision.

As we have continuously recognised, recruitment and retention of our personnel have posed significant challenges for the Defence Forces. It is for that reason the Government asked the independent Public Service Pay Commission to examine these issues in close detail. Those recommendations have been accepted in full and will result in real and tangible benefits to our soldiers, sailors and air crew. The budget provides additional funding of €15 million for increases due under the public service stability agreement 2018 to 2020, as well as the implementation of the recommendations of the commission. The Government's commitment to actioning the report is underpinned by our implementation plan which sets out clear timelines and objectives, providing a detailed and ambitious road map to strengthening the Defence Forces. Among the measures being worked on is a review of technical pay grades 2 to 6 for specialists, with an

initial focus on certain pinch points in the Army, the Naval Service and the Air Corps. The Government's approach ensures that, once again, defence remains fully funded for the established strength of 9,500 personnel at pay rates set through long-established processes and negotiated agreements.

I recognise the decision of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, to accept the Public Service Pay Commission's recommendations and can confirm that the increases in allowances will begin to be paid to its members in the coming weeks. The Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, is considering the commission's recommendations and I hope it will view positively the proposals, together with our implementation plan, in order that the increases will be paid to its members as soon as possible.

We will provide €259.1 million for Defence Forces pensions, an increase of €10 million, ensuring sufficient funding to meet the retirement benefits of some 12,640 former members and their dependants. The Government's commitment to defence is further demonstrated by the significant capital envelope in 2020. The capital allocation will increase by €7 million to €113 million in 2020. The overall capital allocation for 2018 to 2022 is €541 million. This will provide funding for a range of projects, including the continued mid-life upgrade of armoured personnel carriers; the purchase of three new utility aircraft, which are scheduled for delivery in 2020; the replacement of two maritime patrol aircraft, the tender process for which is nearing completion; a mid-life refit of two Naval Service vessels; and €19 million for building projects with a further €9 million for ongoing maintenance and running costs.

We are also providing more than €2 million for the Reserve Defence Force. The Defence group Votes also include over €4 million for civil defence supporting the excellent work of volunteers and civil defence officers across the country.

Since 2016, I have secured increases in Defence Votes of more than €134 million or 15%. These increases have allowed us to increase starting pay for three star privates from €21,800 when I was appointed in 2016 to more than €28,000 and implement outstanding adjudications, meaning €50 per week more for Army rangers, €13.52 for cooks, €65.80 for certain account holders and a saving of €43.63 for recruits and apprentices. These are just some of the many improvements we have made in the past three and a half years.

I would like to address the assertion that this equates to the €32 million increase that I secured to an underspend in the pay subhead. This House and the entire country knows that Fianna Fáil has a reckless past when it comes to managing money. Here we see another example of a party that is populist, that selectively ignores the reality of the public sector pay process and that simply does not understand public finances. I thank the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for his work during the negotiations.

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Pat Breen): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the budget which was prepared in the light of the difficult challenge facing the Government in the coming weeks, namely, the possibility of a hard Brexit. From the perspective of my Department, it was important that the Minister announced a suite of supports for business, including repayable grants and lending schemes that will be available for deployment in the event of a disorderly Brexit. These are targeted at supporting vulnerable but viable firms and build on the many supports introduced by the Government in the past three years. It is noteworthy that they have been designed using the

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feedback of businesses and will ensure Irish enterprise is able to respond to the challenges that a no-deal Brexit presents. This is an initial tranche of emergency funding that can be built upon as circumstances evolve in consultation with the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

These supports will be critical in the highly vulnerable Border areas and in supporting exporters who are heavily exposed to the UK market. Supports announced by the Minister for Finance in his Budget Statement include a rescue and restructuring fund of €42 million, which is available to address the needs of firms in sectors with acute liquidity and other severe difficulties as a result of a disorderly Brexit. The funding will be provided in the form of equity or loans through Enterprise Ireland and it will be available to eligible Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta clients as well as eligible non-agency clients. A further transition fund of €45 million will support businesses in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sector ranging from food and engineering firms to business process outsourcing firms. It will help those businesses to adapt their business mode as needed and adjust to the new trading reality. This fund will be delivered also through Enterprise Ireland and available to eligible Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta clients as well as eligible non-agency clients.

Targeted supports for small and microenterprises will also be essential to limit the impact of a disorderly Brexit. In that regard, budget 2020 includes two related measures to support these businesses. We will increase our funding to Microfinance Ireland to allow it to increase the amount that it can lend to microenterprises from €25,000 to €50,000 over a two to five-year period at a very competitive rate. Second, an emergency Brexit fund of €5 million will be available for microenterprises by way of repayable grants available through the local enterprise offices, LEOs, of up to €50,000. Such qualifying enterprises will have recourse to Microfinance Ireland where they can receive up to €50,000 in loans over a two to five-year period and if required, could avail of a further €50,000 in a repayable grant from their local enterprise office.

The Government is also introducing a transformation fund of €8 million to be administered by Enterprise Ireland. It is a grant scheme supporting larger indigenous firms to transform their business to develop new products and processes, to remain competitive and to assist in diversifying to new markets. There will be initial funding of €5 million for primary food processing companies and €3 million for non-food companies, for example, in traditional engineering sectors. Additional funding for food transformation is also being made available through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

I also welcome the taxation measures announced by the Minister for Finance specifically targeted at SMEs, including significant changes to the research and development tax credit, particularly for small and micro firms which will be able to claim a higher rate of credit of 30% and will have improved options with regard to claiming the payable credit. These firms will also be able to claim the credit for expenditure incurred in advance of commencing to trade. Changes to the research and development tax credit scheme will help enterprises on their innovation journey and increase their productivity, which will be a key focus of the Future Jobs Ireland agenda.

I wish to be clear that the Government is determined to plan ahead and prepare for the jobs of tomorrow, notwithstanding Brexit and other international challenges such as trade wars. This is evident in recent announcements on other significant funding initiatives such as the regional enterprise development fund, the disruptive technology innovation fund and, most

recently, the €2.5 million competitive fund for the local enterprise offices. All of the measures announced will ensure microenterprises and SMEs in every region can be prepared as soon as possible for a disorderly Brexit. They will be on the ball.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I want to address the care of people in our society, particularly those in need of homecare packages and support. I welcome the increase in the budget of 1 million care hours, which will make a significant difference to many families. However, it does not go far enough. A number of people could not receive homecare packages where I live in County Louth. At the end of July, there were 588 people waiting for homecare packages in community health organisation, CHO, 8, which comprises counties Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath, Louth and Meath. Of those, over 100 had been clinically discharged from hospital but were unable to go home. I refer to Hannah Donnelly, a young woman who has been mentioned in this House before and is close to the hearts of the people of Drogheda because they know and support her and her family. She has significant medical needs. On 5 September her family were told that a homecare support package of four hours per week had been approved, but a business case had also been received and accepted. While the HSE realised the importance of reuniting Hannah with her family in a medically supportive environment, it stated it did not have the resources to approve the package. She needs 24/7 care which she is receiving in a hospital bed, but she needs to be at home. It is not good enough and not enough is being done about it.

HSE statistics which were released to me in reply to a parliamentary question show that County Meath has the longest waiting list in its CHO area. There were more people waiting for homecare packages in County Meath on 31 July than there were in counties Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and Louth combined. There is something very wrong in that regard. I welcome and support the analysis of the Home Care Coalition which highlights that where someone lives can determine what care he or she will receive. It is geographical and people in County Meath are being treated unfairly. I am particularly supportive of Sage Advocacy, ALONE, Sean Moynihan and all carers throughout the country. A commitment was given in the past to statutory homecare provision which I welcomed, but I did not see it mentioned in the Budget Statement. I have no doubt that the commitment is still in place, but I would like the Minister to reiterate it and continue to increase the hours available.

The problem of delayed discharges is not just about not getting a homecare package; in some cases there is also a lack of qualified staff to help people. The State and the HSE need to get more people working in homecare. One of my constituents has been clinically discharged but cannot find a skilled person to meet their special homecare needs. I suggest the Government look into opening up special homecare training or upskilling courses in regional colleges or local educational facilities. People who choose to take such courses could be paid a wage on commencing their training in order to minimise the number of delayed discharges, particularly for elderly persons. The majority of those waiting for homecare packages in my area are aged over 65 years. Some might regard them as being in the autumn of their lives and they should be able to go home to spend the important months or years they might have left. Home is where their heart is, with their family and the people who love them. Keeping them in a clinical institution such as a hospital is not good for them or their families and does not make sense.

The budget has achieved many good things. It has increased homecare provision, but it is my firm belief it does not go far enough. I urge people to continue to campaign and put pressure on all of us, including me and Ministers. We all come and go in this House, but the pain of those who cannot get home or the care they need is entirely unacceptable. We must resist

the bureaucracy and red tape that prevents them from receiving that care. There are too many bean-counters in the HSE and not enough people who care enough to find the money. When they have to make cuts, they should make them in their offices, rather than among their front-line staff who are not being looked after properly and need to be paid more.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the budget which was put forward by the Minister for Finance in the House on Tuesday. I will focus on one significant aspect of the budget for County Clare, the mid west and west. I particularly welcome the establishment of a new fund which will secure new routes for regional airports, including Shannon and Cork, Brexit or no Brexit. The new fund consists of €10 million over three years which will enable airports to secure new strategic routes. I have previously raised this matter with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Taoiseach, Shannon Group and the chambers of commerce in Ennis, Shannon, Galway and Limerick. There is an onus on the management of Shannon Airport to take full advantage of the newly established route development fund. The measure announced in the budget could play a major role in the establishment of a vital connection from Shannon to Frankfurt which could potentially provide a €412 million boost for the mid-west and west. We cannot afford to let this opportunity slip. Shannon Group has a duty to ensure the airport will receive the full benefit of this initiative.

Limerick Chamber of Commerce, in conjunction with Ennis, Shannon and Galway chambers of commerce, commissioned a worthwhile report which assessed aviation policy as a driver of economic activity in the west and mid-west. One of its recommendations was the establishment of a fund such as the one to which I have referred. Much of the groundwork to establish the new strategic route from Shannon to Frankfurt has already been done, following the publication of another major report from the Danish international consultancy group Copenhagen Economics which concludes that aviation and enterprise policy must be linked if the Government is to deliver on its policy of achieving balanced regional development.

Shannon Airport adds €306 billion to Ireland's GDP and supports 43,700 jobs. Approximately 1.7 million passengers travel through it every year on 13,000 flights. This implies that at peak times, only 45% of the airport's capacity is being utilised. The spare capacity offers untapped potential to deliver balanced regional development without requiring new investments. It could also alleviate the pressure on Dublin and reduce the need for costly infrastructural spending. The Copenhagen Economics report also concludes that the establishment of a frequent route between Shannon and Frankfurt Airport, with two flights every weekday and one flight at the weekend, would generate an additional €412 million in GDP. The Government might support this route as part of its implementation of the regional spatial and economic strategy for the southern region, in which international financial services are an integral part of the smart specialisation and clustering strategy. Strengthening this connection and making it international via a new route to Frankfurt would complement the financial clusters in the west and mid-west, thus ensuring the sustainability of the route in the long term. The Copenhagen Economics report recommends a range of governmental supports and interventions amid concerns about the regional impact and dominance of Dublin Airport at the expense of other airports.

