



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad . . . . .	600
Message from Select Committee. . . . .	600
Estimates for Public Services 2019: Message from Select Committee . . . . .	600
Ceisteanna - Questions . . . . .	600
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions . . . . .	601
Action Plan for Rural Development Implementation. . . . .	601
Regional Development . . . . .	603
National Broadband Plan . . . . .	605
Recreational Facilities . . . . .	607
Island Communities . . . . .	609
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions . . . . .	611
Community Development Projects Funding . . . . .	611
LEADER Programmes . . . . .	613
Rural Development Plan . . . . .	615
CLÁR Programme . . . . .	617
Common Agricultural Policy Reform. . . . .	619
Rural Development Policy . . . . .	620
Community Development Projects Funding . . . . .	623
Rural Development Policy . . . . .	625
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions. . . . .	626
Visit of Sr. Consilio . . . . .	630
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed) . . . . .	630
Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation . . . . .	635
Waste Management (Amendment) (Regulator) Bill 2019: First Stage . . . . .	645
Rent Freeze (Fair Rent) Bill 2019: First Stage. . . . .	647
Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2018: Second Stage (Resumed) . . . . .	648
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters . . . . .	651
Housing Solutions: Statements . . . . .	651
Scouting Ireland: Statements . . . . .	689
Road Safety Data . . . . .	692
Drugs Dealing . . . . .	695
Cannabis for Medicinal Use. . . . .	698
School Placement . . . . .	701
Report on Examination of School Costs, School Facilities and Teaching Principals: Motion [Private Members] . . . . .	703

## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 5 Nollaig 2019*

*Thursday, 5 December 2019*

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

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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### **Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Seanad Éireann has passed the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Bill 2019, without amendment.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The Select Committee on Justice and Equality has completed its consideration of the Blasphemy (Abolition of Offences and Related Matters) Bill 2019 and has made no amendments thereto.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2019: Message from Select Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The Select Committee on Justice and Equality has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019 - Votes 20 and Vote 24.

### **Ceisteanna - Questions**

## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Action Plan for Rural Development Implementation

1. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the progress in meeting commitments to improve the provision of public services in rural areas as the Department responsible for the implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development, and the discussions he has had with his colleagues regarding meeting targets in the plan. [50956/19]

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I am seeking an update from the Minister for Rural and Community Development regarding the implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development. Given that I listen to him most weekends in our constituency, I can nearly anticipate his response but I want him to focus on a comment he made last summer that other Ministers were dumping stuff on his Department. He may not have used the word “dumping” but that is what he meant, in other words, that all rural services and issues were going to be left to his Department. What engagement has he had with other Ministers about what they should be doing in their Departments as opposed to leaving it all to the Minister’s Department?

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring):** I am delighted that the Deputy is so happy that I am doing so well with my Department. The Action Plan for Rural Development was published in January 2017 as the first whole-of-Government initiative to support the economic and social progress of rural Ireland. The cross-departmental approach of the action plan to support rural communities and rural businesses is benefiting rural areas in many ways. It is driving job creation, improving access to services and enhancing the quality of life in rural Ireland.

The action plan contains measures for delivery across a number of Departments and agencies aimed at enhancing local services, including in the areas of healthcare, schools and initiatives addressing mental health and isolation. For example, the delivery of 18 primary care centres in rural areas was a commitment under the plan and these are all now open and fully operational. My Department has provided funding to Irish Men’s Sheds to support the great work the organisation does to address mental health and isolation in communities. There are now over 450 men’s sheds across the country. My Department also invested €6.9 million in the seniors alert scheme in 2018 and over 53,000 participants are being supported by the scheme.

These are just some examples of the measures being progressed and are in addition to the very substantial investment that my Department has made in rural communities through programmes such as the town and village renewal scheme, LEADER, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, CLÁR and, more recently, the rural regeneration and development fund.

A monitoring committee comprising senior representatives of relevant Departments and key rural stakeholder interests oversees progress on the implementation of the action plan. In addition, my officials are in regular contact with their colleagues in other Departments regarding the progress of relevant measures. Progress reports on the implementation of the action plan are published twice yearly on the *Gov.ie* website.

The action plan reaches the end of its three-year cycle this year. My Department is developing a new rural policy for Ireland that will be launched in the new year. As is the case with the

current action plan, the new policy will reflect a whole-of-Government approach to supporting rural Ireland.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister spoke about improving access to services, enhancing quality of life and healthcare. Last week, the Central Statistics Office, CSO, published statistics showing that there is a considerable difference between rural and urban areas when it comes to average distance from services. The statistics showed that while the average distance in Ireland to the nearest HSE adult emergency department or hospital was more than 20 km, in rural areas it was over 30 km. There were higher average distances in counties Mayo, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim and Roscommon and those distances are increasing. Basic community services like supermarkets and shops are closing and there is a greater distance to travel.

What specific initiatives will be included in the new plan to ensure a basic level of services is available at an accessible distance? Many of the initiatives mentioned by the Minister are worthy and welcome but unless there are basic services, we will not encourage people to remain in rural communities. What if people have to take a journey for medical reasons on roads that may not be good? We saw this morning the difficulties with ambulance access shown by a very tragic case in Donegal. We need to make sure that the basic services are in place.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The CSO report was interesting but the Deputy and I could have written it. We both live in rural Ireland and know the distances people have to travel to access services. This is why we built 18 health centres. We did so to make it easier for people to access services. I read the CSO report the other day. The situation in rural England or rural Spain is no different from the situation here. We will not be able to have hospitals and other large services in every town and village. However, the Deputy must agree that we in rural areas have a quality of life that people elsewhere do not have. While people may have services in Dublin, if one is in the city in the morning or after 3 p.m., one will see congestion and people having to stay in their cars. I feel sorry for these people who have to travel early in the morning and late in the evening. The one thing we have in rural Ireland is quality of life.

Over the past three years, through the town and village renewal scheme, the rural regeneration and development fund, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme and other schemes, the Department has put in place facilities and provided jobs. Six out of every ten jobs created last year were in rural Ireland. We must get more jobs into the regions because more services will follow.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I agree with the Minister about quality of life, etc., but quality of life does not put butter on potatoes. Unless there are services, we will not be able to keep people in rural areas. It is a vicious circle. Without people, there are no services and without services, there are no people so there needs to be a minimum level of service. I do not want hospitals on every corner but I want to know that if I ring for an ambulance, I will not spend hours waiting for one. The figures released for the first quarter of this year show that response times in seven out of the eight ambulance regions countrywide were worse when compared with last year's figures. If we have all this investment, including in services, why are services getting worse? Why are people's experiences of services in rural areas getting worse? While quality of life is wonderful, what we need in the plan is a guarantee of a basic level of services. We need to build to deliver that basic level of services and a contract to access other services so that people know that if they need services, they will be able to get them.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I know I am stepping into another Minister's area but I do not mind

doing so. The reason for greater demand on services is that more people are living in rural Ireland. It is not me saying that. The Deputy cited the CSO figures, which also tell us that more people are living and working in rural Ireland. People are moving back to rural Ireland. Of course, we will have to improve services, including the ambulance services. There are demands for hospitals, nursing homes and school places. That is what my colleagues and I will be addressing in our next plan. I will sit down with my officials and we will look to see what is actually happening and what services are needed in rural Ireland. Resources are going to have to be put in place to ensure that we provide the services people need.

As the Deputy indicated, people in rural Ireland are entitled to have these services at a reasonable distance from their homes. As I stated earlier, we cannot have hospitals and secondary schools in every village but these services should be in reasonable locations in areas to which people can travel. That is why we are looking at Local Link services. There are many other services that we are trying to provide. We are trying to bring people who live in rural areas to hospital appointments and assist them in every way we can.

## **Regional Development**

**2. Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the role of his Department in the development of the midlands following news that two power stations are set to close, which will give rise to job losses. [50292/19]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** My question for the Minister relates to the role that his Department can play in the development of the midlands following the news of the closures of power stations at Lough Ree and Shannonbridge. Those closures are going to have a significant impact, as will the general scaling down of the peat industry. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation is involved but how can the Minister's Department help the midlands?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The responsibility for energy policy matters falls within the remit of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

However, there is an all-of-Government response and commitment to ensuring a sustainable future for those communities that are impacted by the closure of the two power stations in the midlands. The delivery of a package of investment and supports for the midlands will be overseen by the recently appointed just transition commissioner, Mr. Kieran Mulvey.

My Department was established in 2017 with a mission to promote rural and community development and support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities. I am therefore focused on ensuring that the transition to a low-carbon future happens in a just and fair manner. It is important to recognise the potential for climate action measures to be felt differently in different parts of the country, including in rural Ireland.

My Department is represented on the just transition task force being led by the National Economic and Social Council and we intend to be a strong voice for engagement with communities and their involvement in the transition measures.

My Department is finalising the next phase of rural policy for Ireland, which will reflect a whole-of-Government commitment to rural areas. Climate action, new ways of working and the changing nature of jobs are among the key challenges which the new rural policy will seek

to put in place measures to address.

In addition, to support communities, including those in the midlands, there is a full range of funding and supports programmes being delivered by my Department.

Since 2017, Longford and Offaly, the counties in which the closures are taking place, have been allocated in excess of €34 million by my Department for projects that facilitate and encourage economic development and provide facilities that support the sustainability of our communities.

Last month's announcement of funding under the rural regeneration and development fund included €522,000 for a community and economic hub in Abbeyshrule, County Longford, and the same amount for a project aimed at regenerating the town of Edenderry in County Offaly.

My objective, and that of my Department, is to ensure that the funds available to me are targeted at those sectors and communities most in need and that will continue to be the case.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister for his reply. He will understand from where I am coming. Bord na Móna and the ESB have been large employers and significant parts of life in the midlands; indeed, the economic backbone of the area to a large extent. Towns like Shannonbridge, Ferbane and Cloghan will be badly hit by these closures.

I welcome the fact that the Department of Rural and Community Development is represented on the just transition task force. That is important. There is a need to start generating new industries around biomass and biogas. The Minister and Department can feed into the different key objectives of the action plan for rural development by providing the necessary skills, training and supports to people throughout the agricultural sector.

It is also important that we look at tourism in these areas. There are opportunities to improve areas along the River Shannon. We have had the Wild Atlantic Way but there has not been much of a focus on the midlands and we need to bring the same attention to the Shannon region and improve it. I would like to see focus being brought to those areas.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I am glad that Kieran Mulvey has been appointed the just transition commissioner because that is a good move. I worked with him when he chaired a task force about inner city Dublin and he did a tremendous job. The Government went on to support the particular project that the task force came up with.

My Department provides rural regeneration and development funding. We gave €1.2 million for the upgrade of Emo Court, €1 million for the Barrow blueway, €1.2 million for the regeneration of Edgeworthstown, €2.8 million for the historical Granard Motte project and €1.6 million for the mountain bike trails in the Slieve Bloom Mountains. We have an available fund of €1 billion over ten years.

My Department is flexible and will examine where there is a need and a demand. I have not allowed, and will not allow, my Department to only deal with a particular area but instead to deal with the whole of rural Ireland. Funding needs to address specific needs and cases and must be targeted at areas that have suffered and neither I nor my Department will be found wanting in that regard.

It is only right that we look at ways and means to support the midlands. I know the ways in which the areas that Deputy Stanley represents are suffering, as does Deputy Calleary. I was a



Member of this House when Bellacorick faced a similar problem. Crossmolina, Belmullet and other such areas all suffered from the closure of the power station down there. I know exactly from where Deputy Stanley is coming. An all-of-Government approach has been put in place to respond and it is vital that this be adhered to.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome what the Minister has said about the focus of the Department and that he recognises this is a special case. He also mentioned the Slieve Bloom bike trail, which is an important project for Laois-Offaly. That needs to be completed and the Minister's officials might send me a note outlining where the Department is on that project because it is important to see it through to completion. Big progress is being made on that important project.

I will refer to the enterprise pillar in the action plan for rural jobs. There are excellent jobs clubs in the midlands, including the one in Portarlinton and the Laois partnership. The jobs club in Portarlinton deals with people from Laois and Offaly. There has been a focus in recent years on moving people to organisations such as Turas Nua. The Minister will recognise that jobs clubs turn out the goods despite the very small amount of money that goes into them. There may be a need for more jobs clubs to provide supports to get people back into work and allow them to diversify.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I will send the Deputy the details on the Slieve Bloom project, which is exciting and which will create jobs in the region.

Kieran Mulvey will be talking to all interest groups and I am glad that Bord na Móna and the ESB are ready to talk. Some funding will be put in place. Some €6 million was allocated in the budget for a just transition fund and the ESB has agreed to put €5 million into that.

We need to look at ways and means to support these families and try to create jobs. There are lots of good ideas and talented people out there. I hope they will be able to generate the jobs that are needed to replace existing jobs. I know the effect on people when they lose their jobs. It is sad for families. The Government is committed to helping. Kieran Mulvey has been appointed. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, led a number of Ministers to the midlands recently, and the Government understands that a very serious problem exists there. The Government understands that it needs to support, help and try to regenerate the midlands and plans to do that.

## **National Broadband Plan**

3. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the operational details of broadband connection points that will be provided within the first 12 months of the national broadband roll-out; and the role of his Department in the task. [50957/19]

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** My question is on the national broadband plan, specifically whether the roll-out of the broadband connection points, BCPs, is still on schedule. Will they be available to people? What services will be available to those within those points?

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney):** I thank Deputy Calleary for the question. The broadband connection point, BCP, initiative will see high-speed broadband services brought to more than 300 sites in remote

and rural areas across the country as a first phase of the national broadband plan.

BCPs are typically community centres, schools and sports clubs that will act as access hubs for local people, providing on-site access to the Internet. The sites have been deliberately selected in remote and sparsely populated areas that would not otherwise be among the earliest to receive high-speed broadband under the national development plan.

Many of these sites are on islands or in areas with widely dispersed and remote homes and businesses.

Further details on each of the BCPs are available on National Broadband Ireland's website, [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie). As the initiative develops, additional information, such as opening hours and services offered, will be made available through the NBI website.

My officials have worked closely with local authority broadband officers in the first instance to identify the selected sites and, more recently, to help develop the facilities at each of the locations to ensure that full advantage is taken of the high-speed broadband once it arrives. I recently issued an information booklet, via the broadband officers, for BCP site owners. This document provides greater detail on the technologies to be used and how the connections will be made, alongside other relevant information.

I will host a workshop of local authority chief executives later this month at which I intend to highlight the role that BCPs will play in improving rural access to digital services.

My Department will also procure a provider, or providers, for the installation of access infrastructure at the connection points. It is intended that the winning tenderer will work closely with NBI over the course of next year to ensure that the approximately 300 BCPs are delivered within the first year of the roll-out of the national broadband plan.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Minister of State. Has he clarified precisely when those 300 points will be delivered? Will it be during 2020 or 2021? This plan has all the signs of making it up as we are going along. That has been the constant threat in terms of it. What will the speed of the connections be in each of these BCPs? What will be the cost? If I am the owner of a company, will I be able to access the BCP for my business? Will the security be in place for me to do that? Will I be able to use a BCP to work from home, for instance, if I am based in Dublin? What is the position on the procurement process for the operators? When will the Minister be in a position to announce the operator? If we are to believe the Minister's commitments in respect of BCPs being rolled out completely in 2020, we seem to be a long way off basic preparations in that context.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** It will be within the first year of the broadband contract, which was signed last week. We are talking about 12 months from the signing of the contract.

To explain where the broadband connection points will be located, they will be in places such as community centres, schools, sports clubs, heritage and tourism sites, businesses and miscellaneous sites. There are four different types of broadband connection points. Category 1, which is internal access, could be a business centre situated in a public building that provides access to local businesses that may otherwise have to commute to access required broadband services. The Deputy asked me if people in Dublin can work from home. They cannot but they can work from this centre where they can access broadband to do their work.



Category 2, which is internal access, is a hot desk facility that is open business hours or on demand within business hours. Category 3, internal access, is a facility with limited public access that might be open a couple of hours a day or a few days a week. Category 4, which is external access, would be a local Wi-Fi hub. Most BCPs will offer a mixture of internal and external access to high-speed broadband. I assure the Deputy, because it is as much of a problem for me as it is for him in his constituency, that no stone will be left unturned in delivering these 300 sites as a first step.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister of State wants 300 of these BCPs rolled out by this time next year. We do not have an operator. The Minister has not answered my question on the speed of connection that will be available at these sites. He has not answered my question on the cost to people. He gave me the general information that we have already. In his final reply, will he indicate what the cost will be, the speed, and when he will be in a position to award a contract to an operator who then will have to roll out 300 of these sites in six or seven months?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** First, I reassure the Deputy that a process is in place. The procurement has begun. The cost of it will be determined by the procurement, as he knows well. There is a budget within the overall broadband cost but we will not know the cost until we get the tenders back.

Second, I assure the Deputy that every one of the broadband officers in the 31 local authorities is working closely with all the communities and providers of these hubs to make sure we deliver this on time, in partnership with National Broadband Ireland. This contract has been signed a week or two weeks at this stage, so we are progressing. I will be meeting the chief executives of each local authority to ensure they are completely focused on the delivery of this roll-out. I am also working closely with our Department officials to make sure that happens. I reassure the Deputy again that as and when we get the costs and the delivery of each one of the BCPs, it will be made known on the website. The Deputy has to understand that a process will be gone through but we will have them in place within 12 months of the signing of the contract.

## **Recreational Facilities**

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the necessary funds and support will be provided to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council to ensure the community supervised playground on Library Road, Dún Laoghaire, is maintained as a supervised playground; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50939/19]

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** This is a local issue to Dún Laoghaire but it is very important. The playground on Library Road, formerly Johnny Carr's Park, has been a supervised playground since the Dominican nuns supervised it. Generations of local people from Dún Laoghaire have effectively been brought up in this playground. For the past ten years, Crosscare has employed two part-time supervisors of that playground, Pauline and Jill, but that supervision is being removed. Will the Minister's Department entertain discussions with stakeholders, including the council, Crosscare and Barnardos, to try to maintain the supervision of this playground?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank the Deputy for raising the question. My Department provides funding for facilities such as playgrounds through capital grants for the provision of playground infrastructure, including multi-use games areas, MUGAs, through schemes such as the

community enhancement programme and the CLÁR programme.

I understand also that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs administers a capital grant funding scheme to provide new play and recreational facilities for children and young people, or to refurbish existing ones, or a combination of both, and has regular engagement with the local authority play and recreation network.

While my Department provides funding towards the capital cost of providing playground infrastructure and equipment, it does not provide funding towards the ongoing running cost of managing such facilities, including the cost of supervision. The cost of providing supervision would not meet the criteria for any funding scheme currently operated by my Department.

Responsibility for the provision of amenities such as playgrounds is under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, whose Department supports local government in its role of promoting the well-being and quality of life of citizens and communities through the efficient and effective performance of its functions and the delivery of good value services at local level.

I understand that the playground referred to by the Deputy is a facility that is being supported by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown local authority.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The funding has been provided by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. Disgracefully, the executive has made a decision to pull the funding because Crosscare has pulled out, which I believe is a retrograde decision. The cost of it is buttons, at approximately €40,000 a year for two part-time staff who are members of the local community, but the value they give to the community is extraordinary.

*11 o'clock*

Children from the youngest up to the ages of 13 and 14 are supervised in the playground. Many of them are children with special needs. The playground is in an area where there is a DEIS school, so it is a pocket of disadvantage in Dún Laoghaire. If it is lost, many of these children will not go to other playgrounds. In areas of disadvantage, this is a very cheap example, in terms of the cost to the public, of providing early intervention and monitoring of vulnerable young people in many cases.

I am appealing to the Minister to play some role in maintaining what is a vital community facility.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for asking the question. I will offer the only solution available to me. The community services programme in my Department supports 400 organisations nationally and provides funding for a manager and staff. We pay €32,000 for a manager and €19,000 for staff members. The Deputy could also contact the social inclusion and community activation programme to check if it could provide support or assistance or if there is anything that can be done. That programme is also administered by my Department.

The scheme in my Department provides capital funding. It does not provide for staffing or supervision. That is not the role of the Department. We simply do not have the resources to do that. The Deputy could try to have a scheme provided under the community services programme, which operates throughout the country. Some 400 organisations and thousands of people are benefitting. We do not pay them a full salary but we make a major contribution to salaries - €32,000 for a manager and €19,000 for staff members. Perhaps the Deputy would look at that.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I appreciate that and I will look into it. It is maybe an area of hope. I wish the council executive in Dún Laoghaire showed as much energy and interest in maintaining this playground as the Minister has demonstrated in the past five minutes. I appreciate the thought.

I thank Deputy Calleary for passing me a note. I appeal to Fianna Fáil on this matter as well. Fianna Fáil is now in control of the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. Disappointingly, both of the party's prospective general election candidates, having initially said they supported the supervision at the playground, have now done a U-turn. I believe this was done under pressure from the executive of the council, which does not want to keep the supervision. I call on Deputy Calleary to appeal to his party members who will suffer a political price in Dún Laoghaire if they do not secure supervision of this playground.

I appreciate the Minister's response and I will look into the matter. I accept that it is a matter for local government as well but there should be joined-up thinking on these issues. When something is good and working, serves a community and helps to glue a community together for generations, why on earth would we let it go?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** We also have the community enhancement programme under which we provided, on average, €120,000 to each local authority. That is discretionary and is done by the local community development committees and elected representatives. Perhaps funding from that could be used to fund the measure the Deputy seeks.

Councils and councillors have to make decisions as well. We provide the budget for capital and the funding for the community services and the community enhancement programmes. The matter is now in their hands. They can make a decision and I hope it will be the correct one.

## Island Communities

5. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development to outline the policies of his Department on the islands, as requested by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, with regard to the interdepartmental committee for island development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50938/19]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** This is a specific question relating to the Minister's policies for the islands. I have a particular interest because in Galway West we have four islands, namely, the three Aran Islands and Inishbofin. Thus, I have a particular interest in all of the islands. I want clarity on the Department's current policy on the islands.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, which has responsibility for the islands, is developing a national islands policy for publication in 2020. Our Department participates on the interdepartmental working group established to provide inputs to the development of the policy.

Island communities face similar challenges to other rural areas. However, they also face additional challenges due to their separation from the mainland. These issues can include transport connections and broadband provision in addition to access to services and a high dependence on traditional industries such as tourism, agriculture and fishing.

The islands are strong showcases for our culture, heritage and natural resources. They can

also provide opportunities for testing innovative new products and services, including in the area of renewable energy and emerging technologies.

A number of policies recently developed by the Department are relevant to island communities, including the national social enterprise policy and the five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland.

The Department is developing the next phase of rural policy for Ireland to follow on from the Action Plan for Rural Development, which reaches the end of its three-year life cycle at the end of 2019. The new policy will reflect a whole-of-Government commitment to rural Ireland and synergies with other key policy initiatives, including the forthcoming islands policy.

An extensive consultation process has taken place to inform the development of the new rural policy, including a stakeholder event on Inishmore, one of the Aran Islands, in May.

In recognition of the unique challenges and circumstances facing the islands, the new rural policy will include a specific focus on island and coastal communities. It is anticipated the new rural policy, covering the timeframe 2020-25, will be published early in the new year.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome that a new rural policy will focus on the islands. I am a stickler for sticking to the question. What is the current policy of the Department in respect of the islands? A question by Deputy Calleary elicited the information that Ministers were all asked to come back with their current policies. The inaugural meeting of the interdepartmental committee on the policy for the islands took place on 24 September. I ask the Minister of State to confirm that his Department was represented at that meeting. Each Department was asked to come back with its current policy. The reason I am being so specific is that I am fully familiar with the issue. I have the consultation paper before me as *Gaeilge agus Béarla*. I have all the previous reports as well. The difficulty is that island communities face far more challenges, as the Minister of State knows, than rural areas, which are certainly challenged too. I agree that we need a vibrant rural community. What are the current policies of the Department on the islands and the challenges currently facing them?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Our current policies are guided by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, which has responsibility for the islands. We work closely with those responsible. The cross-Government departmental committee for island development has been established and is chaired by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Our Department actively participates in this group to identify areas of mutual interest and potential collaboration.

We talked about the response to the digital age. We should look at the story created in Arranmore in County Donegal, which has set up a hub. I met one of the island's residents in Brussels last Tuesday. The model has been shown across Europe to illustrate what can be done.

Broadband connection points are also relevant. The Department has also allocated broadband connection points to islands in recognition of their isolation.

I assure the Deputy that the islands are high on the Government's agenda. Action in this area is led by the Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Kyne. We will continue to work across all Departments to ensure the islands remain on the agenda.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** It is Christmas time and I note the positive comments of the Minister of State, but the way to heaven is paved with good intentions and reassurances. We need far more than that. We need a policy and we will get one next year, which is welcome. However, as part of the consultation process, each Department has to say what its current policies are. There certainly seems to be a major gap in the reply from the Minister of State, although that is not his fault. He has not outlined what the current policies of the Department are for the islands to make clear what the policies and challenges are. That is what the Department will have to do in the coming weeks as part of the process.

The Minister of State mentioned broadband and various other matters. We have heard this so often and it is all good but these issues have to be embedded in a policy and vision for the islands that recognises the challenges, including the fact that the population is declining. Islanders have showed us the way forward. They have shown us the sustainable way of living in tune with the environment. What we want is a policy as quickly as possible with input from the Department of Community and Rural Development, which is particularly important.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I compliment the Deputy who never exceeds the time limits. I appreciate that.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I repeat that we are working closely with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and we will have a new rural policy in early 2020.

Deputy Connolly asked about our policy. Current actions include the LEADER programme 2014-20, which supports island programmes. The programme has funded 129 projects and €880,000 has been allocated. The social inclusion and community activation programme provides direct supports through regions that focus directly on the islands. Comhar na nOileán received €29,633. The South West Mayo Development Company received €45,000 from SICAP to develop supports for the Mayo islands. There is also the rural regeneration and development fund. These are not policies. These are opportunities for people to get funding streams to help develop their islands and they are being put forward by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Policies are fine but we must make sure we implement them. The proof of the pudding has been in the eating. The Deputy can see what has been delivered to the islands under the funding streams from the Department since the Department was set up. That record stands for itself.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Community Development Projects Funding**

6. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the degree to which the support and services provided by his Department have been most regularly sought by communities nationwide; his views on whether adequate interaction takes place at present; if changes are envisaged which may broaden the appeal and availability and consequently further improve community involvement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50615/19]



**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which local communities have ready access to the kind of funding which they see as being fundamental to their needs and whether it might be possible to improve the existing situation or if it is working satisfactorily.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank the Deputy for the question.

My Department is committed to the successful delivery of a wide range of programmes and supports to benefit all communities.

These supports include large-scale investments in rural regeneration and renewal of our towns and villages. Funding is also provided for rural development with small-scale grants and supports directed to help community and voluntary organisations.

Close engagement with communities is key to ensuring that the positive impact of my Department's policies, programmes and supports is maximised and targeted at those most in need. Consultation with local groups, stakeholders and the public plays a key role in the preparation of all Department policies including the next rural development policy and forthcoming national volunteering strategy.

Earlier this year I launched a new five-year strategy for community and voluntary sector development. Work has begun and funding is in place for the implementation of these measures.

These include enhanced supports for the structures which drive local engagement in decision making – the public participation networks and the local community development committees. Further funding will be provided to support the delivery of the national social enterprise policy for Ireland. This funding is in addition to existing supports already in place for social enterprises.

My Department has been proactive in interacting with communities and delivered, in conjunction with Pobal, a series of six “Helping Hands” events nationwide earlier this year to engage with communities and create awareness and understanding of funding programmes. Feedback from these interactions was very positive and I have asked my officials to consider running other similar events into 2020.

The 2019 series of regional “Rural Opportunity” information sessions run nationwide also raised awareness of the extent to which assistance is available to rural communities from across Departments. This engagement with rural communities will continue on the issues which impact them.

These ongoing consultations and interactions will continue to enhance the effectiveness of the work of my Department and the positive impacts being felt by communities on the ground from our important work.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply and I note the expansion of the various programmes.

For example, where conditional expenditure, matching expenditure or some proportion of expenditure is expected by the body or group which has applied, such conditions sometimes put it in a difficult position. It may be virtually a charity and dependent entirely on what it gets either by its own fund-raising or by way of grant aid from the Minister's Department or others. I am merely wondering if it might be possible to ease that requirement without rendering the



scheme in any way ineffective.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** As somebody who has been very much involved in community all his life, the Deputy is a long time here and he understands it. In some of our schemes, there has to be a local contribution. Particularly if we are dealing with the local authorities, we expect them to put some kind of a contribution into the scheme. In relation to communities themselves, we have a number of schemes that do not involve a local contribution. We give them some funding for the smaller schemes.

It is interesting that Deputy Durkan asked the question this morning because I could name six community groups from all over the country which are involved in major developments, some of which are costing over €1 million. There was one particular project for which the Department granted nearly €1 million. The project was to come in at €1.2 million and the community came back to me stating it is costing €1.6 million. I have that problem now in a number of places. That is where my Department plays a role and where elected representatives play a role. It is fine that these community groups provide great service. If we did not have them we would not have the service, but we need somebody, whether he or she is from my Department, from the local authorities or from other State agencies, to guide them through the process because if a group has €1.2 million and it finds itself €400,000 short, it creates a problem. I would like to see these projects grant aided and completed. I have a number of these problems now around the country and it is something that I and the Department need to look at.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I am aware of one or two of them as well. It is because of interaction with them that I discovered it might be possible to ease the sharp corners that exist in a way that would be beneficial to both the Department and themselves. Following on the Minister's comments, I certainly would be prepared to go back and interact with them and try to improve the situation.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The Deputy has them in his constituency. Every Deputy here has them in his or her constituency. Without those is in the voluntary sector, we would have a difficult situation in this country. They have to be complimented. I have to thank them. They do tremendous work. There are people who put their lives into voluntary schemes and put a lot of work into it and they do not get anything out of it. Sometimes they get abuse. They do not get the respect that they deserve.

I want to put this on the record today and thank them on behalf of the Government and on my own behalf. I see what is happening all over this country and, but for the voluntary sector, we would have a very serious problem, particularly with services. The State will not provide them. The HSE will not provide them. The local authority will not provide them. If we did not have the voluntary sector, we would have a very difficult time in this House.

## **LEADER Programmes**

7. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the Great Western Lakes project; if a copy of the feasibility study will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50640/19]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I want to know the status of the Great Western Lakes project and whether the feasibility study is available.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Great Western Lakes feasibility study referred to by the Deputy was funded under the co-operation strand of the LEADER Programme.

The study was a pre-development phase project which precedes the full co-operation project. It allows local action groups, project promoters and other contributors to investigate the merit and potential to develop concrete actions that could form a full co-operation project.

Funding of €9,750 was approved for the project in question.

The feasibility study involved the investigation into the possibility of creating a scenic driving route linked to the Wild Atlantic Way, and taking in Lough Mask and Lough Corrib.

The study has been completed and was launched in June of this year. It is now open to the project promoters to decide what course of action they wish to take following the completion of the study.

I am arranging for a copy of the feasibility study to be forwarded to the Deputy's office.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome that confirmation that the Minister of State will give me a copy.

Public funds were given out for a feasibility study for a good project. I want to see where it is going to next, what has been learned and how can we roll it out, if it is effective, to other areas because local areas are crying out for projects. The Minister of State knows that. I can name Kilmaine and Shrile - towns that are struggling to survive and need input. I have a later question on the empty residential buildings in different towns which I will come back to.

Has the Department no more contact in relation to this? Is it correct that the Minister of State is waiting for the group on the ground to come back and tell him what it will do?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The local authority partners for the project are FORUM Connemara in west Galway and Mayo Local Community Development Committee, LCDC, through its implementation partner, South West Mayo Development Company. They have done the feasibility study, which involved the investigation of the possibility of creating this scenic driving route linking through counties Galway and Mayo, termed the Great Western Lakes of Lough Mask and Lough Corrib. The proposed driving route would take in Leenane, Maam, Cornamona, Clonbur, the Neale, Ballinrobe, Partry, Tourmakeady, Aghagower and finishing in Westport. The findings of this study will be used to produce a five-year plan for 2018 to 2023 for the development of the driving route, the steps required to progress this project and the financial requirements to implement the plan as well as incorporating the relevant components towards achieving a successful driving route. The project promoters are reviewing the report's findings and will decide if they wish to proceed to a full co-operation project. The Department and the Minister have no role in the progression of this project. It is a matter for the promoters to review the findings in the report and then decide if they want to apply for further funding to progress the project. The Deputy mentioned the towns and villages. This is very important and it is hoped that they will come forward with a very good proposal.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I also hope they come forward with such a proposal. I am a little confused about whether there will be a cycle route.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The feasibility study involved an investigation into the possibility of creating a scenic driving route linked to the Wild Atlantic Way and taking in Lough Mask

and Lough Corrib. The study has been completed. They may decide to put in cycling routes as well as driving routes. I am not so sure what they will come back with in the aftermath of this feasibility study. The important thing is that we hope they come forward with a full co-operation plan because there is funding for that type of project, provided it is feasible. I would hope that they will come forward with something. It is the type of project we need to revitalise rural areas and the small towns and villages along the route, and to create a tourism offering that will bring people to stop in the towns and villages to have a cup of coffee and bring life into some of these towns.

*Question No. 8 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Rural Development Plan**

9. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the timeline for the completion of the new Action Plan for Rural Development; and if he has made a request seeking the transfer of further responsibilities for rural development to his Department. [50621/19]

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister and I spoke briefly earlier about the new version of the Action Plan for Rural Development, which is in preparation. I ask him to outline the timeline for that and state when he sees it being published. To go back to other Departments, the Minister also said, “We cannot allow other Departments to throw everything over to my Department. There is a bit of that happening at the moment [...]”. He said that last July; I got the exact phrase. Is he looking for further responsibilities and further budgets to be transferred officially into his Department as part of the action plan?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The Action Plan for Rural Development has been the key vehicle for delivery of the Government’s support for rural development over the last three years. My Department is currently developing the next phase of rural policy for Ireland, to follow on from the action plan which reaches the end of its three year life cycle at the end of 2019.

The new five-year policy will be forward-looking and will build on the progress achieved through the Action Plan for Rural Development. It will seek to strengthen and build resilience in our rural economies and communities and will identify policy measures which need to be put in place to achieve those objectives.

The process of developing the new policy has involved a wide range of stakeholder consultation events with rural communities and groups, Departments, State agencies, young people and the wider public.

An online survey was also conducted, which allowed the public to prioritise what they consider to be the main challenges and opportunities facing rural Ireland over the coming years. There was a very significant response to the survey, with over 1,700 responses. The insights and views captured through this extensive consultation process have helped to identify the issues that matter to people living and working in rural Ireland.

The new policy is being finalised and I anticipate that it will be launched early in the new year. As is the case with the current action plan, the new policy will reflect a whole-of-Government commitment to rural Ireland.

Since my Department was established in July 2017, we have developed and delivered a wide range of strategic programmes and policies to support the economic and social progress of rural areas and urban and rural communities. I am always open to the possibility of considering additional responsibilities that are consistent with my Department's mission of supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister speaks of resilience. Rural communities are resilient; that is their nature. I am not being political in saying that permanent Government policies get in the way of that resilience and undermine it. We need a plan that encourages and fosters resilience and growth that is sustainable without being choked by various initiatives. I have been reflecting on the response of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in respect of the broadband connection points which are a key part of the national broadband plan and were being unveiled as its opening phase. Frankly, I do not see the capability for delivering 300 of them in 50 weeks. If we go for a year from the signing of the contract, we are looking at 50 weeks. We also spoke earlier about the services story, on which Deputy Aylward has a further question. There are so many programmes in rural Ireland. We need to define the basic level of service and adapt all those programmes to support the basic level of service and grow on it. A key part of this new plan must be an agreement on basic services that we will put in place and then adapt all the programmes to grow that basic level into sustainable communities.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** On the plan, the Deputy is quite correct. This time we really went all out. We had 11 regional workshops, two special workshops with young people and a public online survey in which 1,700 people participated. We went into the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development and it made a submission. There were submissions also received from rural-based organisations. The Deputy made a very valid point and it is one I look at all the time. I want to respond in respect of other things that should be done in the Department as well. The Deputy is quite correct. There are many organisations and we need some way to bring them together and not have half services here and half services there. We need to look at a means of sitting down with community groups, local authorities and stakeholders to see how we can bring them all together. There are bits being done by one organisation and bits being done by another. I need to be able to get them to sit down together. Were it not for some of these organisations, we would not have the services. I am not being critical of them and I am delighted they are there. If we did not have them, we would have difficulty.

The Deputy asked about possible areas for transfers of responsibility. When we are back in government and I am Minister again, Deputy Calleary is going to have a wider brief as Opposition spokesman. Tourism and sport would be a lovely fit with my Department's brief. The greenways and national parks would fit into it, as would Waterways Ireland. All these would fit with the outdoor recreation schemes. I announced further funding for Cavan for the walks scheme yesterday. All that would fit into my Department. We are well capable of delivering all those schemes. I have a very good team, a very good Department and great young officials who are very bright and very able. I can tell the Deputy they are anxious for more work.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I wish the Minister well in the remaining weeks of his ministry to deliver all those things. He has a super team of officials. Would those very excellent individuals not be absolutely delighted to have their Minister living in the town in which the Department is based? In bringing organisations together, one of the difficulties with LEADER at the moment is that we have brought it under the local community development committees, LCDCs, programme in the local authorities. We are losing a connection because of that. It is getting in the way of delivering the programme. I agree that we have to bring them together but we cannot

lose what makes them work and what makes them tick in that process. This comes back to my initial point. The process of bringing them together through the LCDCs has not worked. I do not think it has resulted in better services. We need to be careful when bringing them together that we do not lose that spark.

The Department needs additional responsibilities but it also needs a budget to cover them.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Of course.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** If it takes on all these things without the necessary budget, the projects and the delivery of services will be utterly diminished. In the context of preparing the action plan, what engagement has the Minister had with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, or his Department about the transfer of responsibilities and, most importantly, the transfer and ring-fencing of the budget?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Deputy Calleary is right. Where we bring them together, we do not want any splintering of the work that is being done. It is not a power struggle but to provide better services for rural areas, giving them the services and support that they need. As for transfers I was offered some from other Departments to be taken on as a priority but the budget did not come with them. I will not allow my officials or Government to do that. Anything that comes in, the budget will have to come with it. That is very clear. The existing budget is committed, and if something new comes in, the budget must follow. We are very lucky in the many voluntary organisations we have and the great people who work in these services. They give their lives to it and we do not really appreciate the work they do.

### CLÁR Programme

10. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the allocation for the CLÁR scheme in 2020; his plans to change the scheme in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50429/19]

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I want to know what the Minister's plans are for his CLÁR scheme 2020.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** As the Deputy will be aware, I reopened the CLÁR programme in 2016, following a number of years when the scheme was closed for new applications. More than 1,400 projects have been approved for funding of almost €33 million under the programme since then.

The type of projects that have been supported include safety measures around schools and community facilities, the provision of play areas, supports for emergency first responders, and a measure to provide vehicles to transport people to cancer care and respite centres.

This is much-needed funding for small-scale capital projects in rural areas that have experienced significant levels of population loss. Although the amount of funding available to individual projects under CLÁR is modest, I know that it makes a huge impact on the rural areas it serves. I have visited many of the projects and I have seen first-hand the difference that these projects make to local communities.

I expect that the CLÁR programme will be opened again for new applications in 2020, and



I will make decisions in the new year regarding the measures to be included in the programme.

I will also conduct a review of the programme to take account of the 2016 census data and to consider any factors, other than depopulation, that should be taken into account in designing future CLÁR programmes.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I absolutely concur with the Minister that CLÁR is a source of funding and has a positive impact on schools around the country. St. Mary's national school in Ballyhaise in County Cavan and Drumcrave national school do not fit into the mapping for CLÁR funding. I understand that about five schools in the county are affected in this way. They feel aggrieved that they are not able to access funds that make a big impact on their playgrounds and safety measures. Many schools use CLÁR for safety features that local authorities do not have the funds for. The local authorities are put to the pin of their collars too. They cannot step in and help these schools that do not fit in to CLÁR funding. Does the Minister have any plans to extend CLÁR funding to appropriate schools such as St. Mary's national school in Ballyhaise, which is well outside Cavan town, Drumcrave and other schools that do not get it?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank the Deputy for her comments. She is right. Under CLÁR I can target some of the schemes to where the need is. I found when I came into office that one of the needs was safety outside schools. Anyone who has children knows that when parents and others bring children to school, they want them to be in a safe environment. I considered that scheme and reintroduced it. It has been very successful.

I am doing a review of the CLÁR programme. I do not want it to focus on depopulation. I want it to be where there is a need and to expand it. My officials recently met experts from the National University of Ireland, NUI, Maynooth to see how we can target it. The Deputy will understand that I have to be careful because there is small funding. I wish I could get more funding because it is one of the better schemes. I would like to be able to fund more schools. Under CLÁR I can see where there is a need and no other Department or local authority is dealing with it. I understand the Deputy's question because there are areas in my constituency that are not in the CLÁR programme that would like to be funded.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Ms Cathy McGoldrick, the principal of St. Mary's national school, who is listening in today, will, I hope, take some comfort from the possibility that the school in Ballyhaise could be included in CLÁR funding because there really is nowhere else for her to go. She sees schools close by that are faced with the same challenges but she is not able to access the funds they have.

I have mentioned Killinkere national school on numerous occasions. It has applied for CLÁR funding but unfortunately has been unsuccessful up to this point. I hope that will change in the near future. It is a school that desperately needs CLÁR funding for safety measures there. It is very much in the country but there is an 80 km/h speed limit on the road outside and the car park is across the road from the school. Something like CLÁR funding and a successful application for Killinkere national school would make a world of difference and give parents peace of mind.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** This is a comment, not a promise. I want to sit down with people from the Departments of Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs to see whether we can formulate some kind of a scheme that would deal with the problem that the Deputy has. I know it. I see it in areas that genuinely need the safety scheme but have a problem because



they are not in the CLÁR area.

### **Common Agricultural Policy Reform**

11. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he has fully engaged in the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, reform process to ensure his plans are rural proofed. [50297/19]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** We are into the CAP reform cycle, which has huge implications for Pillars 1 and 2 across rural Ireland. What plans does the Department of Rural and Community Development have to ensure that what happens will be rural proofed?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is the lead Department responsible for negotiations on the CAP reform process. However, as CAP impacts significantly on rural Ireland, my Department has a strong interest in developments in CAP reform. The LEADER programme, which my Department administers, is also funded through the CAP.

In June 2018, the European Commission launched proposals for new regulations for the Common Agricultural Policy 2021-2027. These proposals aim to make the CAP more responsive to current and future challenges, with an increased focus on the environment and climate, supporting the transition towards a more sustainable agricultural sector and the development of vibrant rural areas. Since the launch of the draft regulations, my officials have engaged extensively on the European Commission's proposals with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. This engagement will continue for the duration of the CAP reform process.

In addition to my Department's engagement with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, my officials will also consult all relevant stakeholders to ensure that the views of people in rural Ireland are considered when the next LEADER programme is being designed. LEADER operates on the basis of a local-led approach to rural development and I am confident that our consultation will ensure that the new LEADER programme will address the issues of most importance to the people who live and work in rural areas.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Until now the CAP has disproportionately benefited large farmers. There has been a strong emphasis on upping production and that is fine and dandy but it is recognised now that we have to add value and keep a little bit of money in local communities. Farmers' costs have gone up and that money is leaving local areas. The LEADER programme is key to making improvements. Would the Minister of State consider developing and improving farmers' markets? We are lobbying the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to reintroduce the organic scheme. There are also opportunities in the areas of small-scale energy production. Both the Minister and the Minister of State, coming from the west, will be familiar with the large disadvantaged areas, no different from parts of the midlands, where we could generate extra income in terms of energy, farmers' markets and diversification. We need to recalibrate things in that direction with the new CAP. We also need to put a cap on the maximum payment because that has disproportionately benefited large farmers.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I agree with the Deputy that we need to recalibrate towards smaller farmers. I come from a rural area in east Galway where there are lots of small farmers who are struggling. The Deputy referred to climate action and supporting the transition to a more

sustainable agricultural sector in the context of CAP. It is also important to reiterate that the LEADER programme operates under CAP and that is where we will play our part. We are working closely with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, in order to ensure that we have a strong approach to the new CAP and how it is introduced. There is a delay in the adoption of the new CAP proposals and the EU budget post 2020, with a resultant delay in the strategy for the period but negotiations are ongoing at European level. Ireland is involved in those negotiations through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with strong support from the Department of Rural and Community Development. Our support is greatly appreciated by the lead Department. Draft transition regulations seek to address the delay as it relates to rural development, sectoral interventions, direct payments and LEADER programmes through transitional arrangement for 2021. I wish to reassure the Deputy that there will not be a gap and transitional arrangements will apply until the new CAP is in place. These provide an option for member states to extend their rural development programmes for a period of one year up to 2021, subject to certain conditions. It is expected to take six to eight months to finalise the transitional regulations.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State for that reply. Under Pillar II, LEADER has a key role to play. The maximum payment that can be received under Pillar I is high but the focus must be on small and medium sized farmers. We must assist those farmers to increase their capacity and their income generating abilities. The land alone and the production of beef or sheep, for example, is not enough. There are other opportunities for farmers that must be pushed and developed but we are behind other countries in that regard. If one looks at France and other countries in Europe, one sees that we are way behind in terms of farmers' markets, organic production and so on. We must up our game. Some of the focus in that regard must lie under Pillar II as well.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Project Ireland 2040 recognises that the agrifood sector is critical to the broader social and economic well-being of Ireland. In recognition of the importance of agriculture to Ireland's economy, there will be a focus on this topic in the new rural policies being introduced. One example of this is the Bia Innovator Campus at Athenry, which will be constructed soon, hopefully. It has been supported by my Department through the rural regeneration fund. The campus is expected to create a lot of jobs in the food innovation sector, with up to 280 being created in the first three years of operation. This is the type of project we need to put in place to provide sustainable jobs in rural areas. The forthcoming agrifood strategy to 2030 and Food Wise 2025 are also going to be reflected in our overall policy for rural development over the next five years.

## **Rural Development Policy**

12. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans to improve service provision in rural areas in view of the latest CSO figures released in respect of distance to everyday services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50370/19]

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** I ask the Minister to outline his plans to improve service provision in rural areas in view of the recent publication of CSO figures in respect of distances to everyday services and to make a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Aylward for his question. The CSO recently published a statistical report, *Measuring Distance to Everyday Services in Ireland 2019*, which

shows how close people live to everyday facilities such as schools, hospitals, fire stations and public transport stops.

The report shows that the average distance to most everyday services was at least three times longer for rural dwellings compared to urban dwellings. People in counties Galway, Donegal, Mayo, Leitrim and Roscommon had higher average distances to most everyday services compared to other counties.

This is why we need policies to support rural areas. It is estimated that 50% of the population live in settlements of fewer than 10,000 people and that rural-based enterprises support hundreds of thousands of jobs and contribute significantly to our national economy. Rural communities are also important guardians of our heritage, culture and natural environment. It is important that we ensure that people living in rural areas have reasonable access to services if they are to continue to live and work in rural Ireland.

Since 2017, the Action Plan for Rural Development has been delivering a wide range of measures across Departments and agencies to support job creation, invest in town and village renewal and improve the delivery of services in rural areas, taking account of the ever-changing nature of our society.

My Department is currently developing the next phase of rural policy to succeed the Action Plan for Rural Development which reaches the end of its life cycle this year. The new policy will reflect a whole-of-Government commitment to a range of matters impacting on rural Ireland.

My officials will reflect on the data in the recent CSO report in finalising that policy.

In the meantime, my Department will continue to support communities across Ireland through a range of activities and initiatives. The funding allocation for my Department has been increased from €291 million in 2019 to €308 million in 2020, reflecting my Department's ongoing commitment to supporting rural Ireland and communities more generally.

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** By the Minister's own admission, the latest CSO figures confirm that this Government is leaving rural Ireland behind with regard to service provision. The report published last week on the distance to everyday services in Ireland makes for very sobering reading. Rural dwellers face distances to most services that are at least three times greater than those faced by their urban counterparts. The average distance rural residents must travel to supermarkets, convenience stores, pharmacies or GP clinics is approximately seven times longer than that travelled by their urban counterparts. People in rural Ireland are facing longer commutes to work while the distances they must travel to medical facilities or 24-hour Garda stations are much more pronounced than in urban areas. These statistics are alarming and show how the Government is failing to deliver public policy solutions that improve public service provision and make living in rural Ireland attractive. What is most disappointing is the fact that these figures are not surprising. Under Fine Gael, rural Ireland has been abandoned and the aforementioned figures serve to highlight this. It is clear that the Government's much-referenced action plan is not delivering. The Minister must outline the steps being taken to rectify the imbalance across the country.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Rural Ireland was never more alive than it is today. The Deputy is quoting one set of CSO figures but I will give him another. The CSO has found that more people are working and living in rural Ireland now than since the foundation of the State.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Here we go.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The Department's funding allocation-----

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** I only quoted figures from the CSO-----

**Deputy Michael Ring:** One moment. I did not interrupt the Deputy.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Allow the Minister, please.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I know Deputy Aylward does not want to hear this but my Department's funding allocation is increasing from €291 million in 2019 to €308 million in 2020. To date the rural regeneration scheme has provided €148 million, plenty of which went into Deputy Aylward's county, for 110 projects worth a total of €212 million. Almost 2,500 LEADER projects will have been approved by the end of 2019 and we expect 80% of the €164 million allocated for projects will be approved. The spend to date under the town and village renewal scheme is €11.2 million, while funding under CLÁR is €14.8 million. The community services programme has disbursed €49 million while €43 million has been spent under SICAP. A total of €4.5 million has been spent to date under the community enhancement programme. There was never as much money going into rural Ireland. This Department is working well and is delivering. I assure Deputy Aylward that rural Ireland is vibrant and alive, with great people working and living in our rural communities.

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** Statistics are great and the way they are used-----

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Kilkenny is a great place.

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** The Minister is a great story teller and the way he tells it is great but for people living in rural Ireland, the story is not so good. I do not begrudge people in Dublin and other urban areas their fair share of Government funding. My issue is with the imbalance in terms of what is being spent in rural Ireland. We are crying out for broadband and for transport providing connectivity from village to village. Under the PSO we had transport services which have now been stopped. We need those services back. Rural Ireland is no different to urban Ireland in terms of need. People need to get from A to B, C, D and E. The Minister must admit that there are not enough transport services being provided in rural Ireland. The Minister can shout loudly and quote all the statistics he likes but the facts tell a different story. People in rural Ireland need more connectivity and more services.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The Minister has just one minute in which to respond.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I would need more than a minute to answer but I will do my best. Fianna Fáil took away most of the services when it was in government but its members forget that. Post offices-----

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Fine Gael has been in government for nine years.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Fianna Fáil took away most of the services when it was in government-----

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** Will we go back to 1932 altogether?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** It ran the economy into the ground.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I have one question for the Deputy opposite. Is he going to support this Government's broadband plan or is he going to say one thing here in Dublin and another in Kilkenny? Is he going to support us? We have signed the contract. Will Fianna Fáil support us on broadband?

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** There is no broadband.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Bobby Aylward:** It was €3 billion. It may be €5 billion before it is over.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I am glad this is not happening in Christmas week.

### **Community Development Projects Funding**

13. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the discussions held with Fingal County Council, the archdiocese of Dublin and the local community in Hartstown regarding the building works needed for a centre (details supplied) to continue operating; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50617/19]

28. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the discussions his Department has held with Fingal County Council and the local community in Huntstown regarding the fire safety and structural remedial works needed on a centre (details supplied) in order for it to continue operating; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50616/19]

**Deputy Joan Burton:** I have a very easy question for the Minister. What is he going to do to assist the very large communities in Huntstown and Hartstown? I realise they are not rural areas, but community centres in both areas are at risk of closure following fire inspections and urgently need work done. I raised the matter previously with the Minister. Fingal County Council has tried to be helpful. Does the Minister's Department have money for urban areas? These are big urban areas with large populations. Crèches and preschools there will close unless the Department comes forward with funding.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I am trying to ensure there is time for another Deputy to ask a question. I ask Deputy Burton to co-operate.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 and 28 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I am aware of the situation regarding Hartstown and Huntstown community centres and know how important the centres are to the people there.

Community facilities are funded from a range of sources across various Departments and agencies. For example, my Department has provided funding to Huntstown community centre under the community services and community enhancement programmes. My officials have been in discussions with Fingal County Council regarding the two centres. I am aware that both have specific and exceptional funding requirements.