Passenger numbers at Shannon Airport have increased by more than 460,000 since 2012 when the airport became an independent entity. In the same period Dublin Airport has increased passenger numbers by 12.4 million and Cork Airport by only 52,000. Spreading just 20% of that growth across the regions would still leave Dublin Airport with 10 million additional passengers and the regions with an additional 2.5 million. Such a move would have a far greater economic impact. I wholeheartedly welcome the €10 million route development fund

and look forward to Shannon Airport capitalising on it for the benefit of the mid-west and west region in the interests of achieving balanced regional development.

One aspect of the budget about which I have concerns is the just transition fund. It is critically important that the economy of west Clare be kept under consideration in that regard. Moneypoint is a coal burning power plant and needs a just transition to support it. I have met the Minister on several occasions to discuss the issue. It is critical that the Moneypoint plant be included in the plan.

Deputy James Browne: I am sharing time with Deputy Jack Chambers.

Through the confidence and supply agreement, Fianna Fáil secured an additional €105 million for mental health services in the past three years. In the budget announced last year, €55 million was secured for mental health services. In the budget this year, €39 million was announced, but it appears that €26 million of this sum is for pay increases and other existing service level issues. The remaining €13 million is for services at the National Forensic Mental Health Service Hospital in Portrane. While the money is welcome, in effect this means that there is no funding available for new developments or other projects in 2020. Considering the gaps in mental health services across the country, this will come as a serious disappointment to many. It will potentially mean a year in which we will be at a standstill in mental health services.

A Mental Health Commission report published this morning identified the long-term neglect of people with serious and enduring mental illnesses in the mental health system. This is just another in a regular series of reports on mental health services that have been highly critical of the gaps in services. Issues identified in the report published this morning arise regularly in my constituency clinic in Wexford. The department of psychiatry at Waterford University Hospital patches people up as best it can. Once people with mental health issues are ready to leave the department of psychiatry, there is a problem in that there are no rehabilitation places or appropriate emergency accommodation available for them. Very often they end up back on the streets or in inappropriate emergency accommodation, only to find themselves back in the department of psychiatry several months later. We end up with a revolving door system.

We are in year 13 of a ten-year mental health strategy known as A Vision for Change. Barely over 50% of the staff recommended are in place. For people with intellectual disabilities and a mental illness, there are less than 10% of the staff recommended in place. In many regions there are no staff available to deal with people suffering from intellectual disabilities and a mental illness. This means that other sectors of the mental health service have to pick up the slack, which creates pressure points and serious issues. In its 2016 manifesto Fine Gael proposed expanding the Jigsaw programme significantly. When I was elected in 2016, the talk was that a Jigsaw service would open in County Tipperary within a few months. That still has not occurred. No other Jigsaw services have opened in the entire time, which is simply unacceptable.

We were promised a review and an update of the 2001 Mental Health Act. When it was introduced, it was considered to be a model, progressive Act. However, it needs to be updated with a modern understanding of mental health. Unqualified consultants are practising as consultant psychiatrists, something which has been condemned regularly by the President of the High Court. That issue has not been addressed.

The majority of mental health facilities across the country remain unregulated and unin-

spected. The Mental Health Commission has not been given the powers it needs. This year we had the shocking situation where the mental health service at St. Luke's in Kilkenny was being prosecuted in the District Court for a lack of care for some of the most vulnerable patients in the hospital. Suicide remains the greatest cause of death among young people aged between 15 and 24 years. Primary care psychology waiting lists are shocking. The number of anti-depressant prescriptions is on the increase because general practitioners see no other options or pathways to get people help in mental health services.

In replies to parliamentary questions several weeks ago we found out that €24 million of the funding for mental health services had gone unspent so far this year. This morning the Minister for Health said money would be spent as needed. Money is desperately needed in mental health services. The Minister claimed money was not an issue in solving mental health issues. There is no lack of policy. All that is left is implementation and oversight, both of which are significantly lacking across the entire Government portfolio, not just in mental health services. We end up with a mental health service which patches people up, puts them out on the road, only to see them come back again some months later. We need significant changes in mental health services.

There has been a failure to develop a small and medium-sized enterprise sector. Ireland is a small open economy which is vulnerable to what happens in the international economy. In recent years we have had the economic winds behind our back, with record low interest rates on our debts. The European Central Bank has introduced quantitative easing and there has been strong global demand for our products. All of this has led to a significant bounce in the corporation tax yield, well ahead of anything predicted several years ago. However, 45% of all corporation tax now comes from only ten companies. This is unhealthy and dangerous as the money could disappear overnight. It is similar to the situation with stamp duty 12 years ago.

The economy needs to be rebalanced. There is a need for greater emphasis on the small and medium-sized enterprise sector and indigenous firms. We need to make Ireland an attractive place in which to innovate, as well as to start and grow small and medium-sized enterprises. Many of the Government's supports for the sector are too complicated or unsuitable. There is too much red tape for firms to negotiate. While the improvement in the self-employed tax credit announced in the budget is to be welcomed, it has still not been equalised. Insurance costs are crippling firms and have doubled for many businesses. Some businesses must self-insure, while many festivals have been cancelled owing to the lack of insurance coverage. The Government needs to take this issue seriously. It must not just come up with plans but must implement them too. Awards in the courts are simply too high. Fraudsters and exaggerators fear no consequences. There continues to be a lack of transparency in the insurance industry.

The south-east region has the highest rate of unemployment. I have raised this matter continually with the Minister, but there seems to be no focus or sense of urgency to address it. In Wexford we have few IDA Ireland jobs and little IDA Ireland land. Those employed in the south east are on low incomes and the quality of jobs is poor. We need to see higher quality jobs in the south east. We must provide the necessary training to ensure people can take on those quality jobs when they are provided.

There is a serious lack of targeting the south east. Rosslare Europort receives two small mentions in the Ireland 2040 plan. There is no mention of any project in the plan for the south east, save for two motorways which were already planned, paid for and practically built under the previous Government. Rosslare Europort has not been brought up on a single occasion by

any Minister when dealing with the United Kingdom on Brexit. The United Kingdom technically still owns Rosslare Europort under a convoluted and age-old ownership model. Having met the UK Transport Secretary at Westminster last summer, I understand the British Government is quite happy to separate Fishguard and Rosslare and hand Rosslare back to the Irish Government. However, there is no interest in this happening. Over €100 million was invested in Dublin Port, from which ships were turned away this summer, yet Rosslare Europort is operating at 40% capacity. It should be thriving.

There has been little or no advancement in the development of a technological university for the south east. What is happening? When I was at Waterford Institute of Technology in the 1990s, we were told that it would be the university for the south east, but there seems to have been no advancement whatsoever. Without a university in the south east, the economy of the region cannot be addressed because if one wants to attract international companies, they need to know that there is university training available for their employees as and when they will need it.

I want to address the issue of the disability training allowance of €31.80 per week. It was cut for new entrants this year. It costs people with a disability more to undergo training to find work because it costs them more to live, particularly for transport. I cannot understand the reason the cut was made as the allowance involved little cost. It seems miserly and I was disappointed when it was not reversed in the budget. The rehabilitative training allowance allowed people with disabilities an opportunity to move from education to employment. It is most regrettable, therefore, that it has not been restored.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the budget.

I will start with the Department of Defence. Unfortunately, the Minister of State at the Department of Defence, Deputy Kehoe, has left us, but he brought spin about his supposed €32 million. It is important to contextualise that, based on last year's budget but also on what the allocation is this year. According to the response to a parliamentary question, the savings so far this year on pay amount to €24 million. There also were savings on the capital allocation in the Department of Defence of €28 million, which brings the savings to €52 million. Therefore, in the budgetary allocation for Defence this year, €52 million has gone unspent while we have seen a considerable exodus from the Defence Forces because of pay and conditions, issues with accommodation, infrastructure and a general malaise and morale difficulties under the Minister of State's watch. It is shameful that the Minister of State speaks about apparent recklessness across this House when he has had a reckless tenure in the Department of Defence. He stood over the biggest exodus we have ever seen and he still sits there and defends the indefensible. The Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, for example, has provided the percentage allocations. If one looks at the Department of Defence, the percentage allocation as a proportion of GDP has reduced, year on year. Last year, it was 0.29% of GDP. Next year, it will be 0.27% of GDP. That demonstrates how the Defence budget is shrinking compared to other allocations in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I was surprised to see the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, thank the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe. It should have been Deputy Donohoe thanking Deputy Kehoe because there is a return year on year from the Department of Defence to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The members of the Defence Forces will not be fooled by the roll-over that happens year on year where the Government will pretend to give them over €1 billion but will roll over last year's allocation into next year, as if one cannot do

the sums. It is an insult to members of the Defence Forces that the Government pretends to hand a greater allocation to them when we know that is not the case.

Beneath the serious issues in terms of the macroeconomic allocation to Defence, the pay and conditions that have been well demonstrated and the general morale difficulties, there are other serious issues, for example, around accommodation. The Minister of State pretends that another €7 million will be thrown at that issue next year but if one looks at the Curragh Camp and at many of the barracks across the State, they have crippling infrastructure that is not being addressed. As for the abolition of the 4th Western Brigade, which was based near the constituency of the Acting Chairman, Deputy Eugene Murphy, in Roscommon and Westmeath, serious issues have arisen whereby the infrastructure is collapsing. The Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, will not achieve much success with his budgetary allocation for next year. We still have an allocation for a consultant psychiatrist for the Department of Defence but we have spent the past 12 months waiting for that appointment. Because of the failure to address the issues in terms of the appointment procedures, a psychiatrist has not been appointed.

The Minister of State will forgive soldiers and their families for scratching their heads when they know that over €50 million has gone unspent this year. When the Defence budget is an exercise in public relations, PR, and spin, in recycling previously recycled promises and of unspent millions of euro, the Minister of State is, yet again, misleading on the budgetary allocation. It is magic, promised money that I worry will never be spent to improve the pay and conditions of the serving men and women. In fact, the Minister of State was bragging again here in his five minutes. I note only five minutes were taken by the Minister of State at the Department of Defence, which demonstrates how little he has to say about the men and women he pretends to represent. The Minister of State has increased the pension allocation, not because the members of the Defence Forces are getting any more in pension allocations but because he is funding the exodus. When more are leaving and the turnover is greater, there is a greater necessity to fund the pension allocations. What was needed in this budget was significant investment in retention initiatives in order that one could fund issues related to pay and conditions to keep the men and women working in the Defence Forces rather than trying to increase the pension allocation, which is what the Minister of State has done again this year, not because any individual is getting any more but because the exodus will continue. Soldiers will be very disappointed, but even more disappointed that, beyond the shallow rhetoric and spin, there will be little delivery again in the Department of Defence next year.

There should have been consideration given - my party put it forward in its submission as part of the discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform - to have an independent pay review body to reflect the unique nature of military service. Members of the Defence Forces cannot strike. They cannot join a union. They are at the Government's beck and call when some other workers might strike and when they are called to deliver for this country or to deliver on our international obligations. That proposal was rejected by Fine Gael, which seems to have no interest in delivering for the Defence Forces.