I was previously asked about the possibility of opening a national fund to support community centres with emergency funding requirements for fire safety works. I stated that, given the constraints on my Department's voted funding, it was not possible for me to open a new line of national funding for that purpose. However, I am pleased to inform the Deputy that under the dormant accounts action plan for 2020 I have put in place a very modest fund of €250,000 to assist in a limited number of particularly critical cases. Given the large number of community centres, it is not possible for this fund to support a national programme of remediation works. However, it will allow me to make a contribution towards the costs of works in a small number of exceptionally urgent and critical cases. In that regard, I am prepared to examine what level of funding can be provided to the two centres referenced by the Deputy.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** I thank the Minister for his reply and the promise of potential funding, albeit possibly not of the scale required. He is correct to accept that there is significant pressure on community centres to meet very intensive and expensive fire survey review requirements, particularly those imposed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The centres to which I refer serve urban areas west of Blanchardstown Centre with populations of between 7,000 and 10,000. Approximately 70,000 people go through each centre per year. What do they have to do to access funding from the dormant accounts fund? This issue has been raised at community meetings. I would welcome the Minister's advice on the matter.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I have made clear that I am prepared to support the two communities in question, but my Department does not have the required amount of funding. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the local authorities must play their part. Deputy Calleary earlier raised the issue of other Departments running to my Department when there is a crisis. I do not have enough funding to provide for all requests. I found funding for an exceptional case which was raised with me. My officials are in discussions with the local authority. It will have to step up to the plate, as will the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and other Departments. The alternative is for the Government to establish and support a specific fund. I do not have the resources to so do. I have allocated a certain amount of funding to try to deal with some of the critical cases and that is all I can do.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** The local authority will now be aware that funding will be available from the dormant accounts fund on a limited basis, as well as from the Minister's Department. These issues are being experienced all over the country. Crèches and other services must obtain a fire certificate in order to get an operating licence. Fire safety is important. As the Minister is aware, the inspections are expensive and the work is particularly expensive. These are just two of many centres that will be seeking support. I acknowledge that the allocation of funding may be a decision for the Government as a whole. The Minister referred to the role of other Departments. We must ensure that crèches and preschools adjacent to local primary schools in the heart of local communities are not closed. It would be a black mark against the Government if that were allowed to happen. As Minister with responsibility for community affairs, Deputy Ring might take leadership on the issue.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I have responsibility for community affairs, including the community services programme, from which the areas to which the Deputy refers are benefiting. My Department is responsible for the community enhancement programme and the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. However, I will not take responsibility for the repair of halls all over the country. I do not have the budget to so do. There is a problem and I am trying to deal with it, but it is not solely the remit of my Department. A cross-Government approach needs to be taken and funding must be found.



Local authorities must not simply pass this issue to my Department or the Government. They have funding and responsibilities. There are certain difficulties in this area relating to local authorities, the church or other groups holding title and deeds. That does not mean that every problem comes into my Department. I will try to deal with part of this issue for the Deputy, but I will not take responsibility for every community hall. That is what the LEADER and community enhancement programmes are for. The community services programme is available to assist with staffing and the SICAP may be availed of. My Department and the Government are looking after those who need to be looked after.

### **Rural Development Policy**

14. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the interim progress reports of each of the six relevant local authorities in respect of the town and village pilot residential occupancy scheme will be published; when the final report will be published; the progress of the scheme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50639/19]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** When will the interim reports regarding the six relevant local authorities involved in the very important town and village pilot residential occupancy scheme be published? I have previously raised this very important pilot project with the Minister. We need to learn from it and roll it out. What is its status?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The pilot scheme to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns and villages was launched in October 2018. Funding of up to €100,000 is being made available to each of the six towns involved in the pilot to assist them in developing innovative proposals to encourage town centre living. It is intended that the lessons learned through the pilot will help to inform the future approach to support for and investment in rural towns and villages. It is envisaged that the pilot could lead to the development of more substantive proposals for funding from the rural regeneration and development fund.

Representatives from each of the participating towns have met collectively on a regular basis to discuss the issues emerging from their work on the scheme. This included a workshop hosted by my Department in September which was also attended by experts on the topic.

In June of this year, I received an interim progress report from each of the local authorities involved in the pilot scheme. It was not intended that these reports would be published as they were preliminary in nature and part of an ongoing process. A further and more comprehensive report on the issues identified through the pilot, as well as suggested courses of action, is being prepared for my Department. I expect to receive a draft of the report later this month. Once I have considered it, I intend to make the final report available for publication in the new year.

The Deputy may wish to note that officials from my Department and the local authorities involved in the pilot discussed progress on the initiative with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development at its meeting on 13 November. The transcript of the meeting will provide an indication of the progress being made by the various towns in the pilot.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Minister for the update. I welcome that a final report will be published in the new year. I ask the Minister to confirm that will be done. This is a very important project. I was concerned that County Galway had been completely ignored

by the project, but the Minister explained it is a pilot project which will be considered further. This is an urgent matter, as the Minister, who is even more familiar than I am with many of the towns in question, is aware. In a previous question, I referred to the villages of Kilmaine and Shrule. Many other towns and villages throughout Galway, such as Carraroe or Carna, as well as the islands, could benefit from this project. It is vital that the report is published, we learn from it and we roll it out.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** It will be published in the new year. Galway was not ignored. I picked six towns, but I could have picked 60. They are Boyle, Callan, Ballinrobe, Banagher, Castleblayney and Cappoquin. I tried to spread it around the country. The most important thing is that the report is being done. We want to see what it will contain and then I will have to go to the Government with regard to its recommendations. These people have met and they appeared before the committee. I am looking forward to seeing the report and I will publish it. I want to publish any reports we have produced, whatever they contain. This report is not ready yet but will be ready early in the new year.

*12 o'clock*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** This morning's newspapers are covering the tragic story of the late Mrs. Margaret Callaghan, who died in January 2018. Our thoughts this morning are with her family and friends. Mrs. Callaghan lived only 2 km from Letterkenny University Hospital, yet it took 71 minutes for an ambulance to reach her. She had been previously discharged after a test and rang for an ambulance the following day. Even after taking 71 minutes to travel 2 km, when the ambulance arrived at the emergency department in the hospital there were two ambulances ahead of her ambulance because of what are called offload delays. One of the ambulances had been there for six and a half hours and the other had been there for three and a half hours. Accordingly, Mrs. Callaghan's treatment was delayed. The urgency was not recognised. The medical director of the National Ambulance Service said that the issue with the offload times of ambulances throughout the country is endemic. It was one of the factors that led, regrettably, to Mrs. Callaghan's death. This case was covered in Letterkenny Coroner's Court yesterday.

Deputy Donnelly and other Members of the Houses have highlighted this issue previously. When one rings for an ambulance it is an emergency. One expects a quick turnaround. This country is lucky to have superb paramedics and ambulance personnel who are highly trained to do their jobs, but they are being prevented from doing them for all sorts of reasons, including a lack of investment in ambulance services and emergency departments. The Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, has said that all hospitals in Ireland should monitor the implementation of ambulance "patient handover time ... which requires 95% of patients being handed over from an ambulance crew to the emergency department staff in less than 20 minutes, and where this is not met, corrective action should be taken". The reply to Deputy Donnelly's parliamentary question shows that the target is only being met in just under 16% of cases nationwide, and the HSE 30 minute target is only achieved in 37.1% of cases. Those figures have rapidly decreased from those of September 2017, so the problem is getting worse.

What is the Government's reaction to what unfolded yesterday in Letterkenny Coroner's Court? This is not just an issue in rural areas. Ambulance turnaround and transfer times across the Ireland East hospital group, which includes some of the biggest hospitals in Dublin, and in the South/South West hospital group, which includes hospitals in Cork city, have also decreased substantially. What is the Government's response to this? What action will it take to ensure there are proper and efficient turnaround times in the ambulance service?

**Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty):** I thank Deputy Calleary for raising this tragedy. Before I respond on the occurrences in Letterkenny, I express my condolences to the family of Mrs. Margaret Callaghan. I cannot begin to understand or appreciate how difficult it will be for them to get over her death, given that it potentially should not have happened.

When the emergency care hospital system is under pressure there will be potential for delays in the transfer of care patients from an ambulance to emergency departments. However, the ambulance turnaround performance is currently below target. In the period from January to October 2019, 85.5% of ambulances achieved a turnaround time of 60 minutes or less, which is below the target of 95%. Effective management of timely ambulance turnaround times is a challenge, and probably more of a challenge in some parts of Ireland than in others. The ambulance turnaround framework has been developed to try to address the issues that exist. Ireland has seen a growing demand for unscheduled care, with increased pressure on emergency departments during peak times and particularly in the winter. The key drivers of the ongoing emergency department overcrowding are increasing attendances and admissions nationally, high occupancy rates and a significant increase in delays of transfers of care. In the first ten months of 2019, the number of patients attending hospital emergency departments increased by 2.7% on the number last year and the number of emergency department admissions increased by 1% compared with the same period last year. The numbers on trolleys at 8 a.m. in Letterkenny University Hospital have been persistently high this year.

In preparation for the anticipated increase in demand over the coming winter, the HSE winter plan was launched earlier this year than in any previous year, on 14 November. The plan is supported by an additional €26 million in winter funding nationally. The funding will support access to the fair deal scheme and provide additional home care supports and transitional care to facilities in a timely manner to ensure that discharge happens more quickly and to reduce congestion in emergency departments over the winter. Nine winter action teams, each aligned to the community healthcare organisation, CHO, and associated acute hospital groups, have prepared their integrated winter plans. As I said, there are issues that might affect some parts of the country but not necessarily all parts of the country. These plans will focus on demand management and staffing availability, timely access to the most appropriate care pathways for patients and appropriate and timely discharge from acute hospitals. I hope they will go a long way towards alleviating the situation that resulted in this lady's tragic death.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister's answer indicates a complete disconnect between the Government and what is happening in hospitals. The difficulties in emergency departments have nothing to do with people getting sick and presenting there. They are to do with the fact that there were 300 fewer staff nurses employed in the health system in October compared with last December, 350 consultant vacancies where consultants are not available to attend and a further 350 consultant posts filled by non-consultants. Deputy McConalogue has consistently highlighted that in Letterkenny, despite a promise from the local Minister that 20 extra beds would be opened this year, only ten extra beds have been opened. That is where the difficulties

lie.

Emergency departments are under-resourced and understaffed. The necessary nursing and consultant resources are not in place. The Minister cited the winter plan but no new beds will be opened and no new staff will be appointed under that plan. All of these issues affect the ambulance service and the good work it tries to do. While I know the Minister will be personally committed to this, I ask her to ensure that there is no repeat of this occurrence in the system. Unless the Government deals with the staffing and resource situation, I regret to say that there probably will be a recurrence.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I will outline the integrated winter plan for Letterkenny University Hospital that will be delivered by its action team. The membership of the team includes the CEO of Saolta University Health Care Group, the CEO of the RCSI hospital group, the chief officer of CHO 1 and the CEO of Letterkenny University Hospital. I believe the people involved in ensuring that the winter plan works for this region have a vested interest in the region. Specific funding has been allocated to the winter action teams to support the initiatives at local level. The initiatives for this area include the reablement programme to assist in reducing presentations and admissions and additional medical registrars, who are senior decision makers. Therefore, the extra staff the Deputy says are needed will be put in place. There will be additional aids and appliances to facilitate the discharge of people when they need to be discharged, as opposed to keeping them in hospital when they should not be there, and additional rapid flu testing kits and local PCR flu testing to reduce the length of stays, facilitate diagnosis and treatment of flu patients to reduce isolation demand and reduce the impact of the outbreaks we know are going to come. We will also reduce patient experience times and trolley numbers through a speedier turnaround of the beds and management of infection control by providing additional cleaning hours.

All of that, while it does not directly impact what happened in this tragedy, has a knock-on effect as to when ambulances arrive. If there is nobody to take the people presenting in those ambulances into the hospitals, obviously, that is where the backlog arises. While I cannot give the Deputy a personal guarantee that it will not happen, I hope the initiatives we are putting in place can ensure that no other family has to go through what the Callaghan family are going through.

**Deputy John Brady:** I want to raise issues affecting St. Joseph's dementia care home in Shankill, which is in the midst of a significant funding crisis. St. Joseph's care home is the only care home in the State that cares solely for people living with dementia and it is now, regrettably, threatened with closure due to gross underfunding by the State. Last month when I raised the issue with the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, in the Dáil, he gave me an assurance that funding would be provided to ensure St. Joseph's is able to keep the doors open and stated categorically, "The doors will not close". However, things have reached crisis point and in recent days the management in St. Joseph's has taken the unfortunate decision to inform families and staff it is to stop taking residential admissions with immediate effect. This is a completely unacceptable situation.

There are currently 60 people living in St. Joseph's and up to 120 people use the day care service on a weekly basis. I welcome the fact funding has been provided for the day care aspect of St. Joseph's. However, we cannot underestimate the massive difference a service model like that provided in St. Joseph's offers patients suffering from dementia. It provides an excellent level of care and massive comfort to the families and loved ones of those suffering from de-

mentia. The situation has been caused by gross underfunding of St. Joseph's and it is causing serious anxiety, stress and uncertainty for service users, as well as their families and the excellent staff in the facility.

There are currently 55,000 people in Ireland living with dementia and that number is expected to double over the next 20 years. We need increased funding for dementia services and we need to see the development of more services specifically for dementia care, not less. I call on the Minister, Deputy Harris, to honour the commitment he gave the House to immediately intervene and to ensure staff at St. Joseph's can continue to do the excellent work they do, ensure the service is protected and that the staff and patients have certainty. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in the State and they deserve some respect. It is time to stand up and make it clear that this service is going to be properly funded and maintained. We need to get not just words but actions, because the uncertainty and fear are genuine and need to end. We need a firm commitment that the Government and the Minister will intervene immediately to ensure that funding is put in place.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** In line with the programme for Government commitments, we have made improved access to home supports, and the care associated with them, a priority. We have made additional investment of €52 million this year to bring the total funding for home supports to €487 million in 2020. In 2020, the HSE will deliver 19.2 million hours of support, which represents an enormous increase from last year. We all know it probably is not enough and more will be needed, but we are moving in the right direction.

When we talk about the investment in our care homes, and specifically in regard to St. Joseph's, the Deputy asked the Minister to immediately intervene when he knows full well the Minister has already intervened. The situation of the staff and the patients resident there has been secured. The fact the extra day care money has been given for the people who are presenting for the services is a testament to the fact we respect and rely on the services that are being delivered in Shankill by our medical professionals. We have put our money behind them in order to make sure we can give that critical support and viability to the 60 patients who are living there as their home, and to all of the patients who rely on it on a daily basis. There may be a difficulty with new admissions, and that will form part of the planning we are going to do next year. However, when the Deputy raised the crisis with us a number of weeks ago, both the HSE and the Minister stepped up immediately and gave extra funding to shore up the service and to ensure its viability, so we can show respect to the service providers and the value of the service they are giving to their patients.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister is grossly misinformed because there is no certainty whatsoever. What the Minister is talking about is the day care, and I acknowledged that the HSE has stepped up and provided additional funding. I am talking about the residential care. Some 60 residents are currently in St. Joseph's and there is a waiting list of 350 people trying to get in there, but no additional funding has been secured from the Government. The uncertainty is around the residential side. That is why the board had to take the unfortunate decision, although it was a decision it was forced to take, to immediately cease admissions, which took place from Friday last. The Minister is grossly misinformed. I think there is a deliberate attempt to muddy the waters. What we need is a commitment by Government and the Minister to intervene to ensure the residential element of St. Joseph's is secured, and we need that certainty immediately.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Again, there is absolute certainty for the 60 residents who are



currently living in St. Joseph's and that will continue to be so. While I appreciate there is a waiting list to get in to the facility, I am sure there is a waiting list to get into all of our residential homes, both private and public, the length and breadth of the country. They are supported by the nursing home support scheme and, through the extra funding that was allocated to St. Joseph's last week, we will continue to support the day care service, which is thriving.

### **Visit of Sr. Consilio**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** On my own behalf and on behalf of the Ceann Comhairle, I want to welcome a very special lady to the Visitors Gallery, who is known the length and breadth of the country, Sr. Consilio. I was pleased to have the opportunity to present her today with the human dignity award on behalf of the group in the Dáil. Sr. Consilio has helped thousands of people who have suffered from addiction and we greatly appreciate her work and wish her well. We know she has plans and, hopefully, she can fulfil all of those. Sr. Consilio is welcome.

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed)**

**Deputy Joan Collins:** During the debate on the motion of no confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and his housing policy, I had another reason for expressing no confidence in him. Three years ago a Bill passed Second Stage in this House without opposition, the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Water in Public Ownership) (No. 2) Bill 2016, which seeks to enshrine public ownership and management of public water services in the Constitution. It is sponsored by the Right2Water Deputies in the Dáil. The Bill has been trapped in committee for three years, first by the Tánaiste, when he was Minister, and since then by the current Minister, Deputy Murphy. The excuse given over and over is that the Minister is waiting for an amendment or amendments to the Bill from the Attorney General but, after three years of hearing this, it is just not credible. The intention of the Minister, in my opinion, is and has been to bury my Bill in committee. The Minister does not have the guts to come into the Dáil and argue against and vote against the Bill. His purpose is to leave open the possibility of privatising our water services at some point in the future.

This is yet another disgraceful example of the disregard for basic democracy and the decisions of elected representatives of the people. I am really concerned now that the Bill will not see the light of day given the Minister's continuing inaction. The Right2Water unions are in the process of contacting all parties and groupings in the Dáil about this issue. Thousands upon thousands of people are hugely concerned and angered that Fine Gael is trying to bury the Bill. The very reason communities stopped the installation of water meters was the deeply held understanding that every meter that went into the ground was another step towards privatisation. Local authority workers in water services want a referendum and support my Bill. The Joint Committee on Future Funding of Domestic Water Services supported a referendum to keep our water in public ownership. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions supports a referendum on public ownership. There is no opposition to the Bill in the Dáil on paper. The Government,



however, is still trying to bury the Bill and drag it into the next election.

Again, I call on the Minister, Deputy Murphy, to bring forward the amendment or amendments that he said, in a letter to the committee last July, would be ready by this autumn or, as I said, have the guts to come into the Dáil and argue against and vote against the Bill.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** We as a Government are investing more in the infrastructure of our water than at any time in the history of the State. We take it exceptionally seriously. That is why the previous Government attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to introduce a reliable and consistent funding stream to invest in something that is absolutely crucial for day-to-day living. I think we all recognise that. That boat has very much sailed. The mantra of many people in this House, however, that the idea behind that sustainable funding stream was that we could privatise the service, was an absolute myth and was never borne out by anything close to resembling reality.

When the Minister, Deputy Murphy, tells Deputy Collins he is working with the Attorney General to try to come up with responses to her Bill, I have absolutely no doubt that is true. I do not agree with what she is trying to do, and there are probably other Members of the House who do not. At the end of the day, however, we are a minority Government. If there were consensus among everyone else in the House to do what Deputy Collins wants to do, we would not be having this conversation. Her Bill would probably have already passed. I know that the Minister has attempted to be as constructive as possible over recent years in respect of the Deputy's Bill and will continue to do so. I am not sure whether she has a date for the next step of the Bill. I will relate to the Minister her upset and disagreement with his response to her over recent months and come back to her with a response later.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I did not ask about funding. Water is a human right. We have worked with the Minister, Deputy Murphy, on this on the committee. We have met the Department twice, once ourselves and once with a barrister. The Minister has recognised this. We tried to get the Bill to Committee Stage in April and the Minister, because he had not got the Attorney General amendment, urged the committee to postpone that meeting. He got six members - three Fine Gael, two Fianna Fáil and one rural Independent - to postpone that meeting. He said in July, in a letter to the committee, that he would have the working amendments to bring before the committee by this autumn. I have the letter from the Minister here. This still has not happened. After Christmas we will probably have at a maximum 40 working days left in this Dáil. The Government, when it wants to, as with the liquidation of IBRC, can bring in legislation overnight. Why has the Minister taken so long to bring forward the amendments he said he would bring forward? I believe he is trying to bury the Bill. He will not do that, as far as I am concerned and, I hope, as far as the Opposition and the rest of the Dáil are concerned.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Again, we are a minority Government. If the democratic vote taken at the committee that day had gone a different way, we would be having a different conversation.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** That is not the question.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Again, if the Deputy had consensus for her view-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Where are the Minister's amendments?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** -----we would not be in the position we are in.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Where are the Minister's amendments? Answer the question.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** What I have said-----

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

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Do Deputies opposite want me to answer or not, or does everyone want to have a little blather among themselves?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I would prefer if the Minister answered the question. It is called Leaders' Questions, after all.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister is responding to Deputy Collins's question.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** The thing about Leaders' Questions is that one gets to ask a question and then one is supposed to listen for the answer, not slag, as Deputy Ó Broin always does.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am listening. I am waiting for the answer.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies, please. I will move on.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Slagging is not a policy.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There will be no answer. I will move on.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Will the Minister, Deputy Doherty, ask the Minister, Deputy Murphy, to bring the amendments to the committee?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Next is Deputy Seamus Healy. He is not a member of either the Social Democrats or the Green Party but has been nominated by them.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I have been nominated by myself. This Government is, as we all know, presiding over a housing and homelessness emergency. This is no accident or error. It is the result of a deliberate policy of this Government and previous Governments and commenced by a Fianna Fáil Government. The policy sees housing as a profit-making commodity and sees the market as the solution to this emergency. As each and every member of the public knows, it has been an abject failure and is spreading misery right across the country. We know from the October homelessness figures that a new record has been created: 10,514 persons homeless, one in three of whom is a child. These children are being irreparably damaged by Government policy. In recent days we have seen two reports from housing charities. The Simon Communities have told us there has been an increase in 26% in the number of people turning to their services in the past 12 months. There are now 16,776 such people, up from 13,304 the previous year. Simon also says it provided emergency accommodation to 1,738 people in 2018, up 79.5% on the previous year. Threshold has reported that there would be double the number of homeless people in Ireland but for its interventions. It says the organisation kept 11,500 people in their homes in 2018.

The Minister's Government is deliberately excluding low-income families from local authority housing waiting lists. This condemns these families to paying exorbitant rents and excludes them from the housing assistance schemes. The limits for local authority housing waiting lists have not been increased for years. I will give the Minister an example. In Tip-

perary, a family of two adults and two children on €27,501, which is €8,500 less than the average wage, cannot get on a local authority housing waiting list nor can they get a mortgage. If they were able to get a mortgage, the maximum they would qualify for would be €96,000-odd. House prices in Tipperary have increased by 10.8% and now stand at €183,688. They then face renting. The average rent in Tipperary is now €853 per month, or €213 per week. That is an average, so for bigger towns such as Clonmel and Nenagh the figure is much more like €1,000 per month.

Many families now pay in excess of 40% of their income on rent. Many families are paying more on rent than they would on a mortgage, if they were able to get one. That is absolutely mad. Threshold gives us the example of a three-bed house in Limerick-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Minister to respond. Deputy Healy got an extra half a minute.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** -----costing €1,132 in rent per month.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Minister to respond. The Deputy will have another minute.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The corresponding mortgage on that property would be €838.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has had three and a half minutes to ask it.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** When will the Government accept that its housing policy is an abject failure-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. I call the Minister. The Deputy has had four minutes to ask the question.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** -----and when will it deal with the issues I have raised?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** It is fair to say I do not agree with the last statement the Deputy made. Let us look at the facts and the figures. The 64,000 houses that have been built in the past three years, the houses that are under construction now, and the 30,000-plus houses that are in planning application with all our county councils and An Bord Pleanála show that Rebuilding Ireland is working. The people, including thousands of families, taken out of homelessness in recent years show that our policies are working. This is notwithstanding the fact that the challenges still exist and present daily. That is why we have adapted and modified Rebuilding Ireland over recent years in response to the lovely charities the Deputy named. Simon, Threshold, Respond and all the other agencies that work in specific areas of housing and homelessness do enormous work on behalf of the State for the citizens of the State.

We are happy to support financially all of these agencies that do so much work. It was detailed yesterday. Threshold and Simon issued their reports yesterday. Respond had a briefing for everybody in recent days. They show that they are dealing with very large numbers of people. They also show the response to those large numbers of families and individuals who are asking for help and getting help. That is exactly what taxpayers' money should be doing. It should be helping agencies that have specific expertise, alongside all of our local authorities, in providing houses for people who need houses.

It is not just at a social housing level. There are solutions at every single level. The Deputy

has talked about modifying the rates at which people can apply for social houses. Maybe that needs to be done by local authorities but we also have the council home loan scheme, the Rebuilding Ireland scheme and the affordable housing scheme. There is a response at every single level to people who are at different income levels in the country to provide houses. Agencies with expertise are doing a super job. That all feeds into the 64,000 houses that have been built in this country in recent years. Some 24,000 houses are being built and 33,000 houses are in planning.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** “Live horse and you’ll get grass” comes to mind. The Minister burying her head in the sand and saying that everything is fine and that everything will be fine is madness. It is not sustainable. It breaks the social contract between the State and its citizens and it is already creating serious difficulties. It will create much more serious difficulties in the future unless it is stopped. Surely the recent record homeless figures and the chaos in the rental sector alone would indicate that we have a housing and homelessness emergency. We know that the rental market in Ireland provides no security of tenure, is completely unaffordable and is generally of poor quality. We know that 57% of notices to quit are found to be invalid and that the biggest reason for notices to quit properties is that the properties are being sold. As a result, tenants are being evicted and invariably find themselves falling into homelessness. That has been indicated by all the agencies. Surely it is time to cry “Stop” and to declare statutorily a housing and homelessness emergency.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I obviously do not agree with the Deputy. We have a housing system that was entirely broken when we took over and launched Rebuilding Ireland in 2016.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** It was 2011.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** We have people who were in negative equity arising from the great recession for donkey’s years who took only sheer delight in being able to sell their house when that negative equity receded. That is why we have a huge outflow from our rental market that needs to be addressed. That is why we have had more legislation on rent controls and rent regulations in this House over recent years than we have had in the past 30 years. We have had a number of organisations and local authorities working successfully with us. Wayne Stanley was on the radio this morning telling us not only of the great achievements of Simon in the past year but lauding the fact that the policies are now working. It is certainly not perfect and of course there are still challenges. The Deputy heard Mr. Stanley saying that he has offered us advice on how we should tweak things to make them better. That is the good thing about Rebuilding Ireland. The facts speak for themselves and the number of houses being built for citizens is growing year on year. The plan has been modified to take into account the advice that experts are giving us and we will continue to do so until we reach the stage where we are building 35,000 houses every year to make sure that everybody who wants a home in this country can have one.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move to Questions on Promised Legislation. I will commence with those who did not have an opportunity to speak on Tuesday or Wednesday. I call Deputy Durkan.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** What about leaders?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** My apologies.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Poor leaders.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Sorry. Even the Pope is fallible.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Do not say that to the archbishop.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I apologise to Deputy Durkan in particular because I gather that he was the only one to show leadership at his parliamentary party meeting last night and actually call out the lack of performance of the Government. As regards the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's infallibility, the people of Donegal have known that for a long time.

As we speak, the board of the national children's hospital is at the Committee of Public Accounts. The latest instalment in the Government's vanity project is that there could be a further overrun of some €50 million on the project. This year alone, it is likely to run over budget by between €2 million and €2.9 million. I have been campaigning for some time to address the waiting lists of more than 500 people for occupational therapists in County Mayo. There are vacancies for occupational therapists. I got a response this morning from the HSE to say that it has applied for funding to fill one of those vacancies but that it continues to await a response. How does the Government defend to a parent of a child on a waiting list for an occupational therapist for the child the fact that the HSE cannot get approval for funding for an occupational therapist? The budget for this children's hospital will go over by another €50 million, including by €2.9 million this year. Some €2.9 million would employ an awful lot of occupational therapists.

**Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty):** It is a real pity that Deputy Calleary would resort to language like "vanity project" for a project that has been much needed in this country for nearly two generations.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** We need occupational therapists.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Fianna Fáil was in power for 27 of the past 35 years. There was not even a sniff other than the €50 million that it wasted on the project in the Mater Hospital.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** It went to planning permission. The Minister is misleading the House.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** It is a real pity that Deputy Calleary would descend to that level.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Deal with the question.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** The Deputy is attempting to link the fact that we have recruitment challenges across many professions in the country-----

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** They do not have budgets.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** -----to the national children's hospital, which is a project that will be delivered by this Government. I refer Deputy Calleary to his local community healthcare



organisation, CHO, administration to find out exactly why it has not been able to find an occupational therapist to fill the vacancy.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** They are awaiting funding.

**Deputy John Brady:** Last month, Rondo Food in Arklow announced that there was serious concern about the future of 150 manufacturing jobs in the Arklow area. It committed to engaging in a 30-day consultation process. It is apparent that it entered that consultation process in bad faith. It has dismissed cost-saving measures from representatives from the workforce. It has also rebuffed proposals from Enterprise Ireland. This company has received substantial State grants via Enterprise Ireland and it is quite clear that it had no interest in that process because when it consulted workers in the factory, it was in the process of bringing engineers over from Germany to measure up and move the equipment to its plant in Germany. It knew what the outcome of that consultation process was. There is a dispute because the redundancy package being offered by Gaines is totally unsatisfactory. The workforce has referred it to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. Rondo Food, which has received substantial State funding, is refusing to engage with the WRC. I ask the Minister to intervene, contact this company and ask it to engage with the mechanisms of the State when there are industrial disputes. Arklow is unfortunately an unemployment blackspot and the loss of 150 jobs is devastating. I ask the Minister to commit to establishing an employment task force in the Arklow area.

**Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The regional enterprise plan is the mechanism by which we continue to encourage investment and to support indigenous companies across that region. Enterprise Ireland has been working closely with this company to try to find solutions.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Howlin.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister did not answer the question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have called Deputy Howlin.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister did not answer the question. Maybe the Minister, Deputy Doherty, might answer the questions about the task force and WRC.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have no responsibility for the answers.

**Deputy John Brady:** In fairness, we are supposed to get answers.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I gave the answers.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister did not answer whether she will encourage the company to engage with the WRC and if the Government will commit to establishing a task force.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy. The Deputy and Minister can meet afterwards.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I did not give the answer the Deputy wanted but I gave an answer.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister did not answer the questions.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I answered the questions.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Deputy Humphreys answered the question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The clock is ticking.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It is reported that-----

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I did not say what Deputy Brady wanted to hear.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I will sit down again.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Sorry.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It was reported earlier that up to 12 content moderators intend to take legal action against Facebook because of the awfulness of the content to which they have been exposed. This awfulness is directed at users of Facebook. We have had many debates in the House about how to protect people from online abuse. It has now been two and half years since I introduced the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017. There have been numerous calls for the establishment of a digital safety commissioner. I have been constantly told that Government amendments to the Bill are imminent and that it will become law. It was originally promised that it would be enacted by last summer. We were then told it would be done by Christmas. The latter is now only a few weeks away and that is not going to happen. I do not know how many weeks are left in this Dáil session but this is a critical issue, on which there is consensus between the Government and Opposition to the effect that we need to protect people online. When will we see progress on the Bill?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I also read about that case this morning. It was very difficult to read that humans can behave that way. Thankfully, I do not spend much time on social media but this is a stark reminder of the ugliness that exists in our society. I agree that we need to bring in legislation to ensure a number of social media platforms are regulated. Deputy Burton also mentioned waiting for amendments. I do not intend to be trite, but I am not sure people appreciate the workload the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel had to deal with in the context of the Brexit Bill-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is why we said we would have it done by the summer.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** -----and all the work done regarding social security co-operation between Ireland and the United Kingdom. That work delayed much of our planned legislation. I appreciate what the Deputy is saying and I will try to find out when the amendments will be published.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am not exaggerating when I say that the Government is betraying dementia sufferers and their families, both present and future, as a result of its failure to honour its promises to keep the doors of St. Joseph's dementia care facility in Shankill open. The Minister told me and others that the doors to St. Joseph's would not close. However, they have been closed-----

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** They have not.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----in the context of future admissions. This is a personal matter for me and many others in the area. Some of my loved ones ended their days in St. Joseph's and a personal friend of mine is there now. I and others have people close to us who will be looking to go there in the near future. They will not be able to do so because this Gov-

ernment is refusing to acknowledge the high-dependency special care requirements of many dementia patients. The Taoiseach promised that a review of the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, and its dealings with this precise matter would be completed in 2017, but it never appeared. The Government is not acknowledging the high-dependency care needs of dementia sufferers. It is nonsense to say that the Government has nothing to do with the NTPF, because this is public money, allocated by the Government, and it has every right - indeed obligation - to tell the NTPF to treat dementia sufferers and their families with respect.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Minister is in a position to answer this question or get the relevant Minister to do so?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I will answer the Deputy's question. First, most of the matters we deal with in this House are personal to us. That is why we are here - because we care. Otherwise, we would not be here. The Deputy does not have a monopoly on caring about St. Joseph's hospital. We had this conversation with his Sinn Féin colleague less than half an hour ago.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I heard it.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** The Government will continue to support St. Joseph's. Negotiations are ongoing. The security that was sought for the home's current residents and staff has been offered and secured.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am talking about future residents.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Additional financial resources have been put in place over the last number of weeks to ensure more people can access the centre's day care services. This is an ongoing and evolving situation.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** What about future residential care?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister, without interruption.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** With respect, the Deputy does not like what has been done so far because we have not yet determined the final outcome of the organisation's future security. Work is in progress and the negotiations are ongoing. As a sign of our sincere commitment to St. Joseph's, not only have we given security to the people already living there, we have also provided it with extra money and resources to allow it to take in more day patients. If the Deputy cannot see that as a genuine sign of commitment to moving forward, I give up.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We need more.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Everyone needs more.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I wish to raise an issue relating to the local drug and alcohol task forces. Is the Minister of State at the Department of Health aware that the HSE representative on the Canal Communities local drugs and alcohol task force got up in the middle of an amicable meeting, announced that he was removing himself from the task force as a HSE representative and walked out? Are the State and its agencies abdicating responsibility and leaving communities to fend for themselves, contrary to the national drug and alcohol strategy?

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne):** I am fully

aware that the HSE has withdrawn its service from the Canal Communities task force. A review of the Canal Communities task force in the north inner city was conducted, which raised a number of issues on which the HSE has not been able to come to an amicable agreement. I fully support the HSE's decision to withdraw its co-ordinator and its other representative from the canal task force. The HSE is working with the groups being funded through the task force to resolve some of the issues on the ground. I am fully aware that the HSE has withdrawn its service from the task force, with which I fully agree.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** It is outrageous.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** We have a huge responsibility in the context of accountability-----

**Deputy Joan Collins:** The task forces were working with the HSE-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State, without interruption.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** We have huge responsibility in this area. I am the Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy and I will not stand over funding being wrongly spent, a lack of governance and abuse of services, as were identified in that review. I will not stand over that and will not be taken to task over it either.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** That is outrageous.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I am fully aware of what-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State is being helpful.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will move on to those who did not have an opportunity to ask questions on Tuesday or Wednesday.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** The Minister of State is making accusations against-----

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** It will remain in place until things are brought up to a certain standard.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The first of those who did not get an opportunity to contribute on Tuesday or Wednesday is Deputy Durkan.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** The money that is being put into task forces is not my money. It is public funding.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** The Minister of State should say that outside the House.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Joan Collins-----

**Deputy Joan Collins:** The Minister of State is making accusations-----

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** As a Minister of State in charge of the national drugs strategy, I have a responsibility to ensure there is governance and accountability for funding of the task forces.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** As long as I hold this position, I will continue to do so.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** How dare the Minister of State say there is no accountability in the drugs task forces?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Durkan.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** When is the Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) Bill it likely to come before the House, and will it happen in this session?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Was everyone listening to Deputy Durkan? He asked a short, focused question.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I do not have a date for that Bill yet, but I will come back to the Deputy later today.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Even better.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The tenders for 20 or 30 new school buildings were published on the eTenders website this week. Can the Minister clarify whether the number of schools is 20 or 30? A list of school buildings was also included in that tender which may be built subject to change. I ask the Minister to clarify when those schools will be given the details of when their buildings will be completed. What about the other thousands of schools which are waiting for major work?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Perhaps the Minister might ask the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, about this issue.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** As the Opposition spokesperson for education, the Deputy is well aware of how this process works. The tenders get put out and, when they are awarded, the teams sit down and work out the details. The schools will find out at that time. Some €700 million was allocated for school buildings this morning.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** That is not going to help.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Niamh Smyth for a question on promised legislation and the programme for Government. I do not want any constituency questions.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Unfortunately, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is not here, but I ask the Minister to relay this message to him. People across east Cavan are very concerned about their water supply. Irish Water has had its trials and tribulations, but the people of east Cavan are affected by brown, muddy water that is unacceptable. The situation has been going on for weeks. The water notice has been extended for the fourth time. Mothers are afraid to make babies' bottles and clothes are being stained in washing machines.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is a constituency issue. Nobody listens to me.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Will the Minister to ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government about this, because people are crying out to have water tanks installed? Brown water is coming through their taps.



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

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** The response I have received from Irish Water is that the water is-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is a question for Irish Water.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** -----safe to drink, but people do not have confidence in that.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The question should be submitted to *oireachtasmembers@water.ie*.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I will raise the matter with Irish Water.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister does not have to do so.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** To give the Deputy some solace, we had a similar situation in my neck of the woods because of mains flushing. Brown water coming out of one's taps is not nice and one does not have to be a mother to think so. Irish Water has invested in a programme called "ice pigging", which is a bit unusual, but I might ask it to send the Deputy some details about it. Perhaps it should be employed in her area.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** An awful lot of people are mindful of security in their homes at the moment. Companies are putting in monitored alarms but some of them face major issues installing monitored alarms in areas with poor mobile phone coverage. Has this been brought to the attention of the Government? Installers are coming in and checking what level it is at between one and 30. It must be at 11 before they can install monitored alarms. Swathes of north Cork are without mobile phone coverage. Has the Government contacted the Commission for Communications Regulation or looked at the companies to try to resolve this issue because monitored alarms will not be installed in the homes of elderly people unless something is done about it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Eugene Murphy on the same issue.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** The issue I wish to raise is slightly different but I do support the Deputy's comments.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Hold on, it has to be the same.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** I fully support the argument that mobile phone coverage affects the installation of monitored alarms. In addition, I condemn what Eir is doing with regard to faults on landlines. I and others have a family connection with this. Eir is leaving older people for six, eight or ten weeks before fixing the fault. If the landline is out of action, a pendant alarm is not workable. We are fortunate in that the Department of Rural and Community Affairs has provided substantial funding for those alerts and we have a link to this. What Eir is doing is simply outrageous. I know it is now a private company but we need to call it to order and not leave those people, some of whom are in fear of their lives, stranded. It is in everybody's interests, even those who are laughing about it, that we call on Eir to do the right thing and not leave these people frightened in their homes in rural and urban areas.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring):** A total of 53,000 people have pendant alarms under the seniors alert scheme. Eir wanted to take on the

broadband scheme after it had pulled out of it. How could we give Eir the broadband scheme when it is unable to run the services it provides at the moment? I will get my Department to talk to Eir but it is a bit rich of Eir to tell us all how it was going roll out broadband when it cannot keep the phones on line as it is.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** A straight talker as usual.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** At a small schools symposium held in June 2019, the Minister for Education and Skills gave a commitment to carrying out a review of the resources needed for small schools. Could we get a commitment that teacher numbers will not be reduced in those smaller schools until this review is completed?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I do not have the information to hand as it is not my Department but I will relay the Deputy's message to the Minister and get him to come back to him.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I wish to raise a really important issue regarding insurance. Athy Rugby Football Club, which has been in existence since 1880, survived two world wars and provided provincial and international players, sent a message to all its members yesterday telling them that it cannot get any quote for public liability insurance and might close its doors and grounds on 9 December. Will the Government stand over organisations like sports clubs and community organisations along with businesses not being able to get public liability insurance? It is appalling. Fianna Fáil has introduced a number of Bills that would help address this but the Government has completely stalled on the database in terms of claims. The Government must intervene. What is it going to do about it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, will respond when he has an opportunity.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I will put on the record of the House that the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, and Deputy Heydon met Athy Rugby Football Club in the past number of days, discussed this issue and, I hope, gave it lots of reassurance that because of the passing of the Judicial Council Act in this House in July, it will see a real and positive impact before Christmas on insurance prices and indeed the claims culture in this country.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** This week saw a motion of no confidence on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. The Minister asked us to come up with solutions. Is he aware that the Sienna Valley housing development in Drogheda has 4,000 homes with full planning permission and several thousand homes zoned for housing with a DART station link to Dublin city opening in 2022 but that not a single home has been built because his Department is refusing to fund jointly the €15 million for the northern cross route road, which runs through the housing development? Why, at a time of a national housing emergency, is his Department blocking these homes that form a major part of the housing solution for Dublin and Drogheda and all for the sake of a simple €15 million through road that the local council has already agreed to fund jointly?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The topic is appropriate for a parliamentary question.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** Drogheda has an opportunity to become the sixth city in Ireland.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should submit a Topical Issue.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** Can the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection

ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to meet the Drogheda City Status Group, come to Drogheda and help it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government is in the House regularly.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I suggest Deputy Fitzpatrick puts down a Topical Issue.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Or a parliamentary question.

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** My question concerns regional rural development. What is the process regarding counties that were allocated additional funding? I am sure everybody in the House acknowledges the amount of LEADER funding that was made available throughout this country to very many worthy causes. The additional LEADER funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development must now go through when allocating the additional funding announced by the Minister for various applicants. The next high-scoring applicant in an area that missed out on the original LEADER funding should now be the first to receive the new funding.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We do not need to know how much we are paying out. We just want to know if there is-----

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I will give a very simple figure. I was delighted to allocate a further €5 million to ten LEADER companies. The criteria were people who had allocated funding or schemes that had been approved. We notified them earlier in the year. We gave the top ten €500,000 extra. Regarding ten to 15 companies, there were only about two or three points between them. I will review the LEADER programme at the end of the year. Some LEADER companies are still not performing and I will re-allocate some of that money in the new year.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Page 111 of the programme for Government recognises the positive benefits associated with the knowledge transfer scheme. I met a group of farmers last week in Birr. I have been told that this is a very successful and positive scheme. The farmers with whom I spoke certainly felt that it was very worthwhile. Will this scheme be rolled over until the CAP is agreed? I ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make every effort possible to ensure this scheme is rolled over.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle):** The Deputy is right. The knowledge transfer scheme has been part of the rural development programme under the CAP and has been very successful. There is a likelihood that the next CAP will be delayed by at least a year and there are transitional arrangements so it is certainly intended to accommodate the knowledge transfer scheme under this provision.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The programme for Government commits to increasing capacity in accident and emergency departments across the country. Two years and two months ago, I was given a copy of a plan to remove the emergency department in Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise. There was a public campaign. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fleming and I met the Minister for Health on 15 December at which he committed to halting that plan and putting a consultation process with an external facilitator in place. All of us welcomed the fact that the plan was halted but two years later, nothing has happened. The external facilitator has not been put in place. I have consistently raised the issue through Topical Issues and parliamentary questions and I have also raised it outside the Chamber. The problem is that

two years have passed and 15 December is approaching. We are almost there. The situation is creating uncertainty at the hospital. The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is representing the Taoiseach today. Could she raise this issue with him and the Minister for Health? It is causing problems in recruitment, management and planning at the hospital and we need certainty. When will the consultation process start?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I do not have the answer but I will find out and come back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** I am almost afraid to ask the question as they are very tetchy and grumpy over there this morning.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am never grumpy.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** My question is for the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

What measures will the Government take to help clients who are not working with local enterprise offices, LEOs, Enterprise Ireland or IDA Ireland? Such people are in business below the radar and will obviously be badly affected by Brexit. What cushions or measures will the Government introduce for people who do not necessarily engage with those organisations?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We are both from Border constituencies and are conscious of the impact that Brexit will have on our respective regions.

I have the findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, report on SMEs and it has further informed us that we need to reach out to SMEs that do not currently engage with LEOs, Enterprise Ireland or InterTrade Ireland.  
*I o'clock* We are taking a number of different initiatives to do that. I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to say to people who own such companies, no matter how big or small, that the first port of call is the LEO. The local enterprise office will signpost a suitable direction for such a business owner and send him or her to whatever agency can provide the required support.

I want to concentrate specifically on our indigenous companies, which are huge employers in all of our regions, and find ways that we can support them further by encouraging them to innovate and improve their processes. I am committed to that.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Buckley should not let me down because I want to come in within time.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is holding me up. My question concerns the programme for Government and is addressed to the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Daly. The draft legislation on the reform of Mental Health Act was put before the Mental Health Commission. Have we a definitive date for the publication of that report or, if it is already done, can we see it?

**Deputy Jim Daly:** We do not have a definitive date but the heads of the Bill have been sent to the Mental Health Commission for its comments. The commission is working through that at the moment. There was talk that it could take up to six months to get a response in full from the commission but I cannot guarantee that. The Department has done its work and sent it over

to the Mental Health Commission. It is up to the commission to come back to us on that matter.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That concludes questions on promised legislation. We will move on.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** There are two minutes left.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** People always tell me when there is time left but never when I am over the time.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle has done well.

### **Waste Management (Amendment) (Regulator) Bill 2019: First Stage**

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Waste Management Act 1996 to require the Minister to produce a report on the appointment of an independent regulator for the domestic waste management sector, including the regulation of domestic waste charges.

I am sharing time with Deputy Ward. We need to bring our domestic waste management back under public control and the purpose of this Bill is to kick-start that process. The Bill simply requires the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to produce a report into the appointment of an independent regulator for the domestic waste management sector.

It is fair to say that, over the past 20 years, we have seen good and bad transformations in waste management. The bad is that the system has been fully privatised. Costs have gone up and on average householders are paying more for waste collection than ever before.

We have also seen, at the same time, significant improvements in the reduction of waste through the establishment of the green and brown bins. People are recycling more and using waste as a resource rather than simply as something to be disposed of.

The difficulty is that multiple operators are working in the country, meaning that six, seven or eight different operators are often driving into the same housing estates. That is not good for the environment or the proper sustainability of waste management. It wastes money, creates more emissions and does not provide an efficient service.

Sinn Féin has proposed that local authorities start looking at a franchise model as a stepping stone to full public ownership of waste management. Under such a model, local authorities would franchise out the service to contractors in certain areas. I understand that South Dublin County Council has done some work on this and Dublin City Council is doing a feasibility study and spending money to look at the possibility of rolling out this model, which is good. It would be good for the environment if we ended side-by-side collection.

This Bill sets an independent regulatory framework to allow the process to commence and give some coherence to what would be needed by way of policy. Local authorities need to step



up to the plate but if the Government is committed to, at the very least, ending the side-by-side collection service, it should support this Bill and I ask it to do so.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I am delighted to co-sponsor this Bill which is a continuation of a campaign that I started during my time on South Dublin County Council.

In June 2016, I reported the waste management companies to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission when waste management companies raised their prices in unison after the proposed pay-by-weight scheme. A conservative estimate saw customers expected to pay an additional 43% for waste disposal than they had previously. This would have been another stealth tax on ordinary workers and families. Customers who decided to shop around and try and get a cheaper rate from alternative waste management companies were dismayed to find that any company they contacted had also increased their prices. The waste management companies were operating a cartel.

The privatisation of domestic waste collection services has failed and has resulted in a poorer quality of service, increased costs for households, negative environmental impacts and increased amounts of illegal dumping.

I grew up in north Clondalkin, an area with many socioeconomic problems, but it was cleaner then than it is now. Areas that could be used to play football or walk dogs are full of litter and the remains of fires from the burning of domestic waste. The impact of the few is having a detrimental effect on the many. However, it is not just irresponsible residents who are contributing to this negative environmental impact. There has also been an increase in commercial dumping whereby unscrupulous, unlicensed and unregulated operators collect waste at a cheaper rate and dump it wherever they see fit.

As Deputy Cullinane just said, because of the different operators, bin trucks can be coming down the streets of an estate on multiple days of the week which increases carbon output.

It is no coincidence that the areas in our country with the worst problems of litter are the most disadvantaged. I am sick of walking through parts of my area and seeing discarded rubbish around the street. This behaviour is sucking the life out of communities.

A Sinn Féin amendment to a Private Members' motion calling for the first step in the return of waste management into council control got cross-party support in the House yesterday. Today's legislation sets us on that legislative path.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill being 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 David Cullinane:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

## Rent Freeze (Fair Rent) Bill 2019: First Stage

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 (as amended) to provide for a rent freeze for all existing and new tenancies.

Every Deputy in this House knows that rents are out of control. Average rent for new rentals across the State is currently €1,400 a month. In Dublin city, the figure is €1,700 and in south Dublin, including my constituency, entry rents are now, on average, €2,200 a month. For that to be affordable under the criterion used by Economic and Social Research Ireland, ESRI, that states rent should account for 30% of net disposable income, one would need a gross annual income of €85,000.

A growing number of people, many of them young but some at the later stages of their working lives, whose incomes are between €35,000 and €75,000 simply cannot afford to rent accommodation in our cities and, increasingly, in our towns. In fact, since this Government took office, average rents across the State have increased by €5,000 a year and, in Dublin, average rents have increased by €7,500 a year. That is an enormous additional financial burden on working families, young single people and, in many cases, students. The cost of rent is having an impact on first-time buyers because struggling to pay such high rents means it is virtually impossible to save for a deposit. It is having a negative impact on the local economy. Much of the income being spent on rent would otherwise be spent in the local economy, in shops and services, particularly in smaller rural towns and villages. Employers are telling us that it is having a big impact on wage claims, putting many small and medium enterprises in very difficult situations.

It is clear from the three years' worth of Residential Tenancies Board and *daft.ie* data that the rent pressure zones are not working. They were designed to constrain rent increases to below 4% in high demand areas and they have consistently failed to do so. While many of us argued some years ago for rent certainty, linking rent reviews to the consumer price index in order to keep them in line with inflation, the situation has become so critical that we now need much more urgent and radical action.

For a number of years, Sinn Féin, along with other Opposition parties, has been calling for a freeze on all rents for existing tenancies and new tenancies. In our alternative budget for this year and that for last year, we called for a refundable tax credit to put a month's rent back in renters' pockets because freezing rents at such high and unsustainable levels in and of itself is not enough. We need to reduce rents as well.

The Bill I am introducing attempts to do both of those things. The Bill seeks to introduce an immediate rent freeze, with rents set according to the Residential Tenancies Board equivalised rent index for particular geographical areas for all new and existing tenancies. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows, Opposition Members cannot introduce taxation measures but this Bill would oblige the Minister to bring forward a report within three months on the practicalities of introducing the refundable tax credit to put a month's rent back in renters' pockets, with a view to proceeding with that tax credit, subject to Government approval.

When we get to Second Stage, I am sure the Government will make the case it has made already, namely, that such a measure could deter future investment in the rental sector. The very

opposite is the case. Rental yields are now at such highs, and institutional investors are able to avail of such generous tax breaks, that I do not see how a measure such as this would have any impact on them. More importantly, we have to give renters a break. Rents are too high. We have to stop them rising. We have to bring them down, and this Bill is intended to do just that.

**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 Eoin Ó Broin:** I move: "That Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2018: Second Stage (Resumed)**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2018, taken on Thursday, 28 November 2019. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and, in accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 39; Staon, 1.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	

<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>		
<i>Lahart, John.</i>		
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>		
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>		
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>		
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>		
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>		
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		

<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>		

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

Question declared.

### 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 Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need for additional funding for improvement works on accident black spots; (2) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - to discuss the challenges facing pharmacists and an update on negotiations with the Irish Pharmacy Union; (3) Deputy James Lawless - the lack of autism spectrum disorder school places for secondary school children in Kildare; (4) Deputy Seán Crowe - to discuss the increasing problem of drug dealing in south-west Dublin; (5) Deputy Malcolm Byrne - the shortage of second level places in Wexford and Gorey and plans for the construction of additional schools; (6) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the boil water notice in east Cork due to issues at the Whitegate treatment plant; (7) Deputy Gino Kenny - progress on the medical cannabis access programme; (8) Deputy John Brady - to



discuss job losses at Rondo Food in Arklow; (9) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - to discuss the lack of second level school places in Newbridge and Kildare town, County Kildare; (10) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the static price of beef; and (11) Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - to discuss the ongoing delays in providing the new Macroom Garda station.

The matters raised by Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív, Seán Crowe, Malcolm Byrne and Gino Kenny have been selected for discussion.

*Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m and resumed at 2.10 p.m.*

### **Housing Solutions: Statements**

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English):** This is the second discussion on housing this week. This is an important issue and there is no harm in taking this opportunity to go back over some of the information we discussed earlier in the week and to update the House on Rebuilding Ireland. Unfortunately, a great deal of misinformation was given out during the week. It was disappointing to hear inaccurate and generalised commentary from colleagues across the floor. For most people, the solution now is about politics but we would also like to discuss policies when it comes to housing and housing solutions. Many of the speeches of Deputies did not go near policy and focused only on politics, which was a strange approach.

When good, sensible ideas are put forward we will try to tweak Rebuilding Ireland to include them. We have differences of opinion on certain areas such as large sites, but in other areas where we can address quirks in the system, we will do so. For example, two or three weeks ago, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan requested funding for Traveller-specific accommodation. We took on board that idea and we will spend funding in this area to buy houses. We are willing to listen and change when sensible evidence-based proposals are made. However, much of the commentary in the past week has been unclear. It is disappointing that some Members chose to use the challenging and difficult circumstances that some families and individuals find themselves in to score political points, rather than put forward solutions that can help those households who are experiencing homelessness and housing issues.

As I said on Tuesday evening, Members have made suggestions and expressed ideas here and there and some have proposed legislation. Our job with regard to Rebuilding Ireland was to produce a whole-of-Government plan that brings all Departments together. As with the approach taken in the Action Plan for Jobs, Rebuilding Ireland includes a list of actions that must be taken. I accept that Members have proposed various interventions and ideas but no one has produced a complete plan which, site by site, makes things happen on the ground. It is all very well having nice suggestions and ideas. One Fianna Fáil Deputy said we should build 50,000 houses next year, as if one could pick them out of the sky. It does not work that way.

Deputy McDonald claimed she had the most ambitious plan for social housing. When we add up all the figures in that plan for the next ten years, it is not as ambitious as the Government's plan. Let us have full plans and let us fully tease them out. If the Opposition wants us to scrap our plan, it should produce a full plan of its own, rather than bits and pieces. Somebody has to pull all of this together and the Government has done that. I accept that Deputies have

different ideas but they should come up with a full plan if they want to scrap our plan or if they think our one is not working.