I will move to other issues. It was important that the Government announced measures around the carbon tax and that we have hypothecation. It is important that a hypothecated fund is established in legislation so that it can fund specific measures related to climate change and the just transition. However, as a member of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, I was extremely disappointed to see one of the committee's key recommendations, namely, a fuel poverty review, ignored and neglected by the Government. If key recommendations from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment are to be ignored and

neglected, we face a worrying future in terms of green policies. The Government should follow the letter of the recommendations rather than picking and choosing measures. We need to move beyond discussing a carbon tax but should also look at key other measures that could be delivered for people.

In terms of healthcare, we again saw the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, bragging about his bloated budget. Supplementary Estimates are required year on year, with Fine Gael pretending to be prudent but not being able to manage health spending. The key metric for healthcare is delivery. Waiting lists continue to expand, clinical front-line services are collapsing and we are not able to fill key consultant posts. The medical community was disappointed to be ignored, yet again, by the Fine Gael Government when it comes to delivering on filling the many vacant posts. As my colleague, Deputy Browne, mentioned, there are many people working in consultant posts who potentially are misrepresenting their level of training whereby they are apparently consultants but have not fulfilled the specialist training. Nothing will be done to change that next year.

Delivery in healthcare is about reduced waiting times. It is about increased diagnostics. It is about people who have profound disabilities getting access and intervention. We talk about cradle-to-grave healthcare, but in this budget we have seen no detail of how that will change for people with disabilities or with educational needs. We have people at the age of two or three who may wait five years for a key intervention in terms of occupational therapy, speech and language therapy or seeing a paediatrician for the first time. That is the key in this regard. When can the Government reduce the waiting times to deliver for people with disabilities? When can it reduce the need for people to be displaced and put on home tuition because the Government will not fund their needs within schools? Those are the key issues that have not been delivered in this budget.

I want to mention some other issues. This is a do-nothing budget when it comes to transport infrastructure. In my constituency, we have major capacity issues across our bus and rail network. It will be more of the same next year. More people want to change to public transport and use the existing capacity but when they have to launch themselves onto congested trains or watch buses driving past them, there is major disappointment. This Government seems to be ignoring the concerns expressed across the county of Dublin about the BusConnects project and the difficulties in terms of routes. An expert from London came before the Joint Committee on Climate Action. She was very surprised that Ireland is not integrating cycling facilities with rail and bus services. We are pursuing the singular BusConnects project rather than integrating a new public transport regime for the city.

The budget was overshadowed by Brexit. As a party, it was important that Fianna Fáil played its role in providing stability and a responsible approach. Even if we did not have Brexit to deal with, this Government had to retrench following its bloating of public expenditure. We have seen that year on year. There have been many promises about tax cuts and throwing money at problems but the issue the people have is that they are not seeing delivery in key areas. That will be the measure of this Government whenever we come to the ballot box.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): I call Deputy James Browne.

Deputy James Browne: I have spoken.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): The Deputy has already shared time.

Deputy James Browne: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): We will go, then, to Deputy Brendan Ryan.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I am sharing time with Deputy Penrose; ten minutes each. This budget is another insipid and uninspiring one from a Government that has been living on borrowed time almost since it came into being in 2016. Four budgets, backed all the way by Fianna Fáil, have now been presented by this Government but they have done nothing to move this country forward or to change much-needed approaches to housing or health. Instead, these budgets have been a stage production between the Government and Fianna Fáil, a production aimed at keeping the show on the road rather than carrying out the real work of transforming Ireland.

At the beginning of the Government's term, the excuses for this cosy arrangement was to avoid a so-called unwanted general election. In recent years, the excuse of Brexit has been used to keep this peculiar arrangement in place. All these reasons, however valid or believed, have ultimately run their course. This Government cannot remain in power and do nothing to fix the problems we face.

This is not a housing budget, despite there being a housing crisis. It is not a health budget, despite a crisis in our health system. This is not a childcare budget, despite the fundamental problems that exist in the childcare sector. In fact, this is hardly a budget at all. It is a statement of tepid and uninspiring measures aimed at keeping the political waters calm in advance of an election showdown between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. It is party before country and the country continues to suffer.

I judge a budget by how it will affect the people I represent, the people of Fingal who I meet at the doors, in my clinics and on the street. This budget again fails my Fingal test. The main issue I am dealing with day in and day out is housing. It is the issue of our times but one would never know it with this budget. The housing allocation does not seem to recognise that Ireland has a housing crisis. For example, €1.1 billion was allocated for the construction, acquisition and leasing of only 11,000 new social homes. However, recent figures put the number of homeless in Ireland at more than 10,300, and it is consistently rising. The Economic and Social Research Institute estimates that new home building rates need to be between 30,000 and 35,000 a year to address and get ahead of the housing problem. Social houses are a necessary part of providing people with housing, and the delivery of 11,000 new social houses will still fall short of meeting the social housing need. In addition, the Government has consistently failed to meet any housing targets it has set for itself. As a result, we do not have any confidence that it will reach its own inadequate targets in this respect. When the State does not step in to provide further housing opportunities, people are left to the mercy of the private housing market and subsequently find themselves in tenuous or short-term housing situations at best and unable to afford anything better. Overall, an attempt is being made in this budget to address emergency accommodation situations yet those who have housing but who are nonetheless in a vulnerable state are being neglected.

An additional €80 million has been allocated towards the housing assistance payment, HAP. However, that will primarily benefit private landlords and do little to relieve the situation of those using HAP. HAP tenants are limited by rent maximums and, due to ever-increasing rent prices, finding eligible tenancies is increasingly difficult, as all Members are aware. HAP is an important measure. It replaced rent allowance, which was a poverty trap for thousands of

people. HAP, however, is not a long-term solution and including HAP figures in housing targets needs to end. They are not long-term, secure homes.

In general, this budget allocates money towards helping the homeless while falling short of helping those about to become homeless. The €20 million for homeless services will be distributed among emergency accommodation, prevention measures and day services. While some funding for emergency accommodation is necessary, these accommodations provide an insecure, short-term Band-Aid for the housing crisis. There must be an increased focus on more sustainable housing solutions for families.

Only €2 million additional funding has been allocated to the Residential Tenancies Board for investigating and sanctioning non-compliance with the rent pressure zone measures. The non-compliance with rent pressure zones by some landlords is a real problem and is the reason we need a national rent freeze. We did it twice in Government and it needs to be done again. No zones, no exemptions. A nationwide rent freeze is needed. We support it, as do many Members on this side of the House, but it seems that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil do not.

Overall, there is no comfort for those waiting for social or affordable public housing. Fianna Fáil says it is the party of affordable housing, but it is yet again supporting a budget and a Government which is placing the market front and centre to resolving the housing crisis. What is the reason for that? It is because that is what Fianna Fáil wants also. It is comfortable with a market-based solution because it is the party that gave the provision of housing to the market in the first place. The Irish Council for Social Housing described the budget as deaf to the demand for investment in public housing. That is spot on.

On health, we had many big numbers from the Minister. In any other Department that would be seen as positive. The current expenditure in health is set to increase by 6.3% in 2020. An additional €25 million is to be invested in the National Treatment Purchase Fund to reduce the waiting lists. There will be a €25 increase in the weekly income threshold for GP visit cards, prescription charges will be reduced by 50 cent and the monthly threshold for the drug payment scheme will be reduced by €10 per month. Medical card income thresholds for people over 70 are to be increased by €50 for a single person or €150 for a couple. Some €84 million will be allocated for mental health services. There is a plan to expand free GP care to children under eight and free dental care to under children under six.

We welcome many of these changes but, overall, only an extra €1 billion has been allocated to health in this budget. An extra €4.5 billion has been allocated since this Government came to office. Have we seen the benefit of that extra funding? Have we seen the accident and emergency crisis ended or reduced? We have not. Have we seen waiting lists diminish for occupational therapy or for youth mental health assessments and treatments? We have not. With all this money invested in health, why was the rehabilitative training grant cut in August? Can the Minister tell us where that money has gone? In terms of reform of the health service, I wish Paul Reid well in his work. The Minister is spinning this healthcare budget as the beginning of Sláintecare delivery, but it is not. It is another €1 billion into a system that is broken.

Childcare remains a huge burden for many parents. The costs are exorbitant and rising, and the childcare measures in the budget do not go far enough. In a so-called Brexit budget, childcare should be a priority. If a difficult Brexit causes unemployment, childcare will be essential if parents are to spend time retraining or searching for new jobs. Childcare has another element which the Labour Party has been advocating for, that is, investment in the workforce. Childcare

is, in fact, early years learning. The practitioners in this area, who look after our children and grandchildren and who are entrusted with our most precious resource, are treated very shabbily. They are disrespected by a State that sees them as nappy-changers, not educators. That results in high attrition rates among staff in early years learning. They are overworked, underpaid and undervalued. Many have to leave the industry to reskill due to injury and fatigue. I advise the Government to look at the Big Start campaign from SIPTU, which we fully support. It is a campaign of intellectual rigour. We need a vision for an early years learning system which prepares children for primary education, one in which workers are organised and respected. There is no reason we cannot have the best early years education service in Europe.

We have passionate workers who want to learn and want to be valued, but the Government is ignoring them and keeping parents in a state of financial hardship in this area. In Dublin, crèche costs can top €1,000 per month. That is yet another scandal which the Government is too shy to tackle.

The real kick in the teeth in this budget is the Government's decision to delay the increase in the minimum wage by 30 cent. This is mean and it is tone deaf to the real needs of low-paid workers in this country. What we need is a living wage but when we cannot even deliver a modest increase in the minimum wage it shows where the Government's priorities lie.

In my portfolio of defence, it is welcome to see an increase in the budget by an extra €32.3 million, roughly half of which will cover expected pay rises and the return of some allowances. There is also an increase in capital expenditure, which I hope will be reinvested in the barracks to improve the conditions in which Defence Forces personnel live and work throughout the country. However, it will not be enough. The State is so far behind in meeting the needs of our Defence Forces that while an increase is welcome, it will not go near enough to resolve the ongoing indignity suffered by our Defence Forces when it comes to pay and conditions. I will conclude on that point and share the remaining time with my colleague.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I thank the Deputy for sharing his time. We in the Labour Party are acutely aware that on the cusp of Brexit, the Government had to set out some robust measures to protect jobs in the economy as a result of Brexit but it missed opportunities to promote economic equality and to significantly invest in climate change measures and social housing in particular, as well as to make provision for people with disabilities and our children in order to build a more equal and inclusive society. People have waited long enough for a full social recovery to follow the economic recovery. We have to address clear inequalities, for example, issues such as low pay across services and society in general, not least in our Defence Forces or the fact that many people cannot keep up with ever increasing costs in housing, childcare and health services, as alluded to by Deputy Brendan Ryan.

A no-deal Brexit clearly places existing jobs at risk. The precautionary money put aside by the Government is appropriate to deal with this in an anticipatory fashion. It is easier to save existing jobs and businesses rather than create new ones and where jobs are lost, it is essential to help people to get back into work as soon as possible. Loans to such businesses vulnerable to Brexit and which provide essential liquidity should be allocated at a 0% rate so as to assist those businesses in a very positive way and prevent them from going bust. Extra funding for retraining and upskilling initiatives is vitally important to support workers, particularly in the agrifood and tourism sectors as they prepare for the future, if Brexit becomes a reality.