I would like to clarify some of the factual inaccuracies we heard earlier this week and discuss the homeless, about whom the Government is concerned. We are doing our best to deliver Rebuilding Ireland. I did not get a chance to say on Tuesday night that we accept that there are far too many people in an emergency situation without a house. There is no denying that. We publish the figures. We do not hide behind them. We do the rough sleepers count and so on and we put the truth out there. It would be easier to hide from homelessness but we do not do so. No one denies that the figures are far too high. In some cases, we cannot intervene quickly enough, which is a great shame because it means some families and children are left in emergency accommodation, which is not ideal for anybody. None of us would like that. We are not trying to claim everything is rosy in the garden or that there are no issues. As of today, more than 1,700 families need homes. The quicker we can address that, the better. I cannot be any clearer.

At the core of Rebuilding Ireland is the objective of accelerating the delivery of social, affordable and private housing, while also supporting families and individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness or who may be at risk of homelessness in the future. What is different now compared with three, four or five years ago is that we are able to intervene much quicker and families are asking for help much quicker. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, some families did not know they could come forward and get help, for example, in negotiating with the banks or dealing with their landlords. The position has changed and families now notify us much earlier if there is a problem and we can sometimes intervene to prevent problems arising in the first place. That did not happen in 2013, 2014 and 2015 because the State was not equipped or ready for it, if the truth be known, and funding was not available either. People became homeless quickly in those years. We may have been able to prevent homelessness in many cases if we had been able to step in at an earlier stage but, thankfully, we do that now and it is making a difference with regard to some of the numbers.

We have been working tirelessly to rebuild sufficient capacity in the housing market. As 2019 draws to a close, it is an opportune time to outline the progress that has been made and to inform the House of some future areas of priority action. Addressing homelessness continues to be a key priority for the Government and the Department in particular. To say that is not the case is crazy. Why would it not be a key Government priority? No sane person, on any side of the House, would want anybody to be in homelessness. Deputies should stop telling me the Government is ideologically opposed to helping or to finding solutions. We are not and no sane person would be. Of course we want to help. The Government wants to do all it can on this issue. It is our number one priority and it is silly give the impression that it is not.

We are working closely with local authorities and our NGO service delivery partners to deliver solutions for those individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Many of the NGOs, which have much to contribute, work closely with the Department and the local authorities in providing housing solutions and services. They do a good job and I accept that they also have a role as advocates. A lot of them are working with us and I compliment their work alongside our local authorities and housing bodies. There was an impression given in some of the speeches here on Tuesday that local authorities are not responsible for housing and that we are trying to move away and make it all about housing bodies. I have gone to all the local council chambers and made it very clear that it is not the case. Local authorities are front and centre to this. I compliment the difference they have made over the last two years when they

have been given the chance to do this. They have come a long way to reach their targets and to drive a new pipeline of projects. Naturally there is always pressure on them to do more and we will constantly ask them to do more but compared to where we were three years ago, when there was probably less than a couple of hundred social houses, now it is up at over 10,000 this year by a combination of all the different schemes as well. Local authorities are driving that. If any housing body wants to bring a housing project forward it is in conjunction with a local authority. It is either with one or under its instruction, and is also linked back to our Department. It is not a case that housing bodies are leading the way. Local authorities are in charge. I want to be clear on that. Nobody on our side has any doubts about that but there is a lot of confusion being spread about it on the other side.

While we are unfortunately seeing more individuals in emergency accommodation, it is worth noting that between October 2015 and October 2016, the number of individuals in emergency accommodation increased by 34%. The reason I give that figure is to try to show that a couple of years ago the figures were going up by 30%, 40% or 50% a year. We do not see that now. They are still far too high and we have had a couple of months where the number of people in emergency accommodation has gone up. That is really disappointing. However, the figure is not jumping in the way it was jumping by 30% or 40% in a year. That means we are beginning to make the right progress and the trends are going the right way. It is not quick enough but we have to stop the acceleration first and then try to bring it back down and eventually end it. The increase was 30%, 40% or 50% in some years. I think even at one stage the number of children in emergency accommodation went up by 54% in one year. Thankfully last year it was 1%. That is still not enough but it is a major point of progress that we are trying to build on as quickly as we possibly can.

The quarterly performance reports published by the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, show that more adults, families and their children are moving from homelessness to a home and the rate of exit is increasing. In the first nine months of this year, 4,389 adults along with their children left homelessness and moved to a home. The figure is 17% higher than for the first nine months of 2018. I am not saying it is enough but it is a big difference on last year, which was a big difference on the year before. If we keep going with those trends we will eventually get on top of this. That is what we are trying to do here. In Dublin, where 75% of families experiencing homelessness are located, 786 families moved from emergency accommodation to a home in the first nine months of this year, which is a 50% increase on the same period of 2018. I repeat, in case there are any doubts, that I am not saying this is enough but it is a big difference. If we can continue to do that and repeat it again in the next 12 months, we will go a long way to solving this. Nearly half the families presenting to homelessness services in the Dublin region were found a home without ever having to enter emergency accommodation. I made that point recently in debate. Four or five years ago, if 20 families became homeless, more than likely all 20 of them would enter emergency accommodation and would be there for a long time. That is what was happening. If 20 families present today, for ten of them we are immediately finding a solution and a home. That is a positive. Sadly, the other ten will still go into emergency accommodation but only for a number of months whereas a couple of years ago it could have been two or three years. That has all changed. Any time spent in emergency accommodation is too long; I want to be clear on that. However, it has come down a lot which means we are beginning to be able to react and find people a home much quicker, which is a positive development. We need to keep doing that and more of it. We can do that because the supply of housing has increased. That is key. Behind all this is the need to have a supply of housing, social, private and affordable. Over the last three years, over 12,000 adults have left emergency accommodation

with their children. This year it will be over 5,000 and next year it will be the same again with the money allocated. That is an important part. People in emergency accommodation need to realise and have a little bit of hope that there is a way out of this and it is not going to go on forever. Thankfully the majority of people who are in emergency accommodation will be out in the next couple of months. The difficulty and the sad part is that every week the presentations are just as high again. That is the difficult part here. The rent controls and changes that were brought in in May and June of this year will make a difference and help reduce the number of people presenting. When we analyse the data on those who are coming forward, it is roughly 50-50 whereby half are due to economic, rent or finance issues and the other half has to do with social issues and so on. We have to intervene in different ways for both. Those rent changes should help with one category.

When it comes to rough sleepers, no person should ever have to sleep rough. This has been a key priority of the Government and it is why over 350 new emergency beds were added this year in the Dublin region to the other 800 emergency beds that were put in place as Rebuilding Ireland was published. Last week, an official winter rough sleeper count was carried out and a total of 92 persons were confirmed as sleeping rough across the Dublin region that night. There were plenty of spare emergency beds in the region that night and shelter was available to any person who wished it. There is no lack of capacity to offer somebody an emergency bed who is sleeping rough. For different reasons people end up sleeping rough and we have to intervene every which way we can. The most important part is that there is an emergency bed for them which, again, is very temporary. They can then progress through the system to a more permanent bed. The services are there. There are new people running that service in the streets of Dublin and they are out every night trying to engage with people and encourage them to come in. There is capacity now and rightly so. That capacity is in every other county throughout the country as well. At the summits and meetings every week, we ask local authorities how quickly they are able to move people through the system and so on. We get the feedback and know that in most cases people are in emergency accommodation for quite a short period in most counties. In Dublin, Cork and Galway there is a little bit more pressure but in the majority of cases they are able to intervene quite quickly because they use all the different schemes.

People kept saying to us last week that we should not have the housing assistance payment, HAP. If they do not want HAP, that is fine. I will accept they do not like it, on the condition that they tell me where they would house 48,000 families that are using the HAP scheme today. We all know it is not the most perfect scheme long term.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** That is what we heard five years ago.

**Deputy Damien English:** We would like to have more long-term solutions but while we are building the new houses - we are now at the stage of over 10,000 a year - people need houses today. They cannot wait for the social housing delivery next year. That is why we use the HAP scheme. If Deputies do not like it, they might show me a better scheme in the short term.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Building houses.

**Deputy Pat Casey:** I am sharing time with Deputy Troy. In all fairness, the Minister of State is now asking us to come with a full housing plan. Everybody on the committee has worked with the Government on major pieces of legislation to progress through this House. We have also presented 13 Bills. It is wrong to say we are not part of the solution. We have been part of the solution. That should be recognised. I also must recognise the protest outside the

Dáil today on homelessness.

Most of my contribution will be about homelessness. I refer again to a proposal that was made by our committee and indeed legislation that was proposed by Fianna Fáil regarding the impact short-term letting platforms are having on the availability of homes which could provide a solution to the homelessness crisis. I was the first Deputy in this Dáil to raise the issue at the committee in 2016 with the then Minister, who clearly indicated that he declared a potential conflict of interest because he used a short-term letting platform for a holiday. He also indicated that he did not believe it was having a significant impact on the availability of homes for homeless people. At that time, we had 1,078 families and 2,026 children homeless. At the very same time, there were thousands of entire homes and apartments available on short-term letting platforms. The committee worked and prepared a detailed report on the impact the short-term letting platforms were having on the housing market. Fianna Fáil introduced legislation around the short-term letting platforms. We can clearly see that they are having a significant impact. In fairness, the Minister introduced regulation of the platforms on which we worked with him. However, all he introduced was a definition of a short-term letting platform and he was using the planning process to deal with it. I clearly said at the time that this will never work. It is now proven that it will not work. The amount of resources required to surf the Internet every day to try to establish how many properties are available for 90 days or more is almost impossible to reconcile. Figures obtained through freedom of information show that only 4% have applied for planning for short-term lettings and there is 0.3% enforcement. Clearly that process is not working. I pointed out at that time that what was required was the regulation of the short-term letting platforms, not the properties. Until we regulate them, we will waste resources and energy trying to get on top of this. If we had regulated the short-term letting platforms, they could have given us the detailed information that we require to use the 90-day definition that is in the Planning and Development Act, but we do not have that. I have always spoken about a whole-of-government response to the housing and homelessness crisis. I have raised it with the Minister at the Joint Committee on Housing Planning and Local Government. We need the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to bring in the regulation for the short-term letting platform from a tourism point of view, but there is no interest there. Where is the whole-of-government response? It does not exist, yet the Minister of State is looking to us for plans to resolve the housing crisis.

The latest homeless figures are 3,226 children, a 74% increase since June 2016, and 1,733 families, a 61% increase. At the same time here in Dublin, last night, there were 9,512 properties available on one short-term letting platform. Out of those, 4,790 were a whole house or apartment. What will happen this Christmas? There will be 3,826 children living in hotel rooms while 4,790 entire homes or apartments will be available for tourists or visitors. It is not rocket science. The mathematics are quite simple. That is one of the solutions we have been working on with the Government over recent years that has not been taken into account.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The Minister of State should take no comfort from the fact that the Minister won the vote on a motion of no-confidence on Tuesday night. The vast majority do not have confidence in this Government and we know why it won the vote. The figures released a couple of days ago once again revealed an increase in the people who are housed in bed and breakfast accommodation, hubs and hostels but they do not take into account the number of people sleeping on our streets or involuntarily sharing, that is, couch-surfing. The Minister of State said today that there is no limit, that anyone on the streets can go into their respective local authority and get bed and breakfast accommodation. That is not the case because there



are budgets set for every local authority. The Department is breathing down their necks telling them to try to keep below their budgets. That is a fact. I help people day in, day out, referring them to Westmeath or Longford county councils, which are being told by the Department that they are restricted in what they can spend. Either they are telling lies or the Minister of State is telling lies here in the Dáil this evening.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As a long-standing Member perhaps Deputy Troy might find-----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Either they are misleading or-----

**Deputy Damien English:** I can confirm-----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** -----the Minister of State is misleading the House today.

**Deputy Damien English:** If I may speak very briefly, I am absolutely clear on this. There is no limit or cap when it comes to providing shelter for a homeless person-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy must accept the Minister of State's word.

**Deputy Damien English:** -----on any local authority.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I accept that and I will take-----

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy can take it back now.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I will take it back. I welcome that because heretofore people were told they got only a certain number of nights, that they had to find alternative locations, and if they did not, they were out. That is fact.

Despite what he says, the Minister of State is not listening. He is seeking suggestions and is not listening. If he does not believe me, maybe he will take the word of his colleague, Deputy Durkan. If we can believe what is said in the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party meetings, he said the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government is not listening. If he is not listening to his own backbenchers, what hope is there for us on this side of the House? There was to have been an increase in the threshold from €2 million to €6 million, but for one full year the Department has prevented that change from taking place. If the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport thinks it is all right to allocate the roads budget at the beginning of the year and leave it to the local authorities to spend it, why is it not okay for the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to do the same at the beginning of the year and leave it to well-paid directors and competent staff to spend that money efficiently during the year? That would reduce the need for going backwards and forwards to the Department, which wastes much valuable time.

The Minister of State has repeatedly promised to revamp the tenant purchase scheme. That has yet to happen. Despite promising and repeatedly saying in replies to parliamentary questions that it is imminent, it has not happened. If that was changed and tweaked, it would facilitate people and enable them to purchase their own houses. The Government could use the funds raised to ring-fence and reinvest in new housing in the required area. The thresholds for people on the local authority housing lists are far too low. They are unacceptable. Anybody on a minimum wage, earning little money, does not qualify for local authority housing. For example, one of my constituents who has five children and works is renting a house. He gets up every day and goes to work. He is paying €700 a month to rent and can just about manage. The house has

been sold and the cheapest he can rent for now is €1,200 a month. There is no support for him. He is considering giving up work and going on the dole to avail of schemes. That is not right. There are no supports for people like him. The Department has failed to review the thresholds.

We are still awaiting an affordable housing scheme, which was promised more than 18 months ago, and according to replies to parliamentary questions that I have received, there is no intention of bringing an affordable housing scheme to Westmeath. There is a huge need for it in my constituency. Turnkey developments are welcome, but the manner in which they take place is not open or transparent. I raised this at a meeting with the senior executive team of the Westmeath County Council, which the Minister of State attended, last Friday morning. Local people are unaware of a turnkey development coming into the area. There is no proper or adequate mix of social and affordable housing and there are no plans to change that. Nobody can aspire to own their house in an approved housing body because they are prevented from doing so.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** In his opening contribution today, the Minister of State repeated what he said in responding to the motion of no confidence in his senior Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, namely, that the Opposition has come forward with bits and pieces of solutions but there is no master plan. On the one hand, that is patronising, while on the other, it is arrogant because it suggests that this Government has a master plan and a strategy when it is quite obvious to anybody in need of public and affordable housing that this Government and Rebuilding Ireland have failed. Even when the Taoiseach and the Minister get to their feet they acknowledge that we are not building enough homes and that there is a problem with supply. To put it back on the Opposition by saying that we do not have a plan but the Government does speaks volumes.

The Minister of State is wrong when he says we do not have a plan. I have brought with me copies of the plans we have produced to educate the Minister of State and show him that we are busy providing solutions. One is What is the True Level of Homelessness?

**Deputy Damien English:** I have read the so-called solutions.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I did not interrupt the Minister of State. Another is Achieving Energy Efficiency in Housing. Others include a Part 8 proposal on social housing units in Deputy Ward's and Ó Broin's constituency, Reforming the Private Rented Sector, Regulation of Short-Term Letting Platforms, Review of the Tenant Purchase Scheme, and a comprehensive alternative budget, which I will go through in a second, setting out what needs to happen, and which is a much more ambitious plan than anything the Government proposed. There is one on Waterford and a policy document on what is needed in my constituency. Just in case all of that is not enough, our housing spokesperson wrote a book on housing to set out the challenges and the solutions for the Government. I will donate this to the Minister of State as a Christmas present-----

**Deputy Damien English:** I have a signed copy.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I hope he will read it and learn from it because it is quite obvious to me that he has not read any of the policy documents or the solutions that have been brought forward. He is trying to complicate something that is very simple. We do not need big policy documents to understand the obvious, namely, that this State is not building enough houses. There are families that we all represent who cannot afford to buy their own home because there are not enough affordable homes. How many debates have we had in this Chamber? People

are sick to death of politicians debating housing. Week after week we get policy statements on housing. We need to build the bloody houses that people need. It is the Government's job to do so. Fine Gael is nearly eight years in government but it has not done its job. For eight years it has used the excuse that it needs more time but the people who need homes do not have time; their lives are passing them by. Children are stuck in emergency accommodation, week after week, year after year. What kind of Christmas will they have? We in this House are lucky. We and our children are fortunate enough to have proper homes but many people do not. That is who we, collectively, are failing. The Government does not need big plans. It needs to put money into building public and affordable housing but as long as it does not do that, it is ideological. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil stopped building public housing and left it to developers and landlords. It is all about HAP and RAS, with hundreds of millions of euro being spent in the private rented sector and precious little being spent on public and affordable housing. It is shameful.

The Minister of State came in here today and attacked the Opposition for not putting forward solutions and claimed that we do not have any. I am proud of my party's housing spokesperson, the work he has done and the solutions he has put forward. However, I do not have confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government or in this Government. I do not believe that we will have any solution to the housing crisis as long as Fine Gael is in power, or Fianna Fáil for that matter.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** We are having this debate because there are solutions to the housing crisis. Sinn Féin has solutions, as do the people protesting outside the gates and other Opposition parties in this Chamber, but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will not listen. My office, like those of other Deputies, is inundated with people looking for help in securing homes or preventing eviction into homelessness. It is absolutely heartbreaking. My colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has stood in this Chamber time and again putting forward solutions to end this crisis only to have them voted down or for Fianna Fáil members to sit on their hands and abstain. I will now remind the House of some of our solutions.

Sinn Féin in government would dedicate an extra €1 billion to build social and truly affordable homes. We would implement a rent freeze and give the equivalent of one month's rent in the form of a tax break back to renters every year. We would prevent landlords from seeking more than one month's rent on top of a deposit. We would introduce the so-called Focus Ireland amendment, as well as a homeless prevention Bill which would stop renters from being evicted into homelessness by putting in place a 60-day homeless prevention plan before anyone loses his or her home or tenancy. We would hold a referendum to give a constitutional right to a home. Sinn Féin would bring down rents and build homes because there is no other way to end this crisis. Most of what is said in this House is no more than window dressing.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I wish to speak about one issue that arises for people affected by the housing crisis, namely, the draconian practice of self-accommodation. The recent report from the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness found that families who are self-accommodating have to find their own emergency accommodation. They are not able to access vital supports such as a case worker who can assist them with the daily challenges of homelessness and more importantly, support them in getting out of emergency accommodation. On the face of it, the term "self-accommodation" suggests giving people ownership, autonomy and a choice about getting a roof over their heads but the reality on the ground is quite different. Last Christmas, parents were asked to vacate their hotel rooms, with their children in tow, to make room for tourists. This pattern was repeated on St. Patrick's weekend and

other holiday periods throughout the year. Christmas 2019 is just around the corner. I have had families with young children in my constituency office in Clondalkin. They have all of their personal belongings with them and no means of transport, apart from public transport which some cannot afford. Above all, they have no idea where they will spend the night. The whole day is spent on the phone ringing hotel after hotel and trying to source accommodation. I have witnessed the stress this causes parents and the trauma their children go through. I have seen hope disappear from their children's eyes each time they are told there is no room at the inn. On one occasion a couple with three children used my phone over an eight-hour period trying to find safe and secure accommodation for the night. Eventually they were successful but they had to get two buses to get to the hotel in question. After eight hours of stress, these tired and worn out parents and their three exhausted children had to bring all of their belongings on two buses and cross the city just to have a roof over their heads for one night. This is unacceptable.

If we are to be judged on how we treat our most vulnerable, we are failing badly. Self-accommodation must end and every assistance must be directed to those who need it. I will be raising this matter directly with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I will begin by supporting Deputy Ward's call for an end to self-accommodation. It is one of the most difficult aspects of homelessness for children. There are almost 4,000 homeless children in the country and the idea that they do not know where they will be from one night to the next is appalling. During last night's no confidence debate I referred to a study conducted by the Royal College of Physicians which describes the negative effects of homelessness on young children. It is really heart rending but the situation is even worse for those whose families are self-accommodating. In that context, I published the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill some time ago which went through pre-legislative scrutiny at committee. The committee wrote to me to say that it was recommending that the Bill would proceed. The Minister was given five weeks to respond to that recommendation and give his views on proceeding with the Bill. It is my understanding that the five-week period is nearly up. While it is not going to solve all of the problems of homeless families, it does address the fact that at the moment children are treated as dependent on adults. There is no recognition in law of the rights of children who are homeless. They are simply treated as dependants of homeless adults. If that Bill was enacted, the practice of self-accommodation for families would have to stop. Indeed, other measures like sending families to Garda stations, which happened in Dublin, would also have to stop. It is a small measure but it could make a real difference to the lives of children. The Bill has been through Second Stage in this House and is with the committee. It cannot be moved forward until such time as the Minister responds. I ask the Minister of State to revert to me with information on the status of the Bill.

There are now more than 10,500 people in homelessness. In my own region of the mid-west, an additional 42 people are listed as homeless in Clare and Limerick, 21 of whom are children. I know some of the families involved and some are large families. I have made the point in previous debates that we must start to provide accommodation for larger families because a lot of the children who are in homelessness are from such families. It does not matter how homes are sourced, only that they are found for larger families in order to get those children out of homelessness. It is difficult enough being homeless with one or two children but homelessness with four or five children must be absolutely horrendous.

Not enough is being done in respect of vacant homes. There are still many vacant homes around the country. Although there are vacant homes officers in local authorities, many of them have other roles within the housing departments in addition to trying to activate vacant homes.

In Britain, there is far more focus on finding out who owns vacant homes and getting them back into use. That needs to be done here. Many empty residential properties are in private ownership. I established the very successful voids scheme in local authorities when I was Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, but there remain many vacant privately owned homes. In some cases, there may be issues relating to the fair deal scheme that need to be addressed such that it is possible for families who have a relative in a nursing home to allow the person's property to be rented out. That needs attention because it is an opportunity that is not being taken.

I refer to the issue of using public land. I do not have with me the Labour Party policy document entitled Affordable Homes for All, but I presume the Minister of State has read it.

**Deputy Damien English:** I have.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I had it with me on the most recent occasion we debated this matter. The Labour Party has proposed the provision of 80,000 social and affordable homes over a five-year period at a cost of €16 billion. Our document outlines from where the money would come. On the use of public land, I am convinced there is an ideological policy that requires local authorities to use the majority of their public lands for for-profit private housing and not even the so-called affordable housing, which is just made available at a percentage of the market rate. I was sent a link to a contribution by the CEO of Dublin County Council, Mr. Owen Keegan, in which he clearly stated that the council was not allowed to use public lands solely for public housing.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is the case on large sites.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** We need clarity in that regard because there are many tracts of public land for which the council could very quickly put out a tender for one or more builders to come in and get on with using the land. I ask the Minister of State to address that issue in his reply.

Many Deputies have referred to the Ó Cualann model whereby a voluntary co-operative housing association has been able to build affordable homes in Dublin because the council gave it the land at a nominal price and the various levies and so on were not charged. Surely that model could be used far more widely on publicly owned land. On social mix, people in need of affordable housing could also be accommodated by models such as Ó Cualann. They have significant rents and cannot get a mortgage but are above the income limit for local authority housing, as mentioned by another Deputy. I wish there was movement on these issues and that these models were being used.

I acknowledge the comments of the Minister of State on Traveller accommodation, on which there has been some progress. However, statistics indicate that local authorities are still not spending the money they are allocated for Traveller-specific accommodation. A significant number of Traveller families are still living in totally unsafe and tough situations and that needs to be addressed further.

I support Deputy Casey on short-term letting. My colleague, Senator Humphreys, regularly speaks on the issue in the Dublin area. He knows the issue far better than I do as it is not as big a problem in my constituency. We need proper enforcement to ensure planning applications are submitted by those letting properties on a short-term basis because they are displacing people who would otherwise be able to rent the properties as their home. That issue needs to be looked



at.

On rent freezes, Deputy Ó Broin introduced the Rent Freeze (Fair Rent) Bill 2019 on First Stage today. The Labour Party very much supports the Bill. Now is the time to bring in a rent freeze. The 4% increases in rent pressure zones are being added to totally unaffordable rents. We have reached a point whereby rents are so high that people with reasonably good jobs and, in many cases, two salaries simply cannot afford the rents that are being sought. They have no security in their rented accommodation but cannot raise a deposit to get a mortgage because they are paying so much in rent. They are in a catch 22. A rent freeze would be of assistance in that regard while we await what I hope will be a ramping up of the construction of homes.

This issue has been discussed many times in the House, often on Thursday afternoons. No Deputy wishes just to talk about the matter. We all want to see something happening, more homes being built and, in particular, the number of homeless people declining rather than rising as it has been for months on end. Deputies have put forward practical proposals. All my comments have related to practical proposals, as have those of other Members. The difficulty is that things are still moving at a snail's pace. In the meantime, many people in the rental sector are stuck in the horrible situation of not knowing when they will lose their home, while many young children and their parents are facing into Christmas living in very precarious situations in hotels or hubs. We need to find solutions quickly. A protest on the matter is taking place outside Leinster House and I hope it will make a difference. What will really make a difference is action, construction and measures to ensure that people do not lose their homes in the first place.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will be sharing time with Deputies Paul Murphy and Coppinger. I have just come from the protest to which Deputy O'Sullivan referred. My apologies for being late. It was organised by the people who voluntarily have been out on the streets helping the homeless night in, night out in recent years because they are so appalled by the escalating housing and homelessness crisis. They have presented proposals to which I hope the Government will listen.

The scandalous housing and homelessness crisis results from one central factor in Government policy, namely, that it has facilitated the greed of vulture funds, landlords, property speculators and property hoarders. That is at the core of this crisis. The Government claims that the Opposition criticises but does not have alternatives. It is a dishonest claim and we wish to set the record straight. It is worth noting that before any motions of no confidence were tabled, People Before Profit and Solidarity, on behalf of the protestors, called for this debate on housing solutions. We have presented our solutions many times. I will reiterate them for the Minister of State.

The councils need to provide 20,000 public and affordable housing units on public land each year for the next five years. The Government must immediately stop the sale of public land through public private partnerships, the Land Development Agency or any other privatisation mechanism where such land should be used for public and affordable housing. The National Asset Management Agency's, NAMA's, remaining land assets and cash should be deployed to the provision of affordable housing, which should be genuinely affordable for those on average incomes. In addition, we should give more resources to co-operatives and approved housing bodies as well as increasing the Part V requirement for private developments to at least 20%, which should be taken upfront in land to be built on by the State rather than waiting for developers to decide when they will build.

There should be an immediate rent freeze and an end to evictions on the grounds of sale, which is the main reason people are going into homelessness. There should be genuine rent controls, as is the case in the rest of Europe, to pin rents to affordable levels. There should be punitive and escalating vacant site and property taxes to prevent speculation and hoarding by property developers and to bring empty properties back into use. Local authorities should have and use aggressive compulsory purchase powers to take over land and property that is lying vacant. There should be a constitutional right to housing for all.

A minimum of an extra €2 billion a year should be put into the provision of social and affordable housing. That money should be raised by a levy on the profits of landholders and speculators, closing down the loopholes the Minister has given those speculators, using NAMA's cash and using the money in the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. If this council housing was built, it would generate income for the State rather than the State paying out €700 million on RAS, HAP and other leasing arrangement payments.

In addition, as an essential measure the Minister should raise the income thresholds for social housing to the income levels of ordinary working people who are currently being lopped off the list. That will give the social mix required. Real supports should be given to people who are in homeless accommodation, particularly children so they will not suffer the child abuse and neglect they are currently suffering.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I have just left the protest taking place in front of and at the back of Leinster House. Those who organised the protest are ordinary people who have jobs and plenty of things to be doing. They have done far more through their activity and organising to address the housing crisis than this Government has done, even though that is supposed to be its job. To give a warning to the Government, the protest today reminded me of the early stages of the anti-water charges movement. People's anger is overflowing at both the lack of action on the part of the Government and the reality of policies that serve the interests of landlords and developers.

The protesters gave me a series of demands - a young man handed it to me - which I was asked to outline to the Dáil. Their demands are: that the crisis be declared a national emergency and be treated as such by the Government; the immediate resignation of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy; a national emergency liveable full-time unit to be set up immediately for those who are on the streets at present; dramatic change to the homeless accommodation in place. They call for an end to one-night only beds and rolling beds, to be replaced with 24-hour short-term beds. They further demand that an immediate, feasible rent cap be put in place, be it permanent or temporary, to protect people from evictions; HAP be granted before the lease is signed and that tenants should be under no obligation under the Data Protection Act to declare to landlords that they are accessing the HAP scheme; the recommencement and continuation of the building and supply of local authority housing and affordable homes; and full disclosure of NAMA-owned properties and the net worth of those properties and lands. They call for Irish courts to protect consumers' rights under EU law in mortgage arrears cases and to assess mortgage documents for unfair mortgage terms.

The protesters wish to see a forward way of thinking adopted and changes made. They demand to see the participation of Members and that homelessness be treated as a national emergency, first and foremost. It is a serious crisis that does not just affect the homeless but also mental health, the health services, emergency services, the education system and across the board. It seeps into every aspect of society, seen and unseen.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** People are hanging coats on the Ha'penny Bridge at present. A message has been left with them which says, "If you need one then please take one ... If you want to help, please hang one up". People are so desperate and hopeless about Government solutions that they are using self-help and working class solidarity as the only way to do something. The same solidarity has thousands of people marching and assembling outside the Dáil today and put this debate on the agenda.

Each time the figures are cited the Minister automatically talks about all the people who have exited homelessness. It is like asking for the figures for cancer incidence and being given the numbers of people who have been cured of cancer. It is a ludicrous set up. The Minister has been told on many occasions about the families, their plight and their suffering. One family I was dealing with was sleeping in a car in the Phoenix Park. The wife and daughter had their periods at the time. There was a woman with six children who were using two sets of bunk beds and a double bed. They were in that situation for well over one and a half years, despite the Minister of State's guff. There are families living on takeaways and going to community centres to do their laundry.

Given the anger among the public, I would not like to be the Minister of State facing into a general election. I believe he underestimates that anger. I salute the people who organised today's protest. It is very similar to those of the early days of the water charges in terms of it originating from the ground. I appeal to them to have further demonstrations in the new year. I appeal to the trade unions in particular. This is a workers' issue and they must come out of their slumber and take it up.

In terms of solutions, we have the land. Mr. Mel Reynolds has highlighted this fact for a number of years. Some 114,000 houses could be built on State lands. We have the money. We have the highest number of high net worth individuals and the Apple tax money, if only the Minister would take it. However, neoliberal capitalism is preventing public solutions. It is better to waste taxpayers' money on the HAP and give it to private landlords. Many people are becoming homeless for a second time under the HAP scheme, including a woman I met recently.

I can offer an example from Dublin 15. Fingal County Council says that 200 children from the Blanchardstown area will be in bed and breakfast accommodation over Christmas. That is a gross underestimate but, even so, it is an appalling figure. Why is that happening at a time when Fingal County Council has 90 acres of land sitting empty and undeveloped in Damastown? Our councillors and I put forward a plan. The council has agreed to build on the land, but nothing has happened. Why is that? The Minister of State says there are buckets of money available if people need it. Why has the Church Field site, as the council now calls it, not been built on yet? Why is the council saying it will start with 70 houses? What is happening now is that 20 houses are being built here and ten houses are built there. When I was growing up, one lived on a council estate of 400 houses. There was none of this 20 here and 20 there.

We must see public homes being built on public lands. It will not happen under this Government as obviously it is in its dying days. There must be a water charges or repeal the eighth amendment style movement to force Fianna Fáil - it has the same policy and all its spokesman could talk about was Airbnb, which is a little embarrassing - and Fine Gael to build public homes. It is the obvious solution.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** "Some days I don't even want to wake up because I don't want to face this day ... I am tired in school. Some days I would just sit there and not even

smile”. This quote is from a ten year old girl who is living in a family hub. Hubs, of course, are Fine Gael’s housing solution for every region of the country. A position paper by the faculties of public health medicine and paediatrics in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland on the impact of homelessness and inadequate housing on children’s health was published last Tuesday and it included that quote from the ten year old. It also included other quotes, statistics and truly shameful findings about the health impacts of homelessness and inappropriate housing on children. The paper in question showed that children kept in temporary accommodation for over a year “are over three times more likely to have mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression”. Dr. Julie Heslin, the lead author, has observed that delaying action is detrimental to children and stated: “We know that the impact on a person’s health and wellbeing of adverse experiences in childhood lasts well beyond childhood and becomes apparent in adult life as mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and relationship difficulties, as well as physical disease, such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes.” That is a shocking judgment on the Government’s housing policy of the past nine years.

Like my colleagues in Solidarity-People Before Profit, I warmly salute the people who have taken the time today to march through the streets to demand, for the umpteenth time since 2008, that urgent action be taken on the housing crisis. I have asked the Minister several times when he expects equilibrium to be reached in the Irish housing market, that is, when supply will equal demand in such a way that all those seeking to purchase or rent properties can do so at reasonable sustainable prices, mortgages and rent. The Minister cannot tell me because he knows the Irish property market has always been a dysfunctional, rigged market. Recently, I saw an interesting RTÉ programme on YouTube. It was from 1964 and in it a famous journalist, Mr. John O’Donoghue, was questioning tenants in dire accommodation in central Dublin and families moving into new homes in the then new suburb of Finglas. It is clear there was a housing crisis in Dublin at the time and, despite the creation of the three new towns of Tallaght, Clondalkin and Blanchardstown, that crisis has continued in one form or another up to today.

Even when the level of housing construction high at some points in the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s, there were still lengthy housing lists and people in homeless accommodation. Of course, since the crash, under the watch of this Government, the crisis has accelerated. The core reason was the almost total withdrawal of the State under the Ahern-PD-Green Government and the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government from direct housing construction and provision. They foisted Tory Thatcherism on our people and they have left 10,500 or 11,000 of them homeless today. The housing needs of our people were left at the mercy of stop-start land hoarding and massively greedy developers, property and estate agents and landlords. It is a corrupt industry, a rigged industry, and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have sustained it. Very often, both parties were funded by that industry. We have ended up with 150,000 families and citizens on housing waiting lists or on HAP or RAS tenancies, and with 7,000 homeless adults and almost 4,000 homeless children. Those are the late October figures and the Government would not even give us the statistics on the current situation. These are shocking statistics for the second wealthiest country in Europe, with Luxembourg the only country above us, and one of the four or five wealthiest countries on this planet. It is shameful. It is not just Deputy Kate O’Connell who should be apologising over the behaviour of the Government in housing and health in particular.

Over the years, like colleagues on this side of the House, I have submitted many possible housing solutions to the Government in my submissions to public consultations, in my annual pre-budget submissions and in many speeches and representations. I have also introduced my own Private Members’ Bill on a constitutional right to housing, the Thirty-ninth Amendment of

the Constitution (Right to Housing) Bill 2019, which is still on the clár of the Dáil. The purpose of the Bill is to begin the process to allow for a referendum to be held for the electorate to decide on the insertion of a right to housing into Article 45 of Bunreacht Na hÉireann. The wording put forward in the Bill reads: “The State recognises the common good as including the right to adequate and appropriate housing and shall guarantee that right through its laws, policies and the prioritisation of resources, with particular regard to children.” With the support of the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers and the excellent Oireachtas Library and Research Service, we decided to put that wording into Article 45, which sets out the directive principles of social policy, because we thought even this Government might accept it and run with that Bill.

The genesis of my Bill comes from a long-standing, deep concern about the housing crisis and, in particular, the increasing numbers of children experiencing homelessness, especially from 2014-15. In 2011, there were 641 children experiencing homelessness and, under the watch of this Government, the figure has increased almost 500% to just under 4,000 this year. Without excluding other cohorts of people experiencing homelessness, my Bill explicitly states there must be particular regard to children, given the longer-term impacts of homelessness on them.

In 2015, four and a half years ago, I sought a meeting with the Ombudsman for Children because I saw how bad the problem was becoming at that time, with young mothers with children coming into my office and my mobile clinic, shaking with the fear at the prospect of being evicted and becoming homeless. I met the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, in that summer of 2015 and made a complaint to him about the treatment of homeless children. I met the Children’s Rights Alliance before it travelled to the UN and submitted its third and fourth combined parallel report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to highlight the treatment by the Government, and by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in particular, of the homeless children of this country.

Like other Deputies, I link in often with the CEOs of Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council, my two local councils, and other local housing officials in regard to vacancies and upcoming projects. At present, it is like swimming in treacle given the projects are so slow. As Deputy Mitchell will know, sites that were to be built through Dublin City Council direct build, and where the building was to start in the summer of 2017, only started a few months ago, for example, at Burnell on the north fringe of our constituency.

In February of this year, I brought forward a Dáil motion on homelessness, which passed Dáil Éireann with the support of colleagues, which I deeply appreciate. It summarised the approach of myself and my colleagues in the Independents 4 Change technical group. I called for the Government to declare a housing emergency and implement the necessary emergency measures to urgently address the crisis, to hold a referendum on the right to housing and to commit to rehousing families who have been in emergency homeless accommodation, including hubs, for 18 months or more. We know that in Sweden people are only allowed to be in that type of accommodation for a day or two, and they are then moved into at least HAP-type accommodation or direct provision by the state or the city council of Stockholm or other cities. The motion also called on the Government to commit to rehousing all other families experiencing homelessness by the end of quarter two of 2019, to limit the use of hubs and emergency accommodation to three months maximum and to increase supports to schools in areas with large populations of homeless families. We have heard lots of complaints from teachers during the past couple of years, for example, when we met the INTO and other trade unions, about the impact on homeless children of trying to cope with school life in many local area schools. The



motion also called for free counselling for all families and children experiencing homelessness, should they wish to avail of the service, an increase in the number of available emergency beds and single rooms in dry hostels and the extension of the Housing First programme.

Above all, on behalf of my Independents 4 Change colleagues, I asked for the creation of a national housing executive or a number of regional housing executives to align closely with the Land Development Agency and local authorities to begin a massive programme of direct build social and affordable homes on public or compulsorily purchased or acquired land - whatever we have to do - with the elimination of developers from those sites, and with a target of at least 35,000 social and affordable homes per annum. This is the minimum we need to start digging into those lists. I still meet people who have been on housing lists for ten, 12, 13 or 14 years, as well as people who, in desperation, having being thrown out of private rented accommodation after eight or nine years and who must then wait a minimum of two years. The number of people in emergency accommodation for over two years is deeply shameful and is outlined in the statistics we have been provided with belatedly. The approach we advocate is based on the fundamental principle that, as the great Gene Kerrigan has said, housing is too important to be left to the developers. We should have learned that lesson.

The current epidemic of homelessness, which has been created by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Fine Gael Independents, is the shameful result of the commercialisation of housing and tenancies and the sustained policy decisions to make housing and renting unaffordable and unattainable. I agree with colleagues that this will be a huge issue. All families, even those not directly impacted, are going to feel the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil approach and their housing market ideology, which is clearly preventing the State from addressing the massive demand for new affordable and social housing. The Minister of State's party and its coalition partner have a blind faith in private market developers. They have barely delivered 20,000 homes per annum when we know we need a minimum of 150,000. Only a massive programme of direct build by local authorities under a regional or national housing executive, working closely with the new Land Development Agency, will deliver. If the Government does not do that, there will be many of us on these benches after the general election who will be prepared to implement that kind of programme.

**Deputy Michael Harty:** The topic is "housing solutions". I have spoken about a housing solution in the House on a number of occasions, that is, a rural or regional relocation scheme whereby families in areas of high pressure are offered the opportunity to relocate to an area of lower pressure. In rural Ireland in particular, there are many towns and villages that have a large amount of vacant property which could be brought back into use and brought to a level that would allow families to relocate and to revitalise those towns and villages throughout Ireland. What we are missing in rural Ireland is people. There is a flight from the land. Many people on housing lists in high pressure areas would have a connection with a rural area, regional area or town and could be offered, voluntarily of course, the opportunity to relocate to such towns and villages.

This would be a far less expensive way of accommodating them. When we consider the rents that are demanded in high pressure areas and the rents available in low pressure areas, there would be a huge saving to the State. It would require an inter-agency approach between the Department and the local authorities but surely there is a mechanism whereby people could be offered the opportunity to relocate from housing lists or emergency accommodation into accommodation which is available in rural towns and villages.

In Newmarket-on-Fergus, there is a proposal to build 52 private houses and 18 council houses in a village which has 48 vacant properties. It makes no sense to go through the planning process, and all the hoops and hurdles that have to be overcome, to build housing estates like that and to put in the infrastructure to support those estates, when there is a village that has the capacity to provide 48 houses, apartments or other dwellings for people who wish to be housed within a village, county or region like that. This is replicated right across the country. I am sure there are villages in the Minister of State's constituency, as there are in every Deputy's constituency, where there is a substantial amount of vacant property. These towns and villages are losing their vitality and sustainability and their shops, services, post offices and Garda stations. The whole fabric of rural communities is beginning to unravel, yet there is a huge amount of vacant property in these towns and villages which could be offered to people - on a voluntary basis, of course - if they wished to relocate within the county or region or nationally. The Peter McVerry Trust is now extending out beyond Dublin. It is looking into areas such as Ennis, where it is acquiring property and can provide accommodation for people who wish to relocate. It would provide the wraparound services to help support people relocating. There was a rural resettlement scheme in the west over the past 20 years but it did not have wraparound facilities and supports to accommodate people who were relocating. They were generally left to their own devices. Some remained but many did not, purely because they were put out in the middle of the countryside without supports. What I am talking about is revitalising towns and villages and introducing a relocation scheme. It might only solve 2% or 3% of the housing crisis, but when people move into rural towns and villages they become a major asset in their revitalisation. It makes no sense to build council houses or private houses in a village or town which has many vacant properties. A relocation scheme should be used to the maximum.

Pillar 5 of the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness reads: "Ensure that existing housing stock is used to the maximum degree possible". Pillar 1 relates to emergency accommodation and reads: "Provide early solutions to address the unacceptable level of families in emergency accommodation". The first pages of the Government's plan refer to how it will deal with this. The plan states that by mid-2017 emergency hotel and bed and breakfast-type accommodation for families will only be used in limited circumstances and will have been largely replaced by suitable permanent family accommodation through the delivery of additional housing solutions, including an expanded rapid-build housing programme. Will the Minister of State tell us in his reply, if he is to reply, where that rapid-build housing programme is? Has it come to an end? Is it no longer being pursued? The same pillar states that targets for tenancies to be provided by Housing First teams in Dublin will be tripled and that the housing-led approach will be extended to other urban areas. Where is this action? Has the Government delivered on it? Finally, under the same pillar, the plan states that additional supports will be provided to tackle the complex needs of homeless people, including those with dual diagnosis, in other words, those with mental illness and drug addiction. That is a major problem, which has also been addressed by Peter McVerry, but where are the Government's solutions to it?

I will repeat what I said in the debate on Tuesday night. Public lands should be used for the public good. In the health committee and in the Sláintecare report we have said public money should be spent for the public good in respect of our hospital and health services. This also applies to housing solutions. Public land should be used for the public good because the private market will not solve the public housing crisis. It is slowing down the provision of social housing. It will most likely be a more expensive way of providing social housing and is unlikely to solve the problem.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We now move on to the Social Democrats and the Green Party. I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I am sharing time with Deputy Healy.

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

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I said much of what I wanted to say today on Tuesday evening. On numerous occasions - during Leaders' Questions, Topical Issue debates and debates on motions and legislation we have introduced - I have outlined some of the things we believe need to be done. It is hugely disappointing that the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Murphy, did not pay attention to what many of us in the Opposition had to say, which was very clear from his remarks the other day. It appears, though, that it is not just Opposition suggestions the Government has been ignoring. The Minister of State's parliamentary party meetings are not especially confidential and reports today about the most recent meeting show that there are obviously concerns about this issue within his own party.

One thing we believe is absolutely essential - we have been saying this for several years - is the delivery of a housing agency, a delivery agency, with proper, powerful teeth and targets in place, not the weak Land Development Agency that has been established. Project management of public landbanks is crucial if we are to achieve affordability, which will be the critical issue. We should accumulate more landbanks and prioritise public landbanks for housing that is affordable to buy or rent. We should allow approved housing bodies to borrow off the Government's balance sheet. We had some of the approved housing bodies before the Committee of Public Accounts and they were very optimistic about what they could deliver and where they could source the funding. They believed there was a sizeable amount they could do in terms of a different type of offering. We need to develop and properly fund an affordable purchase scheme. Whereas the Central Bank is renewing the policy it has been pursuing, and no one wants people to get further into debt, there is no doubt but that people are paying multiples in rents over what they would pay in mortgage repayments. The central issue is that we drive down the price of delivering houses. We should urgently design and adequately fund a cost-rental scheme such as the Vienna model. I am sure many others have talked about this. I am trying to be in the Committee of Public Accounts and here at the same time so I have not heard all the debate. We should implement a nationwide rent freeze. This has been done in Berlin; there is absolutely no reason we cannot do it here. It should be done and should have been done years ago.

The housing assistance payment was introduced as a short-term measure. Some of us were very critical of it when it was introduced and said that unless there were an accelerated house-building programme, it would not work or would become the de facto housing solution. It is not even working. I do not know whether there is even much point in saying that today because I have said it in a Topical Issue debate and on Leaders' Questions. There is a wait of about 12 weeks in my area, and I know mine is not the only one, even to administer that. It is becoming even more difficult for people to source accommodation with the housing assistance payment. We need to abolish all special tax benefits for REITs and the so-called cuckoo funds. The kinds of communities they are building will be transient. There is no commitment to this country; their only commitment is to profit. A very dangerous approach is being taken in this regard and, as I said, the over-reliance on the housing assistance payment needs to end.

In the very short time left to me I will make just two further points. I was at a meeting of

Kildare County Council with all the Deputies and Senators from the county. There was huge criticism - not only from me but also from people from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - of the strategic housing developments. Irish Water is an impediment in this regard. The strategic housing developments are very problematic regarding the bypassing of the local authorities. I refer not only to the democratic side of things but also to the functional side. That needs to be revisited, and I will talk to the Minister of State about it again in greater detail.

The homelessness problem is accelerating outside of Dublin. In areas that do not have city infrastructure there are no agencies to provide the extra suite of solutions that, for example, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive provides. It is becoming a greater problem. That has been spoken about by some officials in local authorities to whom the Minister of State might talk about this.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I have spoken about this issue in the Chamber on numerous occasions over recent years. I have presented a whole range of solutions to the housing and homelessness emergency that we have. I have supported a range of solutions put forward by other Opposition parties and individuals. I have produced my own Bill, the Housing Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Bill 2018, which was voted down by the Government and Fianna Fáil. We have presented a range of solutions to the housing emergency, but the Government is not listening and will not listen because the current housing policy is not an accident. It is not an error of judgment or anything like that. Rather it is deliberate. It is a policy followed by this Government and started by a Fianna Fáil Government in 2002. I was a member of South Tipperary County Council then and I remember well the circular coming from the Department, effectively abandoning public housing provision by local authorities. I warned then that we would end up in a situation like this. This Government is wedded to the current policy, big landlords, vulture funds and cuckoo funds. It is not prepared to listen to solutions from Opposition parties and individuals.

I have spoken a number of times this week on this issue but I want to deal specifically with the question of local authority income limits for housing and the rental situation. Many families are excluded from the local authority housing waiting lists because the income limits are too low. They have been in operation for many years and have never been increased. That means that very low income families are being excluded from the list. In Tipperary, if a family of two adults and two children have €27,501, they will not get on to the housing list. That is not because of the local authority, as the Minister tried to imply this morning. That is because those limits are set by the Minister and the Department. That €27,501 is €8,500 less than the average wage. Families on very low incomes are not getting on the housing list. That means that they have no housing support. They pay full rents over a long period. They are in the catch-22 situation where they will not get a mortgage either. In Tipperary, on €27,501, if a person got a mortgage, it would be for a maximum of €96,000. The average cost of a house in Tipperary is €183,688. It is not possible for that family to get a mortgage. Worse still, most of those families pay in excess of 40% of their income on rent. Many of those families pay more on their rent than they would on a mortgage, if they were able to get one. Threshold has a current example of that. A three-bedroom house in Limerick costs €1,132 per month in rent. If that family was able to get a mortgage for that, it would cost €838 a month, €300 per month less than the rent.

The Government has created that situation. It is outrageous and mad, and it has to be dealt with. I have called on numerous occasions for a statutory emergency to be declared and for the implementation of a nationwide rent freeze at significantly reduced rents.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** Thankfully the housing crisis and the issues causing it are at the top of the agenda this week. Statistics have been quoted by all sides over recent days and they are irrefutable. The housing policy of Fine Gael and this Government since 2016, and the previous Fine Gael-led Government from 2011 to 2016, has been acknowledged as a failure. Unfortunately, ordinary people are suffering as a result. However, it should come as no surprise to us that Fine Gael has taken this attitude to housing. The attitude of the previous Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, to the vulture funds when he allowed them to come into the country unregulated was telling. Instead of defending the ordinary people, he viewed the vulture funds as serving a role in our economy, despite the manner in which they treat people around the country. His attitude was cold and heartless and this same attitude has pervaded through this Government, which has allowed a failed housing policy to go unchecked despite the suffering of the people of this country. Ultimately, however, the people will be the arbiters of this Government. They will have their opportunity in the, thankfully, not-too-distant future.

In the meantime, it is our responsibility to offer solutions to the problem. Supporting home ownership must be a Government priority. However, Fine Gael has seen a fall of ownership levels to the lowest in half a century, with a generation excluded from ownership. All the while, Sinn Féin, Solidarity and People Before Profit have not supported any efforts to boost home ownership levels. The Government must do more to assist people to get out of the rip-off rental market. The Government must start delivering on housing. After six separate plans and a dozen launches, it needs to put bricks and mortar on the ground. While other parties grandstand with motions and Bills that will not build an additional home, Fianna Fáil worked on delivering changes and will continue to hold this Government to account.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Fianna Fáil is doing a great job.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** Fianna Fáil is committed to facilitating and enabling home ownership. A strong affordability scheme is vital to securing that. Recent stories about first-time buyers struggling to access credit from banks highlight the need for greater State supports. Fianna Fáil supports the Central Bank rules and its independence. However, we need greater involvement from the Government in helping people to realise the dream of home ownership. Fianna Fáil will launch a new first-time buyers special savings incentive account, SSIA, style scheme to support savers in getting together a deposit to meet Central Bank rules. We will ramp up the supply of affordable housing units after Fine Gael scrapped the scheme in 2012. We will introduce a rent freeze to limit costs for renters. We will launch a shared ownership scheme to help buyers get on the ladder. We will reform the mortgage market and its rip-off interest rates that are above EU levels.

Affordable housing was a key aim of Fianna Fáil in budget 2019. We actively support home ownership and aim to launch an ambitious new scheme that will provide subsidised homes on State-owned land throughout the country. We want a new €100 million per annum affordable housing fund. The investment will construct at least 6,000 homes by 2021. It quadruples, from €25 million, the originally allocated money per year. We will resolve the ongoing mortgage arrears crisis by ending the banks' veto and holding them to account on behalf of their customers.

Some Deputies in this House try to link us to the Fine Gael housing policy and to say that when Fianna Fáil was in government, things were the same. The statistics show otherwise and it is clearly the case that Fianna Fáil Governments in the past succeeded in building houses, even though many Deputies in this House tried to show that that is not the case. Comparing the period from 2002 to 2008 with 2011 to 2017, Fianna Fáil built five times as much local author-



ity housing as Fine Gael. It also outperformed Fine Gael in affordable housing by a ratio of 2:1. The total number of social houses built by local authorities under Fianna Fáil-led Governments in that period was 33,705, while under Fine Gael it was 7,421. These figures prove that a Fianna Fáil-led Government will build houses, and we look forward to the opportunity to do so.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I am pleased to facilitate Deputy Malcolm Byrne's maiden speech in Dáil Éireann.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** As this is my maiden speech, I first thank the people of Wexford for the opportunity to represent them in this House. I got involved in politics for three core reasons. Those reasons, which relate to the State's obligations, continue to be important to me. The State must ensure people have access to education and training in order that they can realise their full potential; provide sustainable employment; and, most important, provide a roof over all our citizens' heads. The issue of housing and homelessness featured prominently in the Wexford by-election campaign, as it did in the other by-election campaigns. Along with health, it was the most prominent issue on the doorsteps.

Politics has to be about solutions, not just slogans, and I will briefly set out three solutions to this problem. The first relates to generation rent, as it is known. Deputy Healy is correct about the amount of money individuals and couples have to pay in rent. Nationally, the average rent for a three-bedroom house is €1,403 a month. In my constituency of Wexford, it is €863 a month, rising to between €1,200 and €1,250 a month in north Wexford. If individuals or couples can show they have been able to make such rent payments consistently over a three-year period, that should count when they apply for a mortgage. While we support the independence of the Central Bank, if it is necessary to change the rules to ensure regard is had to rent payments in mortgage applications, that must be done. We cannot continue with circumstances in which those who belong to generation rent are locked out of owning their own homes. The State should not accept that.

Deputy Harty raised the matter of rural resettlement. It is important to get people to live in our small towns, villages and rural communities. However, the lack of water and sewerage infrastructure is a challenge in that regard. Irish Water has no interest in supporting small towns and villages, and it is debatable how interested the Government is in encouraging rural Ireland to grow again. In County Wexford, towns such as Camolin, Ferns, Campile and Ramsgrange cannot grow and develop as they do not have the water and sewerage capacity to do so. The lack of houses for young families has a knock-on effect on schools and services in those communities. It is essential, therefore, that funding is set aside to provide water and sewerage infrastructure for small towns and villages, not just in Wexford but around the country, in order that homes can be built to revitalise those rural communities.