There is no point in the Minister for Finance simply talking about this being a Brexit bud-

get, the economy is bigger than that and the society is wider. He cannot completely ignore the concern of those who will be most impacted by the burden of a no-deal, which is what happened last Tuesday. They were totally disregarded. Pensioners, vulnerable groups in receipt of welfare payments as well as working and farming families have been completely left behind, while the banks interests have been protected yet again by Fine Gael with Fianna Fáil's consent. Why were the corporations that bankrupted the economy able to escape an increase in the bank levy? Why was the use of losses to reduce their tax payments to zero over many years not examined, reviewed and curtailed so as to secure additional tax from them? That is an important issue.

The ESRI has predicted that in the case of a no-deal Brexit - which the Taoiseach has admitted is now is a likely scenario - the cost will be up to €1,360 per household. Let us be clear, this will add up to €26 per week to the cost of the weekly shopping for families, pensioners and those who are less well off. Specifically, households in the lowest income group would face a 4% increase compared to 2.4% for the highest income group. The price rises will not be on luxury goods. They will be on the children's cereals, bread and the pensioners' tea and biscuits. These are normal day-to-day goods that we all need. The reality is that a no-deal Brexit would predominantly affect low-wage workers, pensioners and those in receipt of welfare payments who spend disproportionately more of their money on these basic items. Yet, if a deal is arrived at in the end and we avoid a no-deal Brexit, the price of inflation alone next year is estimated to be 1.5%. Whatever way we look at it, it is disgraceful that there will be no social welfare increases for the likes of pensioners and those vulnerable groups in society.

The targeted interventions championed by the Government simply do not go far enough and, yet again, it is those who are most in need who have been abandoned. The Labour Party proposed in an alternative budget a €5 per week increase in welfare payments across the board and I strongly suggest this be implemented to ensure that no one is left behind by a chaotic Brexit. I know €338 million has been provided in the social welfare budget for an increase in unemployment which may arise as a result of Brexit. If that does not happen, a supplementary budget should be introduced to ensure that a social welfare payment is paid out next March to provide for those people who have been left behind.

I welcome the provision in the budget increasing the number of hours from 15 to 18.5 per week that carers can work or study outside the home. It is important we continue the focus upon and improve the lot of carers. As I have said previously, the abolition of the means test is the only way to go. I will not rest until this is achieved.

As Deputy Brendan Ryan mentioned, the Labour Party would have increased the minimum wage by 30 cent to €10.10 regardless of Brexit. I recall the first thing I did in 2011 when I was in government and given charge of this matter was to reverse the cut that had been made to the minimum wage in 2010. People forget those things that the Labour Party did. Those receiving the minimum wage are predominantly female, young people and migrants. They are also predominantly employed in the hospitality sector, in restaurants and hotels, and in the retail sector which will be directly impacted by Brexit. As recently as July, at the ICTU conference, the Taoiseach stated that the minimum wage would pass the "psychological barrier" of €10 in 2020. Yet, on budget day, we saw no action. Yesterday, we heard the Taoiseach admit that minimum wage increases do not result in job losses. Yet in almost the same breath he stated the reason for delaying the increase was due to the potential for job losses in the context of Brexit. It is nonsensical. The reality is that Brexit is being used as an excuse to avoid giving decent pay for a decent day's work to those who deserve it. That must be tackled head-on.

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With respect to community employment and Tús schemes, we need to give people opportunities to work in the community and voluntary sector, especially people who have been unemployed for a long time. The Tús scheme needs to be extended for those participating on it to a two-year period. We need to cut out the nonsense of placements being for one year. It is a load of bureaucracy. The participants should be allowed to have two years on the scheme. I know a man who has to leave his placement under the scheme today. He is a person who is wanted in his position and the whole community is begging for him to be kept on. Because there is a shower of bureaucrats in place who do not know the price of anything, regulations such as that one are brought in.

With respect to the reform of the means test, we in the Labour Party believe in the universal provision of public services. The current means test processes applying to people's eligibility for social housing, disability support, carer's allowance, social welfare payments and medical cards involve a maze of complexity. The whole system needs to be reviewed, root and branch, and merged into a single means test that would apply across all Departments and facilitate the streamlined availability of services. The carer's allowance payment, for example, is calculated as part of the assessment of rent payable by people in receipt of the housing assistance payment, HAP. I cannot believe it. All grants and entitlements should be simplified. The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection should take the opportunity to ditch JobPath on the next contract renewal date. It has failed to meet its targets and is a disaster.

None of us seriously doubts the need for Ireland to reduce greenhouse gas emissions but this transformation must be done gradually and in a way that creates new sustainable jobs, especially in the regions such as the midlands region, where I come from. I welcome the allocation of €31 million as a start to help the midlands area where more than 2,000 people are employed in Bord na Móna and many are employed in the offshoot industries and are engaged in harvesting and producing peat and supplying it to the ESB. This is only a start. The midlands region has most to lose in the shift away from fossil fuels and people had better know that.

As we have almost 140,000 council houses nationally, the Government has to invest in a more ambitious programme of energy efficiency retrofitting, which is why we have always stated in our election programme that we would commit to spending €100 million per year in carbon tax revenues to bring all council housing up to the appropriate standard.

In order to encourage people to use public transport there must be a 10 % reduction in public transport fares. That would cost €54 million. We need to increase the public service obligation subsidy for public and rural transport. With respect to the Minister, Deputy Ross, we have a railway station at Thomastown, Killucan that would also serve Raharney. An investment of €1.8 million would put that back in use. We have platforms and everything there. Thousands of people travel eastwards past the constituencies of the Deputies' opposite every day as they make their way to work. They travel from Mullingar, east Westmeath and the surrounding areas to and from Dublin to go to work or college. The Minister is as stubborn as a mule. He hears or sees nothing, particularly anything that is right. If Iarnród Éireann was given a push, it could use some Border, midlands and western regional money and put that station back into use. In terms of decarbonisation, how many cars would the provision of that rail service take off the road? It would reduce the number of cars clogging up the N4 and M50 and it would give people a bit of peace as they travel to and from work. It is a nonsense not to do that. It just shows the lack of joined-up thinking and the stupidity of bureaucrats and Ministers.

If Deputy Ross is a Minister worth his salt at all, he will do his own thing. Of course, as he

is only into photo opportunities and photo bombing, he does not know what is going on. I am sick and tired of looking at him. This might be my last chance at a budget speech to tell the truth to those guys, although I will have a lot more to say when I am leaving. There are a few people I want to have a right shot at.

Farming is an area about which I know a lot. This budget provides €650 million for a Brexit fund, with €110 million going to farming, to be triggered immediately in the event of no deal, and a similar level of funding being secured from the European Commission. There is an €85 million fund for beef farmers. We all know that beef farmers have suffered
4 o'clock over the past three years and that prices have dropped again, with €3.45 per kilo being quoted, so prospects are very poor. There is €45 million for the beef data and genomics programme, €40 million for a target scheme based on the beef scheme, which is about €40 per calf, a €10 million vaccination programme at €20 per calf, and a €10 million calf-to-beef weighing programme, which in its new form will be some €10 per calf.

Let us take a look at the beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM, where only €80 million of the €100 million was utilised this year. It is a scheme designed to fail. Do not get me started again about the bureaucrats. This seems anything but user-friendly. I have received a letter from a father and son who are farming in Mayo, the part of the country from which the Acting Chairman comes. He knows a great deal about farming and it is a pity he is not in the Department because he might get something done. The letter is from people who are doing everything right. Some 90% of their heifers calved between 22 and 26 months, they had ICBF calving reports, they are members of the local Teagasc knowledge transfer discussion group and they followed Teagasc's advice and increased investment this year. They are struggling financially on the beef farm because the merchant credit will have to be carried forward to 2020, which is almost unprecedented on the farm. Like many other firms, the beef crisis has hit this farm hard. They applied for BEAM because this is an exceptional period of their farming careers and the compensation is badly needed to pay off the merchant credit. However, their main concern with the scheme, which I mentioned to the Minister, although he must put plugs in his ears because he hears nothing, is that it requires a 5% reduction in organic nitrogen based on a reference year from July 2018 to June 2019. Farmers like this father and son have been building stock numbers during this time and they were cleared this year when their ICBF report was furnished. However, the 5% reduction that is to take place between July 2020 and June 2021 would be a 20% reduction in their herd because they have been building stock numbers since then. They are building a sustainable farming system based on Teagasc advice and funded by the Department through TAMS, and they are now asked to reduce stock by 5%, which will reverse the farm to where it was five years ago and lead to a far more unsustainable system.

I request the Department not to impose this 5% reduction in organic nitrogen and allow the exceptional aid measure to do exactly what it said on the tin and to be used for what it is meant to be used, which is to compensate farmers for poor beef prices and help beef farmers to raise the price. The Department has been providing TAMS funding to keep their current stocking rate and to meet bank repayments. They are at a loss to know why they have received funding on the one hand to develop the farm and then, on the other, why they are asked to reduce their stock. BEAM was to compensate farmers for the beef crisis of 2018 and the scheme should be allowed to do that and nothing more. I only hope that some of those officials up there, some of whom went to college with me and are getting near retirement age, will listen to what I am saying about the BEAM programme, remodel it and remove that 5% reduction. It is a disaster. That is why nobody is taking it up and some €20 million is being handed back. Mother of di-

vine intervention, what is the Department doing bringing forward schemes when it knows they are not going to work and the money is going to come back?

I could speak for an hour, like the Acting Chairman can. When he is in full flow, he is very hard to stop.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I agree with much of the second part of Deputy Penrose's contribution. On the budget, anybody would welcome the extension to the threshold for medical card holders aged over 70 and for children under eight years of age to access a doctor or dental treatment. The worrying part is that we now hear doctors stating that nothing was agreed, so I presume that needs to be resolved.

When we go through the budget, we can see that much of it is unimaginative. I accept, however, that Brexit has been a major factor. To start with the agricultural side, stamp duty is crippling for the small farmer who goes to a bank to put a few pounds together. This year is no different, particularly in light of the fact that 1.5% is being added to it. Why do we not try to change this? The EU is supposed to be based on a foundation of protecting the family farm. Why do we not give an escape route to somebody with under 100 acres who wants to buy 20 acres more to make their family farm more sustainable instead of crucifying them with another €1,500 or €3,000 on any bit of land they might buy? I have no problem with the conglomerates or the large operators who buy big office blocks having to pay an extra per cent. However, for someone in a rural area who would buy a shop and open a door, for someone who would open a pub - many of which have closed unfortunately - or for someone who might buy a few acres of land to make sure that they stay in an area, why do we not have imaginative thinking to try to help those people to put on a light, open a door and perhaps make a small rural town more vibrant or make a small farming area more viable?

The carbon tax is a real bugbear of mine because it is put on the people of rural Ireland. The position needs to be clarified in light of the different statements coming out in the past three days. Those in the agricultural sector were told on the evening of the budget that carbon tax will not be applied to green diesel. Let us be very clear, because we now have all the information from Revenue, that there has been a carbon tax of €20 per tonne on green diesel up to now and the new carbon tax is going to be added to that. Then, the story came out that contractors and farmers would not be hit with it. The reality is that an agricultural contractor will have to pay the carbon tax in its present form. The Government should look again at this. Let us show a bit of common sense about it. Some 95% of work carried out on farms is done by the agricultural contractors. They are not going to be swallowing this tax because many of them are struggling, and they are going to hand it on. They are going to hand it on to a sector that, as everybody has seen in the past seven or eight weeks, especially in the context of beef and sheep, is struggling. Why we do not have an allowance for that, I cannot understand. I will try to put in an amendment when this goes to committee because we need common sense.

The people in rural parts of Ireland have fewer buses and we know the debacle that has taken place with regard to buses in the last three or four months, with the eligibility criteria and parents having to bring their children to school. In addition, people have to drive 30, 40 and 50 miles to get to work in different parts of the country. No one will be shocked if they live in Roscommon, Galway or the midlands that they could be driving 40 or 50 miles, with some people driving as far as Maynooth every day. It would be great if there was a bus or a train that would shoot them up and shoot them down again when they finish work, but we do not have one on the hour, every hour. It is basically taking the money out of the pockets of these

people. These are the people in what I call middle Ireland who, year in, year out, are crucified. They pay their mortgages and put kids through secondary school and college, but they are being fleeced every time. Everyone says we are going to poverty-proof this person, that person and the other person. The reality is they are never poverty-proofed and they are now, in my opinion, the new poor in Ireland. This is a discriminatory tax against people living in rural Ireland, who have no options and no services. If the services are there, a person cannot be cribbing. However, when those services are not there, it is different. People would take a photo of a bus in my area if they saw one - that is the reality. While €3 million is being provided for rural transport, that is for the whole country. We must put this into perspective. What does it cost to run one bus in Dublin for a year? Dublin needs infrastructure as well. I am the first to say that.

There is uproar about the carbon tax, especially among contractors, because it is hitting farmers, who are in a difficult situation. Unfortunately, farmers are price-takers. Everyone has to eat and all that food is hauled by lorries around the country. The carbon tax will affect that. We do not seem bothered about the big money-spinner. People in rural parts of the country have no choice as to where they work. It is a question of where they can get jobs and sustain a family. They do, however, have a choice as to whether to go to Lanzarote or Kerry. That is the choice they have. The airlines can well afford to take a bit of the hit.

Regarding agriculture, I welcome the €85 million for the beef sector in the budget but, to be honest, if there is a hard Brexit, we will need a lot of €85 million packages or about 100,000 farmers will not survive, unfortunately. We must ensure we tackle that head on. I note that the Minister has said there will be more money provided in the case of a hard Brexit. I welcome that but we need to keep the finger on the pulse. The money that was unspent - it is not new money - on the sheep sector needs to be divvied out as well.

Some 14% or 15% of the country is in designated areas. There are 38 different notifiable actions. Farmers are not able to farm their land in the same way as someone up or down the road from them. Negotiations have gone on over the past six or seven months. They needed €10 million but I see that in the budget the figure has gone from €600,000 to €1 million. Let us be honest; that will not resolve this problem. I encourage the Minister to do one thing. I see that €10 million is to be provided for a new dairy calf to beef weighing scheme. Why do we not think outside the box? We will have a major problem next spring when between 1.3 million and 1.5 million calves are born in the dairy herd in a matter of two or three months. Why do we not give the €10 million to the people who can export these calves and get as many of them as possible out of the country? This would make the sector sustainable by ensuring the factories are not flooded again. When the factories know there are heaps of cattle, they can give whatever price is taken.

Regarding the €1.2 million to be provided to Bord Bia, it better start showing something for the amount of money it gets. All it could do in recent months was ensure that meat processors got Bord Bia quality assurance in England and the North, places where we could not send cattle beforehand. Ironically enough, I note that two of the main meat processors did not share a stand with Bord Bia at the biggest food fair in the world. It is worrying that they had their own stand.

There is nothing for the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme. Before the crash, when Fianna Fáil was in power, the maximum annual payment was something like €4,000. The maximum payment is still only €3,200 or €3,300 now and it was not increased in the budget. The Minister should forget about weighing calves or sending them from beef to dairy. A certain number of calves will go - nobody is saying they will not - but we should bring in an incentive

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because people like incentives and exporters love them. We could give farmers a payment of €10 for every calf they get out of the country. This could alleviate a major problem. The problem is not this year but a year or two down the road. We should ensure we meet the highest animal welfare standards when doing this.

There is a lot of talk at present about Bord na Móna and the midlands. There is only one solution. I sat with Bord na Móna a year ago. It put a lovely glossy document in front of me and told me how it would do all these lovely things and how nobody would ever lose a job. A few months later, I heard that Donnelly's coal yard in Galway was closed. What did the lovely glossy magazine I saw propose? Redundancy. Then there was a similar closure in Sligo. What did Bord na Móna propose? Redundancy. Then it wanted 450 more people and there were further redundancies. This was the new way of creating new jobs. We can throw money at whatever we like. People were told nine months ago there would be a just transition in the years from 2018 to 2025 and now they are being told the doors will close next Christmas. That is what is facing some of these people under the current scenario and plan. I am not worried about An Bord Pleanála or the Environmental Protection Agency. I am worried about people's jobs. We are supposed to be legislators. We must do whatever is needed to ensure a just transition for workers in Bord na Móna in the period until 2025, or 2027 as was predicted. All those workers bought into that plan and they cannot be left hung out to dry.

The €20 million for retrofitting is great - no one is saying it is not. I live in Galway, however, and someone else may live in Donegal. I could be a contractor retrofitting houses. If I am the cheapest, I will get the contract. Let us not cod ourselves that a Bord na Móna worker will be guaranteed to get the contract. The same applies to the rewetting of bogs, for which €5 million has been provided. This is a subject I know a good bit about. Rewetting has taken place on some of the designated bogs. If a bog has to be lined, there will be fewer people working on the site. I read today an article in one of the newspapers that 120 people would be involved. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will understand better than everyone else, anyone rewetting a bog with peat will need a digger and using a digger means putting in a scraw to block a drain. That €5 million will be spent in 240 days using 17 diggers, and that does not include the cost of materials. There are no ifs or buts about that. By the way, a digger is operated by one person, not three people, and that person pulls the levers. That is how it works. No one is denying that large areas can be covered but that is achievable with 17 people in 17 diggers. Once we subtract those 17 from the 1,600 figure, we will still need to find work for 1,583 people.

I welcome the €6 million for the just transition, but we need to do this on a phased basis. It is like going up a hill bit by bit. Over the seven or eight years, we must ensure that these people know where they are going. The door cannot be closed overnight, as I said earlier. Whatever we need to do, let us get the idea of shutting down the plants at Christmas out of our heads. Let us ensure we are honourable about what we said we would do and give the workers a future until 2027.

I turn to education. Regarding grants for teachers who go to college, while there may be some complications, at least an effort is being made to give the grant back to student teachers. It is sad to see funding for school buildings being cut, but I welcome that there will be a small increase in capitation.

We need to get to grips with one thing here. There are various announcements and budgets throughout the year. Four budgets ago, the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, announced that people who had incontinence and who pay

by weight for waste disposal would get an allowance of €75. To this day, that payment has not been introduced. When we announce something in a budget we should be honourable enough to ensure it is done. Councils across the country have their tongues hanging out waiting for the group water framework. It was to come in February or April and there were three people looking at it in May or June. It was then to come in September but it is still not here. Schemes around the country are leaking water and the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has not announced that initiative when he should have.

Maybe we did not have money for pensioners but we should prioritise them, along with children, to ensure the people who worked before us can be looked after. I have sat here listening to the debate on more motions on Wednesday nights than I care to remember since I came here. The only debate I can hear now concerns climate change and it will have the same relevance as every other motion. We have debated motions on rural social scheme workers and the fact that community employment scheme supervisors should be treated correctly when it comes to their pensions and conditions. However, this Government has gone through three budgets now and there is nothing for them. If we are not going to act on the outcome of a motion, we should not debate it to start with. People thought they had won an all-Ireland final that night when the motion passed and everybody was excited but nothing has happened since and those people have not been looked after.

It is a similar position for carers. We have not talked about the fair deal scheme and maybe legislation is required but my understanding is funding is needed. Many questions are being asked of politicians from all sides of the divide about the state of the fair deal scheme. We can introduce all the legislation in the world that we want but if there is no budget to cover it, where do we go? It was promised during the recess that when these Houses returned, the heads of the required Bill would be ready and it would go through the Oireachtas. Everybody anticipated that the new process would start in January 2020. We do not seem to have made any progress in that.

Running a farm or any small business is like running a relay race. The business is handed from one to the other and having to pay big nursing home fees is crippling some people. I know there are some Health Service Executive schemes but I know of cases where people had to sell land. The Government should introduce the promised scheme and it should certainly not say it will do it if it does not intend to. This would help the people in trouble who are paying large sums of money. If we do not act, somebody else will have to go on social welfare because he or she will not have a farm on which to survive.

I ask the Government to consider carefully amendments to the stamp duty code for family farms or small businesses. Will the Government consider how the carbon tax increases will affect contractors? Everybody will say I am a contractor, and I am, but I do not make up the world. I am talking about contractors around the country because 95% of work done on farms is done by a contractor. They will pass on these costs. We need to introduce certain measures because if there is a Brexit, there will be a crisis in agriculture. Do we want to finish them off altogether or is there a willingness to try to help farmers? We can do that through amendments.

Deputy John Curran: I am sharing my time with Deputy Lahart. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the 2020 budget. It is an unusual budget because it is framed very much in the context of the possibility of a hard Brexit, particularly as there is only a week to go to the European Council meeting. It is fair to say that if we do not get a deal soon, getting a deal at all becomes less likely. It is a serious position. Ireland needs stability at this crucial

time and my party has offered the Government that stability for the past number of years. This House is united in its approach to Brexit, which is important. It is in this context that we are facilitating the Government and allowing this budget to pass. The Brexit issue supersedes any other matter at this point.

We have heard others making very significant contributions to the debate on what a no-deal Brexit would mean to the Irish economy. It would mean the loss of tens of thousands of jobs and a very significant drop, amounting to a couple of billion euro, in the Irish economy. As I have said, it is in that context that we will continue to facilitate this budget. It is not just about money with Brexit; it also concerns the peace process and the Border. We are facilitating this budget but there are very significant elements with which we are not happy and where we have concerns, particularly in the area of health and housing, which have been problematic for a number of years. I will refer to the problem of drugs and the increase in drug problems at present but these were not referred to at all in the budget speech.

In his comments, the Minister indicated that if the economic impact of a no-deal Brexit is more severe than forecast, he is prepared to use resources that would otherwise have been dedicated to the rainy day fund. He stated that the rationale for the rainy day fund is to accumulate funding that can be deployed in the event of an adverse shock to the economy, and given the small size and openness of the Irish economy, the use of this type of funding is an important way of protecting the economy in more challenging times. He also said that his original intention had been to transfer €500 million to the rainy day fund from the Exchequer this year, with an additional €1.5 billion transferred from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. The Minister will transfer €1.5 billion from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund but the €500 million from the Exchequer is not being transferred. That is absolutely pathetic.