The Government's policy on social housing is to blame the local authorities when things go wrong. Local government in Ireland has a very strong and proud record of homebuilding going back to the foundation of the State. Between 1922 and 1924, when this country had nothing, 2,000 houses were built by local authorities under the Cumann na nGaedheal homebuilding plan, known as the £2 million plan. To put that in context, the same number of houses was built by local authorities under this Government last year, and we are a much wealthier country now, almost a century later. We have to give local councils the power to build housing. I have raised this matter with the Minister of State previously. If a council wants to build social housing within its own area, it has to go through the Department. It then takes four stages and an average of two years - longer in many cases - before we see shovels in the ground. We have to

give responsibility back to local councils.

It is very easy to throw around slogans when debating housing. I hope that by listening to our concerns about generation rent, giving local authorities the opportunity to respond to their own communities and putting water and sewerage infrastructure in place in rural areas, we will be in a position to address some of the housing challenges we face.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I congratulate the Deputy on his maiden contribution.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I am sharing time with Deputies Bríd Smith and Gino Kenny. This debate is about housing solutions, so I will speak directly to that issue. The first solution is to build public housing on public land. Mel Reynolds, who is a housing commentator and expert, has said we have enough public lands in this State to build 114,000 public homes. The Government's plan for public lands depends on the new Land Development Agency, which generally favours a 60:30:10 ratio. That means making an arrangement with a private developer for 60% of the homes built on a development to be sold at market rate, 30% made available for affordable schemes, and 10% used as social housing. Under that approach to our public lands, a little over 10,000 social homes would be built when we could have a multiple of that.

The Government's definition of an affordable home, broadly speaking, is one that costs €50,000 less than the market rate. That is not affordable in my book or as far as many young workers or those on average incomes are concerned. Affordable housing should be provided at the cost of building. The cost of State land should be deducted, taxes should be waived and the builder's profit kept to a minimum. I will speak more about that last point in a moment. The State could also provide interest rates close to 0%. If all those costs were stripped out, they would amount to 50% of the cost of a home. The Government should be able to provide homes, which would cost €320,000 at current market rates, for little more than €160,000. The 114,000 houses which could be built on public lands should be 50% social housing and 50% affordable housing on that basis.

We also need drastic cuts in rent prices. A five-year rent freeze is on the cards in Berlin. We need to go further than that and introduce rent control measures which cut rents because they are currently unaffordable. We need to ban evictions into homelessness, pass the Anti-Evictions Bill 2018, make eviction on grounds of renovation illegal and make the sale of property as grounds for eviction illegal, as is the case in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark.

Finally, we need to give the State the wherewithal to build houses. That means going beyond direct labour units in councils, which we had in the past, and nationalising the construction industry. Let us put the construction industry under public ownership in order that the public interest can be put first, rather than the profits of the few. That would be beneficial for building housing, as well as for projects such as the national children's hospital.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** The Government will have been in power for nine years come February. In that time, the housing crisis has become incrementally worse. If the Government was a business or any sort of commercial enterprise, it would be run out of town. However, we are not talking about a business but about people who have to endure a homelessness crisis that has been compounded by various phenomena and successive Governments. It is not a natural phenomenon for 10,000 people to be homeless. It is the most unnatural phenomenon one can comprehend. More than 10,000 people do not have a house. They are in emergency accommo-

dation. It is quite incredible. A mantra has echoed around this Chamber that we cannot make the same mistakes of the past. I find that hard to get my head around. The mistakes of the past involved us building public housing on a massive scale, which has largely been very successful. It gave working people a house to call their own and has been transformative. I find it hard to comprehend how this could be considered a mistake.

The Taoiseach goes on about how it is not about ideology, but it is. Why would the Government want to sell public land to private developers when we have the greatest housing crisis in the history? Think about it. It does not make sense. If we have a crisis, one would think that we would build rental, affordable and public housing on public land rather than sell it to private developers. It is hard to understand.

The Government has also created the conditions compounding this crisis, particularly around vulture funds and property speculators. Other issues around people accessing council housing involve income thresholds. Income thresholds are far too low. Many people want to access public housing but cannot. They are discriminated against because they work. The thresholds should be far higher. I would go as far as to say that people earning €80,000 or €100,000 should be able to access public housing if they wish. There should be no barrier to that.

I do not know if the Minister knows of a man named George Clarke, who is a presenter and architect. He is running a really good campaign in Great Britain around council housing. He was brought up in a council house in the 1970s. A total of one million people are on the waiting list for council housing there. The right to buy scheme has seen millions of council houses sold off without being replaced. He said “we desperately need a new generation of well-designed, genuinely affordable council houses for those in most need”. He says that “in 1919, the Government’s ‘Addison Act’ gave local councils the power to build thousands of new homes across Britain after the First World War” so this is something that goes back 100 years in Great Britain, which has a significant history of building public housing. At the same time, we have a tradition in this country where it is normal for 10,000 people to be homeless. This policy is a complete failure. It is to be hoped the general election in the new year will see the end of this Administration.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is a tragedy but it is also a truth. It was also something I was extremely proud to witness. The solution to the housing crisis was outside the gates of this House today. It involved the working poor of this city, Newbridge, Mayo, Galway, Cork and Kerry, to mention a few of the places where the people I met today are from. Ordinary people in their thousands called on this Government to give them homes, not hostels or hotels. They know the solution and they are out to demand it. I would say to them, “Let your movement grow and mushroom and a thousand flowers bloom”, because that is what the Government will listen to. For how long have we stood here and put forward Bills and motions from all sides of the House, yet the Government has listened to nothing except those who lobby it consistently to do their bidding - the developers, the builders, the banks and the wealthy?

Insofar as the Government has a housing policy, I congratulate it because it has worked. It has worked for the people whom the Government supports and who support it - the REITs, the vulture funds, the cuckoo funds, the bankers and the developers - and for whom the Government has bent, changed and moved the rules and goalposts. What it has failed to do is provide decent, affordable public housing for ordinary people on public land, and the public is well aware of it. The Government may be happy that it has pleased its cohort of supporters among Fine Gael, but it is certainly not implementing a policy that is looking after the people. The

lifetime of this Government is short. I hope that it is very short-lived and that it does not get back in to rule over this sort of crisis.

Among the things the Government has done is drive up rents and refuse to implement a rent freeze, which it thinks will not work. It thinks we need more landlords. Remember, one third of the Members of this House are landlords. We have more than enough landlords. What we need is State-funded and State-run homes of a decent nature for the people. I am thinking of people like Ruby. I tweeted her photograph to the Minister. She carried a placard that read, "I'm Ruby. I'm four. I'm homeless." I tweeted another photograph to the Minister showing a family from Newbridge with four children who have spent two years in a hub. The eldest son has asthma and there is no sign of them being housed. I meet families in Ballyfermot in Dublin South-Central every day who are being evicted, and the Minister of State knows this because I have spoken to him about them. They are being evicted from housing assistance payment, HAP, properties. HAP is no solution for these people. We need radical reform and change. I believe that the people power outside the gates is the start of something new and frightening for this Government. Long may it continue until there is a complete change in the policies of this State to put people and their housing needs before the profit and greed of the Government's cohort.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I welcome the opportunity to speak again on housing. It is the biggest crisis we have and the biggest challenge we face, not just here in the Oireachtas but within society. Only last week, Fianna Fáil put forward a Private Members' Bill. I had the opportunity to speak about that to the Minister of State. Much of what I have to say echoes what I said last week. Seven days on, the frustration is increasing. It involves the families in south Kildare with whom I have dealt regarding the current housing and homelessness crisis.

The Minister of State's first priority in terms of serving the people is housing and providing a safe and secure home - a roof over the heads of families in absolute despair who are getting more and more despondent as the days, weeks and months go by. These are the people stuck in emergency accommodation and family hubs. They are trying to give their children a decent home and to get them to school every day but they do not have any of the resources or supports any family would hope to have for their children.

The first measure is about supporting home ownership. The fact that home ownership has dropped to the lowest level in 50 years is frightening. Home ownership is slipping away from a generation and the situation is getting worse. Younger people I know, like my brothers and sisters, may never have the opportunity to own their own home. That is okay if someone has security of tenure and security regarding rent, but we do not have either in this country. It affects all of the young people and indeed the not-so-young, because every week I come across older people in this situation. I discussed this with Age Action Ireland at the weekend. I meet single people in their 60s, 70s and even 80s who might be widowed or separated and who do not have a home to call their own. This must be an incredibly frightening place to be in after living one's life and doing one's best for this country and society and one's own community and family. Young people in Dublin and areas close to Dublin, including parts of my county of Kildare, are paying up to 55% of their income in rent. They are trying to save for a deposit but are unable to do so and are being put to the pin of their collar.

The Government has produced six plans accompanied by 12 different launches. We can have all the plans and launches in the world but it is down to delivery and bricks and mortar on

the ground.

It comes down to outcomes that properly serve the interests of those whom we represent.

Fianna Fáil has worked on policy changes, made suggestions and brought forward Bills. Only last week, Deputy Darragh O'Brien brought forward a good Bill to try to provide that 30% of all units built go to affordable housing, in addition to the requirements under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The proposed Bill would also be a means of reforming planning laws to prevent cuckoo funds from taking over complete blocks of developments.

What else do we need? This debate is focusing on solutions as well as problems. Fianna Fáil has put forward solutions around more local authority and public housing. The record of the Fine Gael Government over the past nine years is absolutely shameful. We need affordable homes and Fianna Fáil has brought forward legislation to provide them.

Shared ownership of homes was done away with under this Government but we need to bring it back. We need to reform the mortgage market and help people with deposits. Fianna Fáil has suggested a type of special savings incentive account, SSIA, scheme through which we would, if we were in government, support people to own their first homes by helping with deposits.

More designated student accommodation is also important. In our large cities with universities and other third level educational facilities, students are competing with private renters and people who are availing of the HAP scheme. It is incredibly difficult for all involved. Until we get more affordable accommodation, we are going to have that element of competition between different sectors of society and there will be more victims of this crisis.

Smaller towns and communities around the country are in real danger of stagnating because of a rural housing policy in many local authorities that essentially prevents planning for one-off houses. I am not suggesting a plethora of one-off houses but stronger cases need to be made for people who want to build homes in their communities and support their families. Generations must be helped to look after one another. Such a move would also support local businesses. Those communities need to survive and thrive. We need to open up planning in that area. As my colleague, Deputy Thomas Byrne, said, we also need to invest in water and sewerage schemes to enable small communities to survive and thrive.

We need landlords in the system, but unfortunately there is a complete over-reliance on the private sector at the moment, which is causing problems for many people.

We appreciate the opportunity to raise these issues. I ask for the Minister of State's help on behalf of all of those whom I represent in south Kildare and parts of Laois and Offaly who are on housing lists and trying to acquire their own homes and have a place to call their own. I quoted a poem of Padraic Colum's last week that we all learned about the importance of the opportunity to have one's own home and keys. It is essential that we all, across this House, do what we can to ensure that people have that opportunity.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I have said many times in this House that the first obligation on any Government is to keep its people safe, and this Government has failed miserably to achieve that across many sectors. If I wanted to sum up the Government's attitude and explain it to someone, I would give the example of the Government's support for the banks when they evict people and for the vulture funds when they treat people badly. The Government turns its back



on the people who are affected.

This Government introduced vulture funds to this country. The citizens of this State, through the Government, own or have an interest in some of the banks. If the Government wants to solve part of the housing crisis, it must acknowledge that the policies of the banks are the source of some of the biggest issues that we now face, including homelessness, evictions, repossession, people being put out of their homes and not having any security.

In July of this year, one particular bank sold 2,100 loans to a vulture fund, according to its portfolio of sales. Those were people's homes. They ranged in value up to €250,000, so they were not big, expensive properties. These were homes to which people who hoped to own a home aspired. The Government allowed that transaction to take place and left those people in a vulnerable position with no security whatsoever. AIB is preparing a home loan sale that may result in 6,000 of those types of loans being transferred to a vulture fund. Other banks, aside from the one I have mentioned, will sell on family homes and AIB might be next.

David Hall, the mortgage debtor advocate, called this situation a tsunami. Many commentators will try to undermine him and others by calling that a ridiculous suggestion, but the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach today discovered, as evidenced in the portfolio of sales of a particular bank in April 2019, that banks are now stockpiling for sale homes and mortgages with which they cannot deal. The banks are saving the costs that would have been associated with legal fees, administration and finding a solution to the problems within the bank and will cast the people affected to the discretion of the market and what the vulture funds might do with those houses. That is the kernel of the problem for a considerable number of people. The Minister of State and his Government do absolutely nothing about it. The Government gives tax breaks to those funds. In fact, it does not tax them at all. The Government allows the banks that it owns to do this to its people and will not change direction regardless of who tells it to. All of that is being piled on top of the housing crisis.

Local authorities simply cannot deal with these issues. I have seen how planning applications and suggestions from local authorities are treated by the Department. It is heavily bureaucratic and some of the loops and hoops through which people have to go to deliver houses in an emergency situation are almost nonsensical. These are not normal times. We are in an emergency. Notwithstanding that, the Department continues to put people through hoops and put obstacles in the way of the real delivery of houses.

I agree that there should be a construction programme directed by local authorities with real solutions because they have the information. Local authorities and councillors know their housing lists inside out and do not have to be told anything. They are being stopped in the street and asked when a son or daughter will get a house or by a couple hoping to get a house who want to know when their case will be resolved.

I do not know who the speaker was but the Minister of State said that they were to pay for bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels. The implementation of that as a policy does not work, and it is not the case that councils will do it immediately for people who are in desperate straits. That is simply not right. There is a policy that the Minister of State may have set down but it is not being adhered to across each and every county. As a result, we get different approaches to his different policies.

Deputy Doherty has a Bill before the finance committee because the Minister of State is looking for solutions. It is the No Consent, No Sale Bill 2019. I will support him on that Bill because it was brought forward in the absence of any understanding of any real policy by this Government.

I introduced the Affordable Housing and Fair Mortgage Bill here, assisted by the Master of the High Court, Ed Honohan, which went nowhere. The Government did nothing about it. As a result of ignoring all the Bills before the House that have passed Second Stage and are waiting to be debated in committee, the Government has introduced money messages and further obstacles of bureaucracy. It simply will not listen to anybody. Fr. Peter McVerry was on a television programme the other night. He has no political interest, but by God did he lay it on the line for the Government and tell it where it is going wrong.

The courts are dealing with cases where houses are going to be repossessed. That will mean that families will be put on the street. I know of a landlord in Dublin who is trying desperately to hold on to his house. There are at least six people living in that house who will be on the street. I know a lady and her children in Bray who have been before and humiliated in the courts. She has been dragged by security officers out of the bank as she tried to present her case directly to it. She has been threatened by the sheriff in the most appalling of ways. She is trying to hold on to her home for herself and her children and this State stands idly by and allows the thuggery that is involved in removing people from their homes. The Government should be ashamed that it has allowed this to happen.

I point the Minister of State to the Glenbeigh sale where those who are trying to seek legal representation because of the manner in which that sale was conducted cannot get the Abhaile scheme. Even some of the schemes Ministers have in place are not able to be accessed by the people who need them most.

The one man who stood in the gap and stopped some of the vultures and the banks behaving the way that they did, which I thought I would never see happen in this country, including thuggery and corruption - one can throw all the names one likes at it - is Ed Honohan. He gave everybody who came before him a chance. He held the banks to account and the President of the High Court, with a nod, I am sure, from the Government, took all those cases away from him. That is a shame in itself. It is administration that is not right and should not be accepted. I ask the Government to start in the courts with the banks it owns and stop these terrible evictions and repossessions and do something concrete about this issue.

On the vote of confidence, I agree Fianna Fáil sat on its hands. It did the same with the motion on the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris. The fact of the matter is that a Minister is acting at one with the Cabinet. If a Member tables a motion of no confidence in the Government, I will vote for it because that is the way it should be. I honestly hope that this supply and confidence arrangement, which is a farce and is accommodating all this stuff, comes to an end quickly in the new year so that at least the electorate can have its say.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I acknowledge the contributions made by previous speakers on topics such as the treatment of homeless people and people in mortgage arrears or on housing assistance payment. I will focus on the strategic housing development, SHD, process and make a few constructive comments about it. I appeal to the Minister of State and his senior colleague to take these on. The Minister, Deputy Murphy, reviewed the strategic housing development process earlier in the summer. I believe I was one of the few Deputies who made a submission

to that. He is due to lay it before the House. I ask him to pause and take some constructive comments on board before he does that for the simple reason, and he may not be aware of this, that he is in danger of creating, at the very least, a difficult situation and needless tension in some settled residential communities that accept there will be housing developments in particular areas but never envisaged the scale, densities and heights that were intended. The SHD process drives a coach and four through all of that.

I do not want people to think I am leaving aside the topic of homelessness or any of the other allied issues around housing, but I have a limited amount of time and I want to focus on the SHD process. One of the commonest themes that has emerged in the past six to eight months, and it has become very pronounced more recently, as I do house calls, which I do weekly, and meet parents who are in their late 50s or early 60s who ought to be enjoying their twilight years - I am sure they do not have a particular issue with this - is that more of their adult children are returning home. That is a fact. It is not a cliché or an anecdote.

The most acute case of that was in a part of Tallaght, in my constituency, where a mother told me her four adult children had come back to live at home, varying in age from 25 to 35, because they cannot afford rents. They are fortunate, and I am being ironic, in the sense that they are from Dublin, live in Dublin and work in Dublin and can at least can exercise that option to return to the family home in Dublin. A person from rural Ireland living in Dublin who is paying extraordinary rents does not have the opportunity to exercise that option to return home. In most cases, these adult children are returning home to try to save a deposit for a house.

One of the issues with the SHDs, and I will return to it, is that they are promoting build to rent predominantly in Knocklyon, Scholarstown, Tallaght and Citywest, in my constituency. They are not promoting build to own. The Minister of State is asking people who cannot afford existing rents and who have returned to their family home to avoid having to pay those extortionate rents to save money for deposits to take advantage of build to rent in their local community where extortionate rents will be charged. It simply does not make sense. They want homes. They want to be able to buy. We have to be able to subsidise that, if necessary, because when it is balanced out, as I have said on a number of occasions, with the amount of money the State is spending on housing assistance payment, it goes into a black hole. The State certainly does not get any benefit from it. I acknowledge that, without the private rental sector, there would be no homes for people who are on the housing list, but there is no benefit to the State. The State does not get any asset benefit from the HAP.

The second point I want to make is that chief executives of local authorities are becoming increasingly concerned about the speculative nature of many of these strategic housing development applications. There are scores of them before my local authority, South Dublin County Council. Some senior officials in different bodies believe these are speculative, and if the developers secure planning permission, they will simply flip the properties to make a profit.

When it was set out at the start of 2016, the strategic housing development process was well intentioned. The whole idea was to try to fast-track planning to deliver houses on the ground. Since then, we know, as a result of academic studies and journalistic articles, especially those in *The Sunday Business Post*, that the delay in the planning process is a contrived delay brought forward by developers and supported by their public relations companies and the Construction Industry Federation. The idea has been to create the impression that what is stopping houses from being built is a delay in the planning process. Yet, planning permission for thousands of SHD units has been granted and thousands exist on paper only without a shovel stuck in the

ground.

I wish to return to the issue around SHDs. Perhaps I ought to have articulated it having served on a local authority for 18 or 19 years. I would have taken An Bord Pleanála out of any fast-track process and ended the process with the decision of the local authority. I came from and served on a good local authority with an excellent housing department. I did not always agree with the planning decisions but it was a good housing department that was transparent, publicly visible, utterly democratic and allowed public representatives to represent the people who elected them. It allowed those representatives a strong voice when planning applications came forward in communities.

This is the greatest scandal for ordinary thinking people. In the case of Citywest and the Fortunestown area, a local area master plan was devised in 2012. It covered how the area would develop in terms of housing, amenities, facilities, the provision of sports and cultural facilities, transport and traffic etc. Yet, a ministerial order can simply override the local area plan and the county development plan. In the case of Citywest, even if the developer had a mind to take note of what was in the local area plan, the plan is hopelessly outdated now. What was being proposed in 2012 was not eight, nine or ten storey mass-density build to rent accommodation. That plan proposed settled residential mixed developments. There were some apartments as well as duplexes and homes where people could make their families. The area is beside a major transport hub with the Luas. However, not everyone who lives in Citywest wants to go to the city by Luas. People who live in Citywest know that the green line is 99% off road but the red line encounters all manner of traffic and obstacles on its way into the city. It can take one hour and 20 minutes to get from Citywest into the heart of the city centre.

This is only beginning to hit local communities because the SHD process is beginning to gain traction now. More and more are going into the system. In Knocklyon, on the lands owned by the former Taoiseach, the now deceased Liam Cosgrave, Ardstone Homes wants to build close to 600 units, which are almost all apartments. It is not beside a college, business or Luas station. It is miles from a Luas station. It is not beside a hospital or business park. It is a build to rent project. It is 100 or 200 yards from housing estates where adult children are returning home to live because they cannot afford rents. I put it to the Minister of State that there is no greater metaphor than that development. It represents a complete failure of Fine Gael housing policy. There is no greater metaphor than someone applying and being granted permission on lands owned by a former Taoiseach and President of the Free State. It was the ancestral home. What we will see eventually on the land is 600 units of apartments that do not promote family living or community. They are not particularly well serviced by public transport, notwithstanding what the developer might say.

In Tallaght, the board turned down several SHDs and said we needed a master plan for the area. In fairness to the local authority and the elected members, the county councillors are now considering that. It may help provide a context so that we do not ghettoise parts of the town again. If any built town suffered in the past 30 or 40 years from planning mistakes, it was Tallaght. This is an opportunity to ensure we can build a modern, thriving, dynamic centre and improve on what is in place rather than repeat the mistakes of the past and end up with four, five and six storey buildings where there are no families, a transitory population, no one bedding down, and dwellings surrounded by absolutely no amenities. That cannot build a good society.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** If one thing sums up the Fine Gael attitude to housing it is the fact that no Fine Gael Deputy has spoken in this debate other than the Minister of State. That is a

real pity and it proves our suspicions that this is not a focus for that party. Frankly, the sooner Fine Gael is out of Government, the better. That party is completely and utterly out of touch with reality.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Fianna Fáil could have voted Fine Gael out of Government this week.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I agree with many of the comments of my colleague, Deputy Lachart, about inappropriate apartment development. It is happening everywhere else. The focus of my contribution today will be the *Irish Independent* headline that referred to the commuter belt buckling as new homebuyers are forced further out. The article refers to the great pressure that will be on schools and public transport in the commuter belt. I wish to let Fine Gael and the Deputies in the constituencies know that we are already under major pressure with schools and public transport in particular and with general amenities too.

My constituency colleague, the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, showed utter detachment from reality today when she was interviewed on Newstalk. She said Fine Gael had learned the lessons of the past and that the facilities were being put in place in conjunction with new housing. She instanced a playground in Ratoath and an extension to a second level school in Ratoath as well. That is her home town. Ratoath will not be the focus of most of the housebuilding in County Meath in the coming years. Moreover, the extension to the secondary school in Ratoath is long overdue. The playground, welcome as it is, is not the answer to all the problems with regard to our facilities.

The Minister seems to have completely forgotten the town of Ashbourne, where a major public park has almost completely fallen off the agenda. Fine Gael seems to have completely forgotten the scenario in Ashbourne with regard to schools. We had to bring five principals into the Department to plead the case for a primary school. It opened in September with 100 pupils, many of whom were going to school in other parts of the country. Some were going to school in Wicklow, Drogheda and the south side of Dublin instead of going to their local school. I raised the matter in the Dáil many times and eventually the Department took cognisance of it. The Minister does not seem to be aware of the pressure on school places in Dunshaughlin and the rural area between Dunshaughlin and Kilcock.

There is simply no planning for the housing coming to these areas. There is a vast amount of housing in Dunshaughlin. School planning is not what it is, especially at second level. Fine Gael does not seem to be aware of the problems in east Meath and Drogheda relating to school places. Fine Gael seems to be quite happy with many of my constituents being stuck in traffic on the N2 at Primatestown simply because of a lack of action. There is a grossly inferior bus service. What really took the biscuit was that the Minister promised a review of the Navan rail line. The Navan rail line was cancelled by the Fine Gael Government and is not really part of the national development plan. It is incumbent on the party to speak the truth. It is also incumbent on the party to know what is actually happening on the ground, to know the problems and to try to plan for the future, but Fine Gael has failed to do that.

We fully recognise that people will want to live in County Meath and that there is a major housing crisis in County Meath. It is caused simply by the lack of supply in Meath and by the lack of supply in Dublin as people move out from Dublin, something they have done for many years. We need a Government in touch with reality. We need Deputies in the Dáil who are in touch with the problems of their constituencies. We saw in the by-elections my colleague to



my left and my namesake, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, elected in Wexford. He has been pushing through me the issue of second-level places, particularly in Gorey. I refer to other colleagues. Deputy Darragh O'Brien mentioned second-level places and primary places in his constituency. Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee has done so as well. Kildare has another considerable issue. I refer to special schools in Wicklow. Deputy Casey, beside me, is nodding his head as well. He has problems there. Yet Fine Gael Ministers will go out and say that they have all this in hand. They do not, and the public knows that they do not. In the new year, at some point, when the Brexit issue is sorted - I acknowledge the comments in that regard from one of my colleagues - there will be a general election. At that point, it will not be Dáil Éireann that will have a vote of confidence in the Government.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** In February.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** It will not be Dáil Éireann. It will be the people of Ireland. Whenever the election happens, the people will have a chance to have their say on a detached and out-of-touch Government and finally solve the housing crisis, as we see Fianna Fáil, leading in a number of local authorities with smaller parties, starting to get to grips with the problem and trying to come up with real and practical solutions and get more people under roofs and finally solve our homeless crisis. What I hope happens after the next general election is that there will be Deputies, such as the Fianna Fáil Deputies and others who spoke in this Chamber, who have a real interest in this issue because they know and are meeting the people on the ground, and that we finally will get to grips with this problem. While the general election cannot necessarily happen before Brexit is sorted, the sooner it happens after that the better.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** It was unfortunate that Deputy Thomas Byrne was not informed that there were speakers listed to make contributions this afternoon.

This is a debate on housing solutions. It is important to say that the Government does not have a monopoly on good ideas in relation to housing. We do not claim to have the monopoly on good ideas in relation to housing. Indeed, it certainly is not an ideological one, despite the best efforts of some in mentioning repeatedly that my party has some sort of difficulty with the provision of housing of any type. That is completely inaccurate. The record of the Government speaks volumes as to our concerted efforts to ensure that everybody has a home and that as many people as possible are taken off the housing lists and put into homes.

Homelessness is a significant issue and the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs which I chair wrote a report, particularly as it applies to children, in conjunction with the Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, and published it a number of weeks back. The report is now being considered by the Government.