My party has advocated a rainy day fund for some considerable time. It is worth noting that every year since 2012, Fine Gael has needed large Supplementary Estimates, amounting to over €6 billion, to pay for budget overspends. Last year there was almost €650 million for the overspend in the Department of Health alone, not including the increased costs relating to the children's hospital. There will be an overspend of more than €300 million in the health area this year. These overspends have been funded significantly by the increase in growth in corporation tax receipts. Everybody recognises that these, while welcome, are not a reliable source of long-term income. During the period in question, money should have been ring-fenced for an unforeseen event like a no-deal Brexit. It is a sad day when so few funds have been provided to the rainy day fund.

A number of increases to social welfare payments are to be welcomed, although they are small or modest. The living alone allowance is to be increased and the payment for dependant children will rise by €2 for those under 12 and €3 for those who are over 12. The income disregard for payments for working lone parents will also increase by €15. Income thresholds for the working family payment will rise by €10 and the amount of time those in receipt of carer's benefit can work or study will increase from 15 hours to 18.5 hours per week. Although these are welcome, this budget for the vast majority of people dependent on social welfare has been a non-event. They are bitterly disappointed by it. The Minister made a play in specifically saying the Christmas bonus would be paid in full this year but it is not something with which to play politics. It should be built into the base as an annual core cost rather than a supplementary cost at the end of a year. The Christmas bonus for vulnerable people is a necessary payment to ensure they can survive the Christmas period without going into debt or accessing moneylenders, etc.

I mentioned areas with which we were disappointed. In his 30-odd pages of budget speech, not once did the Minister allude to concerns relating to drug problems in Ireland. Global production of illicit drugs is booming and there have been record figures for the production of opium and cocaine. Total global opium production jumped 65% in one year from 2016 to 2017 and cocaine in a three-year period rose by over 50% between 2013 and 2016. At the same time as traditional illicit drugs are booming, non-medical use of opiate prescription drugs is becoming a major threat. Cannabis remains the world's most commonly used drug. The potency of cannabis resin has risen from a decade ago. The active constituent concentration was 8% and is now more than 17%. We have a major problem with illicit drugs in this country. There is a great deal of research on this. I have no wish to get too tied down by it, but it is interesting to note the increase in seizures that An Garda Síochána is making. This clearly indicates the amount of drugs in circulation. This increased use of illicit drugs is not harmless but we are ignoring it. It is something we should pay specific attention to because the figures indicate that 730 people each year die a drug-related death. Two people a day, every day, die a drug-related death. Yet, this particular budget makes no reference to the national drugs strategy or the task forces. Task forces are facing significant challenges, including local and regional drugs task forces. Since the task forces were established 22 years ago, when they were specifically targeted, the problem has become national. Yet, core funding was cut during the recession. For the past six years, core funding to our drug and alcohol task forces has not been increased. That is a disgrace. The parent organisations, the Department of Health and the HSE, have seen significant increases in funding during that period. Yet the drug and alcohol task forces have not. The challenges and the work they are expected to do are increasing and it is a shame on the Government that it has allowed such a situation to develop over several years.

Deputy Penrose was speaking some minutes ago on the area of transport. I wish to comment on that as well. The Minister indicated that an allocation of €2.7 billion was being made to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, which is a substantial increase of €384 million. The problem is that we are not seeing that on the ground. A couple of additional buses were allocated to my area. Yet, on routes from Lucan to the city centre, there is no alternative mode of transport. There is no Dart or Luas at the moment and whether there ever will be is another question. People are not able to get on the bus in the morning. Buses are going past the bus stops full. We can talk about big figures but if we are not delivering effective solutions for people who are affected, then the budget day announcements do not add up to much.

The Minister said he was allocating €1.1 billion for social housing to deliver 11,000 new social homes. The problem is that they are not being built. They are being acquired through other mechanisms. Local government must have a far more meaningful role in the direct provision of social housing. Last year, local authorities only built 2,000 local authority houses. That figure needs to grow rapidly. The Government and local authorities are buying from an already small market and thus squeezing out many first-time buyers. First-time buyers were ignored in this budget in terms of affordability. We need real and meaningful schemes that do not exist. Moreover, no reference was made to them. Reference was made to an additional €80 million for the housing assistance payment support. It was interesting because the additional €80 million being made available would provide funding to support 15,750 new people. We are really driving a significant portion of people into HAP. They are the very people who are ending up homeless. More and more people are becoming homeless although we already have 53,000 people in HAP accommodation. If we add a further 15,000 then we are exacerbating the problem. Our focus must be on the provision of local authority housing.

I wish to refer briefly to health. There was an indication that 1 million additional home care hours would be provided in 2020. This is an issue we all have had to face over recent years. We all have had experiences of constituents who have been patients in hospital and who wanted to get out and come home but for whom there was no access to such care. At present, a total of 7,000 people are waiting for home support. They are on home care of various types. It is questionable whether the 1 million hours will be as significant as suggested. On 17 September this year, there were 745 people in hospital who were ready to be discharged and 140 or 150 of them had been waiting for one week or less. Moreover, 600 had been waiting for more than one week, 363 had been waiting for more than one month while 79 had been waiting for more than six months to be discharged. We cannot have our acute hospitals tied up like that. Home care, home supports and step-down facilities must be provided to allow these people to exit hospital, where they should not be and do not want to be.

Deputy John Lahart: My colleagues have raised some themes that I will be referring to myself. I wanted to raise four points. One arises from my role on the Committee on Budgetary Oversight and some of the common themes that have come forward there. The second point arises from my role as spokesperson for Dublin and Dublin transport and relates to some of the aspects of the budget that are especially disappointing, including climate action. The third relates to my constituency and some of the measures that are going to impact specifically, or not, on my constituency.

In his contribution to this debate yesterday, the Taoiseach stated:

There are many examples in our own history, including recent history, of warnings going unheeded that a period of economic growth would be followed by a period of economic collapse. Steps were not taken to prepare for what was coming and the country was left defenceless when the worst happened.

These are sentiments I strongly share. As a member of the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, I have heard this theme being raised repeatedly at meetings of the committee where we have benefited from the contributions and attendance of witnesses such as the Governor of the Central Bank. We have had informal meetings with the IMF and regular briefings with the ESRI. We have also had regular briefings with the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, the body set up under the previous Government to institutionalise the memory of the crash, as the former chairman put it. For the past three years, and especially for the past two years, as the contributors and witnesses came before the committee several common themes have emerged. One has kept coming up for the past three years. This is our over-reliance on corporation tax. This is a point to which my colleague, Deputy Curran, alluded. Corporation tax is Ireland's version of what North Sea oil is to Norway. Deputy Michael McGrath, our finance spokesperson, said the other day that one of the lessons we learned from the crash was that it is important and prudent to put some money away when times are good. Modest growth began in this country statistically and factually in 2010. We have had nine years of growth. Under the confidence and supply agreement signed between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the rainy day fund, a Fianna Fáil idea, was instituted. That was 2016. The rainy day fund, as Deputy Michael McGrath said, is there but there is not a penny in it. In fact, a real sign of how badly the public finances have been managed in good times is the fact that every cent that may have to be spent in the event of a no-deal Brexit scenario will have to be borrowed. I will put it in stark illustration. When Deputy Noonan sat in the Minister's seat in 2015, he was forecasting forward to budget 2018. He said in budget 2018, servicing the national debt would cost €9 billion and corporation tax receipts would be €5 billion. As we know, in 2018 corporation tax receipts were €10 billion

and servicing the national debt cost half of the €9 billion projection. Every red cent of that surplus has been embedded in day-to-day spending and the cupboard is bare. Whatever else is said about Fianna Fáil Governments in the 2000s, approximately €26 billion was put in the National Pensions Reserve Fund. That made the crash, as awful as it was, a little softer than it could have been.

Michael Tutty is a member of IFAC who I believe to be a former official at the Department of Finance, although I could be wrong in that regard. Within the past month, when he attended as a witness before the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, he stated that we are back to where we have been in the past. It is only in the past three or four months that the Minister for Finance has been taking on board the regular and sustained criticism from the Committee on Budgetary Oversight. Those are my comments on the national context.

My next point relates to Dublin, Dublin transport and climate action measures. Nothing has been done to bridge the gap between now and the completion of the proposals in the Government's much vaunted Project Ireland 2040. Even if the latter are successful, a passenger could not set foot on the metro or travel on the BusConnects corridors until around 2027. Deputies Curran, Haughey and others representing Dublin have raised this issue in numerous debates in this House. There is nothing to bridge the gap between the here and now and when all of those projects are built out, if they are built out. As I have said before, a baby born today will be lucky to set foot on the metro when he or she is 12 and about to start secondary school. There is nothing to offset the air quality issues and the chronic traffic congestion that we are experiencing in Dublin between now and 2027.

The Government's climate action plan refers to 950,000 electric cars, but I suspect that such technology may be bypassed in the next three or four years. The Government's plan is all about e-cars and there is no mention of e-bikes. On the Continent, the Belgians are the leaders in this area, followed by the Dutch, Danes and Scandinavians. In cities in particular, e-bikes are seen as a really practical and efficient solution for journeys in the 5 km to 8 km range and they are tax-incentivised in major ways in the aforementioned countries. There is no mention of e-bikes in the Government's climate action plan or in the budget. There are no incentives for employees or employers in that context. Regardless of whether a general election comes sooner or later, if Fine Gael prepares a manifesto that refers to e-cycling, we can tell the public that the party had eight years in power and prepared a climate action plan in which it is never mentioned. It had a budget in which it could have introduced practical measures to bridge the gap between now and 2027 but it had nothing to say about e-cycling.

The Government's climate action measures are for those who are in the fortunate position of having considerable savings or being reasonably well off. Most people in this House, including myself, could not afford to purchase an e-car, to make that big leap from a diesel car. I speak for many citizens in the country when I say that and Deputy Lisa Chambers made the same point earlier today. Most citizens could not afford the expense of a total deep retrofit of their homes, although they may be able to do small pieces of it, step by step. The difficulty is that one must have money up front to do any of these projects. We need to take a long, hard look at how we approach this issue and how we assist people. At the moment, all of the measures seem to be aimed at those who have disposable income or substantial savings, at people who can part with significant sums of money up front to draw down the admittedly generous grants that are available.

On the cycling budget, *cyclist.ie* is tweeting away in response to an infograph from the De-

partment of Transport, Tourism and Sport on spending on cycling in the budget. It is not able to tie down the exact figure for Dublin cycling and neither am I. It has become lost in greenways. In the context of BusConnects, the Minister referred in his contribution earlier to 200 km of cycle lanes. In the great cycle plan of 2013, reference was made to 600 km of cycle track in Dublin, so the ambition and the bar keeps being lowered.

At a constituency level, the cut in the Department of Education and Skills schools building projects budget worries me because there are a number of proposed projects in my area, including a proposed post-primary school in Citywest, a Gaelscoil in Knocklyon and numerous other projects. I echo some of the points made by my party colleague, Deputy Curran, on the most vulnerable special needs children and their parents. We have advocated very strongly on their behalf in this House during this Dáil. We have been calling for additional autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units but a cut, for the first time in seven years, to the Department's building budget is not good news.

One of the items that Fianna Fáil stitched into the confidence and supply agreement was an increase in the number of gardaí, and I welcome the announcement of another 700 gardaí. Apart from housing and health, which are two of the biggest issues of concern, there is also growing concern about anti-social behaviour as a result of the lack of community gardaí. Senior gardaí will say that there has been a serious increase in teenager-on-teenager anti-social behaviour. That is happening in a number of pockets of my constituency and is not exclusive to some areas.

On the matter of affordable housing, my colleague referred to so-called social housing supports as opposed to social housing. The former means the housing assistance payment, HAP, and we are spending in excess of €1 billion on that scheme. Deputy Curran talked about young people being excluded from the housing market. There was an example very recently in my constituency where 13 houses went through the normal planning process, were granted permission and built, but a housing association bought every one of them. That is very good news for people who are on the housing list but bad news for young first-time buyers who wanted to return to this part of Tallaght to buy their first home. We are not building anything like the number of social and private houses that we need. I heard some of my rural colleagues speak about rents of €1,500 per month but rents are €2,000 per month in parts of my constituency. That money is going into a big black hole. Subsidised, affordable housing is the way forward.

In terms of health, I am concerned about the intensive care unit, ICU, that is to be built in Tallaght Hospital. I am also concerned about the waiting lists, carers, and children with special needs, many of whom are on huge waiting lists for speech and language therapy, for example. They get three sessions of therapy after a wait of two or three years. That allows the officials to tick the box to say that they have had their speech therapy. They must then go to the bottom of the waiting list again and wait for another two or three years for more therapy. Unless their families have money, they cannot get the vital support and assistance they so badly need in their early developing years.

As Deputy Cowen said earlier, were it not for Brexit, we would have been in an election scenario before now. We have done our duty by the country in facilitating aspects of this but that does mean it is an endorsement. There is sufficient material here, particularly with regard to the Government's competence in terms of managing the economy, upon which the public will ultimately deliver an answer in a general election.

Debate adjourned.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Foreign Conflicts

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I welcome the fact that we have the opportunity to raise this issue today. The expression “words fail me” is totally inadequate to describe how I felt when I heard President Trump say earlier that the Kurds did not help the US in Normandy in the First World War, so why should he defend them now. These are the same Kurds who have fought alongside the US against ISIS for the past five years. This Turkish offensive is called, ironically, Operation Peace Spring. We know the history of the suffering of the Kurdish people. I do not think any people have suffered as much as the Kurds. Promises were made to them by the western allies after the First World War, which provided for a Kurdish state, but that was abandoned. Instead, the Kurds were given minority status in various countries, including Turkey where they have suffered appalling human rights violations. They have never had their own permanent state.

The Kurds were defending their enclaves in northern Syria against ISIS. Their Peshmerga forces defended parts of Iraq against ISIS when those areas were abandoned by the Iraqi army. We know about Kobane and Raqqa and other areas that had been taken over by ISIS, where the Kurds have been steadily driving ISIS out. We also know what happened in those ISIS-controlled areas. It appears that President Erdoğan’s agenda is driven by the need to boost his own popularity after the mayoral defeat in Istanbul. Those who suffer the most are the civilians, most of whom have already been displaced from their own countries. We also have the issue of ISIS fighters who were captured in the area. Will they be released? If so, that will create new opportunities for them.

President Trump also commented to the effect that the Turks and the Kurds have been fighting each other for centuries, as if it were inevitable that there will be another conflict. We know that 11,000 Kurdish people have lost their lives in the conflict. The agenda has always been to displace the Kurds and there have been many examples of that. This looks like an attempt to annihilate them. President Trump has reminded people that Turkey is a big trading partner of the US. Turkey is hosting Syrian refugees and has received €6 billion in that regard. However, it is looking for more money. Is it using this conflict as a playing card? In the middle of it all, the Kurdish people are suffering.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that what is unfolding in north-east Syria only compounds the misery of the Syrian people and the persecution of the Kurdish people. It has the potential to create more internal refugees in Syria. Some 60,000 people have already left the affected zone in northern Syria. In a quite incredible statement for a member of NATO and a President of Turkey, President Erdoğan stated on Turkish television that he will flood Europe with millions of refugees if the European Union taunts Turkey regarding its interference in Syria. More than 500,000 people live within 5 km of the Syria-Turkey border. The Tánaiste will agree that foreign interference in Syria has created a quagmire of human

misery. Some 500,000 people have been killed there in the past eight years. This is one of the worst civil wars humanity has seen. Given the events of the past three days and, in particular, the green light given by President Trump, it is ironic that the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF, which were trained and armed by the Americans and were fighting ISIS, are now being battered by the Turkish military. This is a betrayal of the Kurdish people by the Americans. What can Ireland and the European Union do to address the situation?

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. It gives me an opportunity to put several things on the record. Recent developments in Syria are deeply worrying. Turkey's military action in the north east of the country will further undermine the stability of the region, which is still reeling from the costly battle against ISIS. It will also undermine prospects for a lasting peace in Syria and exacerbate civilian suffering in a country that has been devastated by war and population displacements for eight and a half years.

On 6 October, the United States announced a withdrawal of US troops from an area of north-east Syria close to the Turkish border ahead of a Turkish offensive into Syrian territory. Subsequent statements stressed that the US is not involved in, and does not support, the operation. Turkey commenced unilateral military operations in the area on 9 October, with the stated aim of preventing what it asserted was the creation of a terror corridor along its border.

I am particularly concerned about the humanitarian impact of a military escalation and further displacement of civilian populations. In a statement issued on 9 October, I stressed that the protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law must be paramount. I urge all parties to ensure unhindered, safe and sustainable humanitarian access. The position of the EU was made clear yesterday in a statement reaffirming that a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict cannot be achieved militarily and calling upon Turkey to cease unilateral action.

There are long-term security implications implicit in the US withdrawal and subsequent Turkish incursion in northern Syria. The fight against ISIS made considerable progress earlier this year. Unilateral military action against groups which played a decisive front-line role in this fight clearly risks undermining that progress. The resurgence of ISIS remains a significant threat to regional and international security. I am concerned that these developments will lead to further instability and that ISIS could take advantage of the vacuum. It is imperative that terrorist fighters remain securely detained to prevent them from joining or rejoining the ranks of terrorist groups.

It is vital that the rights of the ethnic Kurdish population in north-east Syria are protected. The EU has confirmed that it will not provide stabilisation or development assistance in areas where the rights of local populations are ignored. The safety and protection of all civilians and respect for international humanitarian law must be paramount. We must call out situations where that does not happen. Military action in Syria also risks undermining the work of the UN in attempting to facilitate a negotiated end to the conflict and a political transition which meets the legitimate aspirations of all communities in Syria. I take this opportunity to reiterate Ireland's strong support for the work of the UN special envoy, urge Turkey to cease military operations and call on parties to engage with the UN-led process.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: We know there are diverging opinions on the matter in the US. The EU has condemned the Turkish action but I understand that the ambassadors on the EU Political and Security Committee have not been able to agree a common position, possibly

due to the relationship of Hungary and Turkey. How effective can the UN security council be in this situation, particularly with regard to the possibility of a country exercising a veto over any action to be taken? I acknowledge that the Tánaiste made a strong statement regarding humanitarian issues and the implications in terms of instability. I presume that he will reiterate those points at the EU meeting of foreign ministers on Monday. There is a need for action because otherwise the situation will worsen.

As Syria is moving towards peace talks and recovering from the humanitarian disaster there, the emphasis should be on the right of safe return for Syrians who left their country and not this pending disaster which will worsen.

Deputy Gino Kenny: This situation has the potential to escalate into a regional war. In terms of the geopolitics of the area, there is a significant Kurdish minority in Turkey as well as Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Iran. The history of the Kurdish people is one of absolute persecution. They have been bitterly betrayed by the Americans, although that is no surprise for the Kurdish civilians as the Americans have bitterly betrayed many people, having interfered in foreign policy.

One practical thing the Tánaiste can do is to summon the Turkish Ambassador to ask him whether he will take responsibility for the civilian deaths which are occurring on his watch. There is blood on his hands.

Deputy Simon Coveney: A collective EU statement has been issued. There was a delay in it being issued, which I understand was caused by Hungarian concerns regarding what was proposed. All 28 members have now signed up to a statement of collective EU position, which is very welcome. Several members of the UN Security Council have requested that the issue be formally raised before the council, which would be appropriate.

I have been to Kurdish cities in northern Iraq and to western Turkey, where many Kurds live. I met many community leaders there. The Turkish action has the potential to create significant tension in the area and the mass movement of people. That is why I was
5 o'clock one of the first EU Ministers to issue a fairly strong statement on the issue. If I think it would be helpful to call in the Turkish Ambassador, I will do so. I am not sure what purpose it would serve immediately, but it may be useful to do so to try to understand in detail the Turkish perspective and have an opportunity to question it. I will have an opportunity to raise the matter at the Foreign Affairs Council next Monday and the General Affairs Council next Tuesday. I will be meeting many of my colleagues and am sure this will be one of the key issues under discussion.

Community Development Projects

Deputy Joan Burton: I am glad to be able to speak about Huntstown community centre in the Dáil a couple of days after the budget. The Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, is standing in for the Minister for Rural and Community Development, who could not be here today, unfortunately. I ask the Minister of State to understand that Huntstown is a very large community in Dublin 15. So far this year, the very successful Huntstown community centre has been used by over 68,000 people, which is a lot of people. I am sure the Minister of State is familiar with community centres in his constituency of Wicklow. Like many public buildings, Huntstown community centre has recently undergone a necessary audit of fire and building checks. This

happened after a number of schools in Dublin 15 were found to have serious defects. Everyone, including the board of management, the day-to-day management of the centre, the manager of the centre and the manager of the crèche that is run from Huntstown community centre, wants the centre to operate to the highest safety levels. The people of Huntstown and Dublin 15 are entitled to no less.

The report on fire safety, structural safety and structural issues with the building is really concerning. It comes with a price tag of €250,000, which is not that huge in the context of the way the Government spends money. It involves making the building safe in terms of various materials and building practices which were not adhered to when a new addition was added onto the centre some years ago. The centre itself has been operating for almost 20 years. Along with the adjoining school, church and small set of shops, the community centre is the heartbeat of the community. The staff and management of the centre work very hard and are respected by the community for the contribution they make.

I ask the Minister of State and his Fine Gael colleagues, along with those in Fianna Fáil who are supporting them in government, to ensure €250,000 is made available to the community of Huntstown. Facilities like the community crèche are vital for families with young children. Many activities, including after-school events, take place at the centre. Many people drop into the coffee shop each day or each weekend. The traditional activities that are found in a popular community centre, such as dancing and art classes for older people, must be able to continue at Huntstown community centre.

In light of the seriousness of the reports that have been submitted, I have no doubt that the centre will face serious obstacles as it seeks to continue to operate as it operates now. The Government must be able to address this. It is able to help rural areas like the Minister of State's locality through LEADER funds. Some county councils take responsibility for community centres, particularly newer centres or centres in disadvantaged areas. People in Huntstown get up early in the morning in the manner advocated by members of the Government. They work and they contribute to their community centre. They are no less deserving than other communities of Government funding and support to ensure their much-loved community centre is able to continue. I ask the Minister of State to give hope and reassurance to people in Huntstown that the Government will ensure such assistance is provided.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. The Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, was meant to deputise for the Minister for Rural and Community Development, but she has had to attend to a domestic matter.

The Minister, Deputy Ring, is aware of the situation in Huntstown community centre and knows how important the centre is to the people of Huntstown. Community centres are the cornerstones of many communities around the country. They bring people together in a safe space for social, educational and informational purposes. We need to do everything we can to keep them open and in good condition because they help to tie communities together. Like Deputy Burton and every other Member of the House, I regularly visit community centres in my role as a public representative. It is important that facilities where people gather are safe from a fire safety perspective and safe in every other way. I understand that issues of this nature have arisen at Huntstown community centre. I am informed that the centre is doing everything in its power to address these issues and to work through all the requirements. The importance of ensuring facilities are safe for everyone who uses them cannot be overstated.

Community facilities are funded from a range of sources across various Departments and agencies. Some of these supports are provided by the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Department has provided funding of €184,000 to Huntstown community centre in 2019 under the community services programme, which supports more than 400 community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. Funding is provided towards the cost of a manager and a number of other positions. In total, the community services programme is allocating €553,000 to Huntstown community centre from 2018 to the end of 2020. Separately, the Department of Rural and Community Development funds the community enhancement programme, which helps community groups to improve their facilities. In 2018, Huntstown community centre received €3,500 towards building upgrades. The local authority is involved in administering this programme.

I understand that Fingal County Council is aware of the fire safety issues with Huntstown community centre, which is owned by the local community. Officials from the council are arranging to meet the manager of the centre and local councillors to explore the supports that can be offered. I know this type of issue is not confined to Huntstown community centre. Funding sources that are available across the Government can be used to cover issues like this. LEADER funding can be used for facilities outside the five main cities. The rural regeneration and urban regeneration funds are also in place. The community enhancement programme is available for minor works that may be needed. I urge people in the community to use their meeting with the council officials to explore all of the options available to them.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is a very disappointing response. If this community centre was situated down the country, it would be funded generously for important community activities. The LEADER programme, which was mentioned by the Minister of State, is good for providing such funding. As we know, part of that funding comes from the EU. If this community centre was in a disadvantaged area, the county council would probably take responsibility for funding it. This is a community-owned community centre. It is part of the hub of this large community. There are sources of funding, such as the Dormant Accounts Fund, which the Government can use. I have raised them privately with the Minister. I am rather disappointed that the note from the Minister, as read by the Minister of State, does not mention the Dormant Accounts Fund, which may be used precisely for purposes like this.

I am pleased that officials from the county council are going to meet people from the centre. That is valuable. We are talking about a diverse community with a large number of young people, including children and secondary school students. Approximately 60 languages are spoken by the children who attend the school next door to the community centre. The staff in the centre, led by the manager, go out of their way to make everyone in this vibrant and integrated community feel welcome in the centre. The manager of the crèche goes out of her way to help to look after the young babies and children of the area. We are talking about a vital community resource and, in capital terms, a relatively small sum of money, €250,000, to address the fire safety and roof issues.

There were storm warnings last weekend. Many of us were afraid, given the nature of the warnings which had been issued and the quality of and problems with the roof, that had the major storm materialised it would have done much more damage than was the case. If this work can be done quickly, money would be saved. I asked the Minister of State to advise the Minister, Deputy Ring, that it is not enough to tell urban communities where people get up early, go to work and pay taxes that if they lived down the country the roof would be funded but because they live in Dublin it cannot be fixed. The dormant account funds can be used to

supply funding for the centre.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I will ensure that the Deputy's very persuasive arguments are brought to the attention of the Minister, in particular the availability of the dormant accounts fund.

I am aware that the rural and urban regeneration funds and community enhancement programme are possible sources of funding. The Minister asked his officials to keep him apprised of the situation, following the engagement between the local authority, councillors and the centre manager. Deputy Burton is obviously more aware of the situation than I am, but the Minister is investigating the best possible measures to fund the centre to ensure it is safe. Everyone accepts that is an imperative.

Road Projects Status

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I welcome the Minister. This is an old hobbyhorse of mine because the problem has not gone away. The Minister may recall that in May 2017, I and some of my colleagues, including Deputies Moynihan and Niall Collins from Limerick, raised the need for the M20 to be put in place via Mallow, Buttevant, Charleville and Patrickswell past Croom. The issue is being debated. Consideration is being given to rerouting the M20 via the N7 to Cahir and connectivity to the N24, namely, the Waterford to Limerick road. The local authorities concerned have their own priorities.

In October 2017, the Taoiseach confirmed in the House that he would ensure the M20 route selection process would involve a corridor from Cork to Limerick via Mallow, Buttevant and Charleville. We thought that the project had been agreed. The Minister and his Department have provided money for a study to be carried out. The issue has raised its ugly head again in the past couple of months. I am concerned that the lead authority is Limerick County Council, which seems to be in agreement with the Tipperary and Waterford local authorities in terms of giving priority to the N24 and using it as a route to add to the N7 to get to Cork.

The Southern Regional Assembly compiled the regional spatial and economic strategy for the southern region for the next ten or 20 years. It stated that the options available include the M20 route to Cahir and connecting to the N24, which is a major concern. I thought everything had been buried, but when I met regional statutory bodies like the IBEC section for the southern region and CIT, they raised their concerns with Oireachtas Members that the M20 route selection encompasses many alternatives.

I want some confirmation that the Minister, under the guidance of the Taoiseach, will give solace and comfort to the people of Mallow, Buttevant and Charleville that they will have a motorway. I know the Minister will tell us we have to change our strategy because of climate and green energy initiatives and so on, but there is no point comparing us with other countries which may be more advanced in terms of infrastructure and development. As we know from the document on regional planning guidelines from the South Western Regional Authority, an important aspect of mobility within the region is the upgrading of principal routes. This is a principal route. Mallow is totally congested. I will put my hand up and admit that when my party was in government in the 1990s and 2000s we got distracted in terms of Mallow and the bypass. We went for major projects such as the M20. The project went as far as consultation and route selection, and submissions were received in 2008 but because of the recession it was,

understandably, pulled.

The economic positives, including access and so on, for the south-west region must be taken into account. The Minister is forgetting about the people of west and north-west Cork and Kerry in terms of connectivity. He must remember that the route is made longer by going via Cahir. I ask that the Department and Minister provide an update. He is able to have his say with other Departments. I ask that he be responsible for his Department and ask Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and all of the local authorities in the Munster area to acknowledge that the preferred route has to be via Mallow, Buttevant, Charleville and Limerick.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which is close to his heart and location. I will try to reply in a way that gives him some reassurance.

I need to explain that as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding for the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, the planning, design and operation of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned, in this case Cork and Limerick county councils.

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the national development plan has been developed by the Government to underpin the successful implementation of the new national planning framework. This provides the strategic and financial framework for TII's national roads programme for 2018 to 2027. In the ten years covered by the plan, over €11 billion will be invested in the overall road network. The M20 Cork to Limerick proposed project is in the national development plan as a project to be advanced through planning, design and on to construction.

The scheme could include the provision of over 82 km of motorway between the existing N20 in Blarney, County Cork, and the existing M20 in Patrickswell, County Limerick, with an online motorway service area, depending on what is required by the public spending code. Planning and design work for the proposed scheme is under way and technical advisors were appointed in March 2019 by Limerick City and County Council to progress this work. A revised project appraisal plan was prepared and approved by my Department on 12 August 2019.

Early works, including traffic modelling and constraints studies, are under way. I understand that the project team is currently appraising the alternative corridors within the study area that might be considered as feasible options required by the public spending code and statutory process. These include other road based options as well as public transport based alternatives. This work will continue for the next 18 months approximately. The expected benefits of the project are: improved connectivity for the Atlantic economic corridor; safety improvements; bypasses of Charleville, Mallow and Buttevant; and wider economic benefits for the region. I also understand that TII has provided an allocation of €2.15 million to Limerick City and County Council for the project this year. This scheme is at an early stage of development and, therefore, it is not possible to indicate the timeframe in terms of construction proceeding. The latter will, of course, be dependent upon the satisfactory conclusion of the statutory planning approval process.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I thank the Minister for his reply. He hit the nail on the head at the beginning of his contribution. He has responsibility for overall policy. Policy means that he can dictate economic growth in the areas concerned, along with priorities. In other words, he

can say that the policy is that we need to ensure the route is from Cork to Limerick via Mallow, Buttevant and Charleville. In case there is any confusion, I keep reiterating this. The Minister went off course when he stated that those involved, be it TII or, possibly, the national roads design office teams of the various local authorities, are looking at alternative corridors. How far east of the M20 will these alternative corridors be because the M7 is east of the M20? That is my concern. When can we expect this issue to be put to bed? Regarding consultations, one could have people in Mitchelstown looking at a proposal for M20 and asking what they have to do with the latter.

The economic benefit has been set out. We need a purpose-built western corridor that does not just run from Cork to Limerick but goes all the way to Galway. The Minister acknowledges that he got the Gort motorway completed, which is welcome news. I hope we can eventually bring that motorway all the way from the west to Donegal. I know about the emphasis on green energy transport models but we cannot lose sight of the fact that the south west is lagging behind when it comes to infrastructure. The last major built infrastructure project in the south west involved the flyovers in Kinsale and Wilton in Cork city. With the exception of these, we have been left at a disadvantage. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the section on transport in the Budget Statement mentions the progress involving the M20 even without mentioning the Dunkettle interchange, which also has a major impact on the development of Cork city and county and the southern region with regard to accessibility and mobility of transport.

I ask the Minister to tell his cohorts. As he said, he is responsible for policy while they are responsible for planning. Being responsible for policy means that he can tell them it is a policy issue and to initiate the progress of the design from Cork to Mallow to Buttevant to Charleville.

Deputy Shane Ross: I would not like to in any way suggest that the Deputy was making inappropriate proposals but he must be clear about this. The Government is committed to this project. That is not in doubt and I do not think he is questioning it. To raise this issue in the context of the south not being adequately funded in terms of major projects is rather contradictory. I would have preferred it if the Deputy had got up and said that the south feels that it is not getting the necessary funding or attention for roads. This is a major project. We are talking about €11 billion over a number of years. It is a significant commitment to Cork and Limerick regarding the necessity for speedier contact between those two cities and bringing them closer to each other. That commitment is there. That is Government policy, as I outlined earlier.

What I will not and cannot do is interfere in any way with the planning process. I will not direct them regarding the findings to make when they come up with their case and decide on the best route to take and any other planning issues involved. Two sets of approvals are required in respect of projects such as this one. The Deputy is well aware that one is approval of the business case and a cost-benefit analysis of the project while the other is approval by An Bord Pleanála of an application for development consent. The project is at a very early stage. I stress that any timeframe for the successful and timely delivery of any project depends on obtaining the necessary consents at various critical stages, including at the route selection, detailed design and tender stages. I know the Deputy is concerned, as he should be, about the detail but he should also welcome the major project that is at hand. We are moving it forward as quickly as we can. Consents are given by those bodies without any interference from us.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.25 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 October 2019.