It is important to mention some of the solutions to this housing crisis. We have changed planning law. As the Members will be perfectly aware, this has been referenced and lauded by a couple of Members in the context of it being picked up. It is important to note that. We have introduced fast-tracking of planning applications. We have to a certain extent pushed quite hard the master plan concept in local authorities which some local authorities have been good at pushing.

In my constituency, a master plan is currently on display and for public consultation and it is picking up a significant amount of objection on such grounds as density. These are the issues that we have been debating in this House for a number of years. If one looks at Dublin city, ev-

ery opportunity to build up is thwarted by the planners. I will give the obvious example of Tara Street. On Tara Street, the local authority members passed the local development plan with a height cap. An application was submitted for a building of similar height to the cap and the planners refused it on the basis that it was too tall. There is the irony in the Irish planning system. We will continue to be fixated with ensuring that we provide as many homes as possible, get as many people out of unsuitable accommodation and deliver upon commitments that not only the Government but this House has given to the public to do all it can to improve upon the lot of those 10,000 and, indeed, the 67,000 or 68,000 people on housing lists across the State.

The other matter that I wanted to touch upon was the culture in this House of blaming the Government, stating that it is all Fine Gael's fault and that approaching our ninth year in government we should have resolved this housing crisis, we should have done all the rest of it and we should wave our magic wand and resolve the housing crisis in the morning. Of course, the reason we have this housing crisis is because our economy was collapsed by the Members opposite. It is ironic that they criticise us for not prioritising housing. I am sure the Members opposite are aware that we had no money to prioritise anything up until probably 2015 or 2016. It is important to note that having not built houses for quite a number of years, there is a hang-over of approximately 200,000 properties that are not in the housing stock of the State and that should be. However, I go back to the title of this debate, which is "Housing Solutions", and thus have no particular interest in dwelling too long on the mistakes that politics has made in the past.

I repeat what I said at the start, that no Government and no party has a monopoly on good ideas when it comes to housing. There have been some good solutions put forward by Members, including Members opposite. It is appreciated because it resolves the problem. Even if it is only for a person or two, that is a solution to an individual or a group of individuals and that is what we are here for. It was Deputy Lahart who referenced that we are here to deliver for our constituents. We are here to improve the lot for our constituents and across the country.

I will finish with a comment on density. We must stop building out. Not being critical of Deputy Lahart, we must stop looking at a site as large as the site he is referencing in his constituency that happened to be owned by a former member of Fine Gael and criticising a planner or, indeed, a construction company for identifying such a considerable site and saying that it is a good site for the development of housing. Where I agree with the Deputy though is on the issue of unfettered access to purchasing large volumes of apartments and houses for rental only. There are, of course, all sorts of reasons that rental is a necessity in any market but when the purpose of the development is for rental only, Deputy Lahart is correct that there is an issue with building a community where that will not promote family life in general terms. We still have not resolved the issue of long-term leases in the residential market. We still have short-term leases that can only be reviewed every year or so, and put up by 4% or thereabouts, depending on where they are in the country. The difficulty is we are fixated on home ownership. Given our history, that is understandable. However, it is not sustainable for us to continue with such a considerable percentage of home ownership. The State must acknowledge that there is a large number of people in society who cannot afford to buy a property and who, depending their circumstances, may not be eligible for social housing, and it is something that we must facilitate. It is the same across the world in every state that I can think of. I am not suggesting for a moment that it should not be an ambition to support home ownership. That said, there also must be an acknowledgement that there is a percentage of Irish society that will not be able to afford to buy a home. That is where the State must come in and assist them. That includes the likes

of long-term leases and long-term rental agreements such as are done all over the world. We do not seem to do them very well here.

I wanted to reference density and ensure that we acknowledge that we need to build up. In Dublin city, within 5 km or 10 km of the city centre we are still sprawling. We are still filling in the north county of Fingal with two-storey properties with a front garden and a back garden. Maybe that is fine. That is fine, of course, for a huge portion of Irish society. In Dublin city centre, however, we are still objecting to apartments and high-rise development. In one constituency not too far from here, a Member of the other House has objected cumulatively to more than 1,000 properties in his given community. This sort of stuff has to stop. We have to recognise that we have to go up in the city centre so that we can justify spending billions of euro of taxpayers' money on mass transport systems. It is absolutely essential that we provide the throughput. Dublin city centre is no longer where people come to shop. It is no longer where people come solely to work. There are many reasons people go to the outskirts of the city but the justification for spending billions of euro in taxpayers' money on transport systems where there is a density problem such as in certain parts of south Dublin is that the density is not there and the throughput is not there. That has to be acknowledged. I thank the Acting Chairman for facilitating my contribution.

**Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe:** I will be brief, as I do not wish to repeat what has been said by previous speakers on the issue of homelessness and the shortage of housing. I will focus on my own back yard of Cork and in particular on Cork East, where the Government could be doing more. The common denominator that arises in many villages and towns in my area is Irish Water, which is not progressing developments. I will give the example of Glanworth, a little village in my own parish. Cork County Council gave approval for a developer to build houses with some to be allocated for social housing. The builder cannot start. Irish Water has put an obstruction in the way because a facility is not working properly. Lately we were led to believe that they were to be included in a bundle of other villages and projects but somehow, the village of Glanworth fell out of the equation. I have raised this with the Minister of State before. Leading on from Glanworth, one can go to Mitchelstown, which significantly is located just off the M8 and has great potential for economic growth. It is hindered also. No one can build a house in Mitchelstown at the moment. It is ironic that Irish Water is the problem here again. I understand that while the wastewater treatment plant in Glanworth is not working properly, what has been taken out of that plant is being taken to Mitchelstown and both towns are being hindered. It has been brought to my attention that in Castletownroche people are interested in building houses and Irish Water again has put an obstruction in the way. The Minister of State is getting wrapped up in the cities but rural Ireland needs a fair chance of growing as well. To grow, it needs houses, social, affordable and for the person who wants to get into the market, that is, for the working people. I have only been here for three and half years. These issues have been going on for longer than three and a half years with Irish Water in the Cork area.

I want to touch on the density issue. It is all fine having high-density developments within cities and major urban areas. In east Cork, in the likes of Cobh and Middleton, they are asking for high-density developments that are in no way attached to the town centre. Builders are standing back and will not get involved in the development. This is also delaying the construction of houses. I know most people here have been focusing on homelessness and the need for more social housing. If we do not get houses built in our villages and towns, these people could end up migrating to the bigger urban areas and creating a bigger problem down the road for whoever will be in the next Government.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English):** I would need about an hour to go back over all the issues. I will touch on some of them. I have pages of notes here so I will come back to everybody with comments on most of the issues they have raised. I will try to work backwards. There is a common thread between a lot of sites, as stated by Deputy O’Keeffe, in respect of Irish Water trying to reach those sites that are earmarked and so on. Even on a lot of our own sites, there are issues with delays on connections and getting started. We are working with Irish Water on that. The Deputy mentioned Mitchelstown, which was raised with us by Deputy Stanton as well. It is a different issue in terms of investing in the plans and that. As we did not have investment in water infrastructure for many years, we are playing catch-up. There are plans to do that and we will do it and allocate the money. That is one issue. The other issue is the speed of being able to reach the sites that in some cases have houses on them. We are working with Irish Water on that as well. Likewise, we work with other utilities such as the ESB, which has brought in more staff to deal with connections more quickly. It is ongoing and I think we are getting on top of it and will solve it. Deputy O’Keeffe and others have flagged it and we are dealing with it. It is different from the issues the newly-elected Deputy Malcolm Byrne is raising in respect of servicing areas that probably are not on Irish Water’s plans. I agree with him on that. It is an issue we have discussed with Cork and other councils when there are towns and villages that we want to see developed in a sustainable way. This needs to be done under Project Ireland 2040, which can and will save rural Ireland. There is a mismatch between Irish Water’s initial plans and those of some local authorities. I have made it very clear that we have to join those plans together to get them corrected. We want to find solutions to that as well. We were in Tipperary during the year launching a very good plan they had for rural towns and villages to allow for servicing sites to make them available to locals as well. Deputies may wish to have a look at that. It is a good document. Our Department launched it. We believe in it and will work with them and will find funding to make it happen. The issue is well raised. It is common to other counties as well.

Deputy O’Loughlin has gone but she also raised one-off housing, as have others. I encourage Deputies to check the records on this. There is a perception that Fine Gael is blocking one-off housing and is not for it. There has been an average of 6,000 one-off houses every year for the past three or four years. That is quite a lot. In places like Galway, where one sees a rate of nearly 70% or 80% for one-off houses, that is not sustainable either. We have to get the balance right. Certainly, people have to have one-off houses when they are working their land, farming in their local communities and wanting to look after their families. That is allowed for. However, a lot of people who want to live in rural Ireland would like to live in a village or a town if we can develop it right and make it affordable to live there. We are very much focused on that. I believe we can achieve that through Project Ireland 2040.

I cannot let it pass that Deputy Thomas Byrne mentioned the rail line to Navan. I will try to stay calm on this but I am going to put out some facts. It is absolutely essential that we get that rail line built again, without a doubt. It is part of my job as a local Deputy and as a Minister of State to make it happen. We will get it back on track. The first step is doing a cost-benefit analysis to prove we are entitled to taxpayers’ money to build it. That is the way we do everything now through Project Ireland 2040, through capital plans. There is proper research and evidence and I can stand over it. That is the way the Minister, Deputy Donohoe runs this country and that is why the public finances are back in order. The first step is going to happen in the months ahead with a re-examination of the matter. I have no doubt it will put the Navan rail line back on track. Thereafter, we can secure the funding under Project Ireland 2040. If Deputies read

the document, they would note the Minister, Deputy Donohoe stated that he will do a review of his capital plan at the end of 2021. That is the opportunity. If the study confirms Navan railway line, we can allocate the money and it can be put back on track there. Again, we did not cancel it. It was never allocated by anybody. The Fianna Fáil Government and previous Governments announced it about ten different times.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** We built it as far as Dunboyne.

**Deputy Damien English:** It was announced loads of times. There were leaflets and posters that the railway line was coming but no money was set aside for it at all. It had not been brought through the planning process. When it is put back on track, we will bring it through the planning process and we will allocate the money and deliver it. It is needed. It is the only part of the greater Dublin region that does not have a rail connection. It was not cancelled. I will say, also, that in the way we now do our business, every Department has joined-up thinking. We have roads, rail and all the different connections working together. When I first started at my first council meeting, the Navan rail line and the motorway were being looked at. I asked the Fianna Fáil Government of the day to link the two together and put motorway and rail together at the same time. I was told we cannot do that, those two do not talk to each other. Thankfully, that has changed now. All our agencies talk to one another, we have proper planning and delivery and that will continue. If we stick to our plan, which was put together by the whole of Government, that will work.

I want to touch on Deputy Boyd Barrett's comments first. He was one of the first to flag up that this would be an issue in the early years. When people say this Government has been here for nine years I ask them to judge us on our performance since we made housing a number one priority in 2016 and allocated the resources. By the end of this year we will have delivered over 100,000 housing solutions in different combinations of all the schemes. As time goes on there will be more permanent social housing as opposed to having to use the HAP scheme and so on. The Deputy is right to say that there were signs that we had to step in before then. When we came into government in 2011 we did not have any money. We were €20 billion short every year. The Deputy flagged this problem in 2013, 2014 and 2015. The first chance we got to put real money behind this and make real plans was in 2015 and 2016. We did that. I ask the Deputy to judge us from there on. I will take criticism on those couple of years but I will not take the Fianna Fáil criticism that we are here nine years. The first four or five years we were trying to cover the ground it left us with, which was a serious mess, based on construction as well. I am going on about that because every speech tonight has tried to get at Fine Gael on this as well.

I have not seen the list of demands from the protest outside today. I will look through them. Previous marchers have asked the Government to go to 10,000 social housing units and thankfully we have reached that level this year. Now I hear talk of 20,000, which is about right. We are not that far off and I agree with Deputies on that. Other parties hope it will come to that level too. Other people's plans are not anywhere near 20,000 a year but we are. We will set aside the funding under Project Ireland 2040 to bring us to 12,000 social housing units a year. Next year it will be 11,000 but it will be 12,000 the year after. If we add in the affordable housing that is in the system we are not far off the 20,000 we need to get to every year and keep it at that.

Some people are not here now but the Fianna Fáil spokesperson was here all day telling us that Fine Gael is against social housing and that if we let Fianna Fáil back in it will fix it, that it has a proven track record of building houses. That was said on Tuesday night as well. As for the reason we lack social housing, in 2006 and 2007 when this country over 12 months built



90,000 houses, which were needed in the long run, but how many were social housing?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Very few.

**Deputy Damien English:** A total of 4,500 which is less than 5%. That is my point. If we had built social housing every year for the past 20 years we would not be in the situation we have today. Thankfully that has changed. We had a five-year plan which leads into our 20-year plan, Project Ireland 2040, to put social housing back where it should be. I ask everybody else commit to that. Some have but everybody else should do the same and not do what they did in the past which was to build houses, in a not very co-ordinated way, which were not necessarily for social housing.

What happened after that year? I want to focus on Deputy Malcolm Byrne, the new Member. He is right to say that sustainable jobs are very important. One of the first parts of Rebuilding Ireland involves having a sustainable construction sector so that people who go to college, who take on apprenticeships and develop their skills in the construction sector know they will have a safe job for a long time, not boom and bust, but that there will be a sustainable construction sector that will reward their efforts in training and education. Their teams will be rebuilt and others who go into the business of building housing will know that it is a safe sector. That is what we are trying to do. A sustainable housing construction sector will deliver in or around 30,000 houses every year for the next 20 years. It will not be a case of 50,000 one year, none the next year, 90,000 versus 10,000, but a steady supply. We are nearly at that point. We have come up to it steadily in the past three years to get to that level. This year it will be over 24,000, next year over 26,000. I will not take lectures from Fianna Fáil Deputies telling me that my party is not concerned about housing or social housing because it is not true. They need to check all the facts and figures because we act in a sustainable logical way that will add up.

I have listened to Deputy McGuinness and many of his colleagues for a long time telling me that tens of thousands of people will be evicted from their homes. That is scaremongering and it has not happened because we do not let it happen. We have a lot of schemes to work with people who are in trouble and may lose their houses through the banks. Our core system has protected the family home in most cases. Yes there are some whose cases are completely unsustainable for whatever reasons and eventually this changes. In the majority of cases, however, we have worked with people and kept them in their family homes. It is repeatedly said here, and I have been listening to it for years, that there will be tens of thousands evicted a year. That has not happened and it will not happen because we do not let it happen. Thankfully we have designed many schemes, for example, the mortgage to rent scheme is a great scheme. When a mortgage is unsustainable we can step in on behalf of the State and buy the house and rent it back to the family, with the option to buy it back. There are plenty of solutions. People should engage with us. Deputy McGuinness mentioned one or two cases where it sounded as if there was not enough intervention. I will check them out with him.

He claimed that my party brought in vulture funds. He should look at the history books. When we came into government we were handed a construction crisis, with 3,000 unfinished estates, 300,000 people out of work and 16% unemployment. That is what was handed to us. That is what led to funds coming into this country to buy up properties.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** So this Government did bring in vulture funds.

**Deputy Damien English:** It was not Fine Gael policy that brought them in.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** This Government did bring in the vulture funds. The Minister of State has just admitted it.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Opposition should not try to rewrite history just because we are getting close to an election.

Deputy Thomas Byrne raised the issue of commuter belt areas. We are trying to prevent the sprawl which has come back to the density issue. Under Project 2040 we will have to accept higher density in our cities, towns and boundaries. That means changing the way we think about the type of housing and trying to fit it into sites and that will not be nice for everybody. We have a lot of work to do to bring communities on board because we do have to achieve higher densities in key areas to take the pressure off Meath, Kildare, Wexford and Wicklow which got all the houses and nothing else in previous years. Under Project Ireland 2040 we are trying to rebalance that. There will be some housing and growth. Some councils want loads more but I favour balanced development, with some more housing, matched with proper school places, jobs, education, investments in health and so on. That is what we are trying to achieve here. Deputy Thomas Byrne raised it and I back him up on that. School places are a key area. We see that in Dunshaughlin, Trim and Navan and the Minister for Education and Skills has said he will meet all the principals to deal with some short-term solutions and to put in place some long-term solutions as well. We will be proactive and will find everybody a school place but we should not have to do that. It should be planned right. That is what is happening now with Project Ireland 2040: joined-up thinking.

Deputy Lahart mentioned the SHD process. It is not so much that process he has problems with but density, planning guidelines and applications. He did say at the end of his speech that not every planning application is granted. Some bad applications have been refused. We are trying to look for quality. There is a choice but SHD is not for one type of housing, it allows all types of housing. It is not a permanent process. The Deputy may have missed it but the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, signed it on Tuesday so the two-year extension put before the House a few weeks ago was confirmed. We are considering that and we will be adding to it and bringing it through here, with the Deputy's support I hope.

To respond to Deputy Casey, I do recognise the support we get from him and his party on many of the housing issues. He is right to say that many of the applications through the SHD process did not produce the result they should have and activity on the site. The planning permission was granted but not enough houses were built. In the review it was flagged to the Minister that he should consider bringing in a use it or lose it clause. He said he will do that. We will be here in January with legislation. I do not know if it is a regulation or legislation to tweak that to say the developer has a certain period to use their planning application under the SHD process or they will lose their permission. We want to encourage activity on sites and more housing. All the solutions to our housing problems regardless of the differences we may have about who pays what and so on are aimed at supply of housing. That should be our focus, to get the supply of housing up as quickly as we can.

This week and last week I have heard from one side of the House about home ownership. Those Deputies would want to check their facts on this. Home ownership is something I totally and utterly believe in and so does my party and this Government. We give people the option to buy if they can when they can or to rent if they want to rent, as many want to. Home ownership in this country however has been declining steadily since the 1980s, not just in the past three or four years. The facts are that home ownership declined dramatically from 2011 to 2016, much

more in those five years than in the past five or six years. If the Members opposite are going to try to throw some stones at me and my party they should please check their facts first.

There is a myth being put about by one party, for some strange reason, that we want to blame local authorities. I started my speech by praising local authorities and by recognising their major achievements over the past three or four years. I am not saying they are all saints or that the Department is sainted, we do not get everything right, but the local authorities have come a hell of a long way from delivering less than a couple of hundred houses three years ago to this year's output of over 10,000 houses. They are front and centre of addressing the housing crisis. Like our councillors and Deputies, they meet the people daily. I commend the housing teams who work in very difficult situations. It is very difficult to tell someone that there is no house for them today and they should come back in a few months. That can be very hard. The local authorities are doing a lot of good work but we are constantly pushing that, changing that and doing more to make it even better to deliver faster and so on and we have changed the system.

Deputies should not try to put words in our mouths and claim we are blaming the local authorities because we are not. This is a partnership between the Department, the Government, local authorities, housing bodies and NGOs and everyone is playing a part. There has been a major increase in delivery but I am the first to admit that it is still not enough. It still has not delivered a home for everybody and I am not denying that. However, we are on the right track.

5 o'clock      People say to me that Rebuilding Ireland is not working but by the end of this year, over 100,000 people will have been helped by it. We are now at 10,000 social houses per year and will be at 11,000 next year. We would not have got there in one year; it took a couple of years to get there. Some said that we should wave a magic wand and do it in one year but that was not possible. It takes time to get up and running. Now that everything is up and running, we can build on that supply and keep it going. At the end of the day, nobody wants to see children and their families in emergency accommodation. We must try to get them out of emergency accommodation as quickly as possible and into a permanent home and that is what we are doing.

I touched on the HAP earlier. I know that not everyone likes it but it provides solutions relatively quickly for some people. It is not the endgame or a permanent solution but it is better than living in hotels or family hubs. I am aware that some people encourage families not to take up a HAP house. That is wrong because a HAP-supported house is much better than living in hotels or family hubs while on the journey to a more permanent home. I could say a lot more but I have run out of time.

### **Scouting Ireland: Statements**

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I welcome this evening's debate on Scouting Ireland. There are many in this House who, quite rightly, have remained vigilant in respect of Scouting Ireland. I will listen carefully as I value the knowledge and expertise of colleagues who bring an insight from meetings with survivors, children, parents and volunteers of Scouting Ireland. I understand that members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs continued this forensic work yesterday. This type of scrutiny is appropriate and I believe it is the reason we are all elected to represent the people in our communities. As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I have found the information and

learning that emerges from the committee hearings helpful in respect of decisions that I have to make about Scouting Ireland. It was interesting to hear the Chairman of the committee note that after Tusla, Scouting Ireland is the organisation that the committee has spent the most time on. This reflects the level of concern of public representatives about how the organisation is currently being run, its recent history and the legacy issues with which it is dealing.

It is 22 months since I became aware of serious issues relating to the governance of Scouting Ireland. My Department and I have scrutinised the operation of the organisation to ensure that today's children and young people are safe when they are in the care of Scouting Ireland. The second issue of concern is dealing with what went on in the past in the two legacy scouting organisations, the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland and the Scouting Association of Ireland. I would like to deal with today's children first. The Governance arrangements in Scouting Ireland up to October 2018 were dysfunctional and blinkered. I am using a simple definition of governance, namely, the way a group of people does things. The first warning bells about the way things were being done in Scouting Ireland were sounded in February 2018 in a report in *The Irish Times*. It detailed how those in authority in Scouting Ireland dealt with an allegation of rape by a volunteer. Senior members of Scouting Ireland responded inappropriately and the then board of Scouting Ireland, in my opinion, failed in its duty to respond to this behaviour by its senior volunteers. Therefore, with little confidence in the board, I suspended State funding. Over the following few weeks, the decision to suspend funding was, sadly, reinforced by the continued poor judgment of the then board.

I would like to state clearly that there were senior people in Scouting Ireland who were not involved and who stepped up to the plate to reform the governance of the organisation. They did this despite some internal opposition and were key to ensuring that Scouting Ireland was put on the right track. They should be commended on this. They committed to reforming the structures of Scouting Ireland and they achieved this. That continues to be the start of a long road back for Scouting Ireland. A significant step was the full external governance review conducted, on my behalf, by former Senator, Ms Jillian van Turnhout. She applied her considerable expertise to reviewing the governance of Scouting Ireland. Ms van Turnhout's report set out a pathway for Scouting Ireland to address the shocking deficits in the organisation. She submitted her review to me in June 2018 and Scouting Ireland reported to me last month that it has implemented all of her recommendations in full. I have asked Ms van Turnhout to examine whether this has been done comprehensively and she will report back on this early next year.

Last year, I agreed to provide funding to enhance the safeguarding capacity of Scouting Ireland. This has allowed the establishment of a permanent safeguarding manager to support the wider safeguarding team. I have met the safeguarding manager, who also appeared as part of the delegation attending the joint committee meeting yesterday. I was impressed by his experience and his single-mindedness in ensuring that Scouting Ireland is a safe organisation for children.

Scouting Ireland is close to full completion of the strategic actions agreed with Tusla in March of this year. I understand from senior colleagues in Tusla that it is satisfied with its engagement with Scouting Ireland. This assurance is critical and will continue to be so into the future.

The level of scrutiny of Scouting Ireland is intense but it has to be and it will continue thus. Deputies will be aware that, as Minister, I have extended public funding to Scouting Ireland until April next year. Restoration of funding after then will be dependent on certain developments.

My officials and I regularly meet representatives from both the board and executive of Scouting Ireland. I have requested and received regular updates on safeguarding and governance issues in the form of detailed progress reports, all of which have also been shared publicly. We scrutinise these reports very carefully and use our meetings with Scouting Ireland to clarify details therein. My officials last met Scouting Ireland on 6 November and at that meeting I welcomed the progress made to date. Ms van Turnhout's assessment on the implementation of the recommendations of her report will be key to any decision to restore funding.

Past abuse continues to ruin lives. We witnessed this through the heart-breaking testimony of survivors of abuse on the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, "Scouts Dishonour", three weeks ago. The men who spoke on the programme dug deep to summon the strength to tell their harrowing stories and share with us the catastrophic effect the abuse has had on their lives. While the programme confirmed information that we have been aware of for some time, including the significant numbers of children who were abused and the clear failure to keep them safe while in the care of previous scouting organisations, hearing the story in the words and the voices of those who were abused is something that will remain with me. These children were failed by those who should have protected them from the criminals who abused them. One cannot help but wonder if those who failed to protect these children were motivated by loyalty, not to the children, but to the organisation. It would not be the first time that has happened but we are trying to make sure it is the last.

It is a fundamental legal requirement that all cases of child abuse be investigated by the relevant statutory authorities, irrespective of when they occurred or were reported. Strong governance and safeguarding policies and processes must be in place in all organisations for children and young people. Scouting Ireland's role, as set out in law, is to forward pertinent information, evidence and records to the relevant authorities, namely, An Garda Síochána and Tusla, and it is the responsibility of these bodies to carry out the appropriate investigation.

Mr. Ian Elliott has been commissioned by Scouting Ireland to review historical sexual abuse in scouting in Ireland. I am aware some Deputies believe that because Mr. Elliott was contracted by Scouting Ireland in a safeguarding role, his work on this report is not independent. Regardless of one's views on the matter, the report is fundamental to the next steps to be taken by the Government and the Oireachtas in respect of Scouting Ireland. It will set out the evidence which has emerged in recent times and the actions taken by the organisations at the time, namely, the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland and the Scouting Association of Ireland. It will outline the lessons for Scouting Ireland as it seeks to continuously improve its safeguarding and it will be an important analysis for all Members to consider. It will be shared with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. I expect to receive it in February. In order to give me and my officials time to digest the report, as well as giving the committee an opportunity to scrutinise it, I have decided not to make a further decision on extending funding to Scouting Ireland until March.

I am aware of calls for a form of statutory inquiry into the handling of abuse in the scouting movement and I am giving this question very careful consideration. I am interested in Members' views in this regard.

Everybody involved in activities with children and young people has a moral and legal responsibility to keep them safe. Children have a fundamental right to be safe from abuse and harm. We have introduced laws and regulations to protect them. I introduced mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse two years ago next week. We need to be vigilant. Those who



shared their stories on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme were not given the protections they should have received and have carried the consequences with them into adulthood. The people who abused them are guilty of a heinous crime. Those who should have safeguarded and protected them from the abusers also bear guilt.

It is clear that there have been fundamental failures to which we must face up. We must support survivors to heal and we must hold perpetrators to account. The current situation challenges us all and we must rise to that challenge. We must not simply write policies and procedures or talk about keeping children safe. Rather, we must live and breathe safeguarding as our number one priority. This vital work will ensure a future in which children and young people can enjoy the very significant benefits of being involved in youth organisations while being kept safe and protected from harm at all times.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I am sharing time with Deputy O’Loughlin.

I thank the Minister for her most welcome statement. There were undoubtedly failures in previous decades as highlighted in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme entitled, Scouts Dishonour. However, the programme also outlined details of a case involving an alleged abuser who was reported to the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s but only removed from Scouting Ireland in 2018. That is a current failure, not a historical one. The full review conducted by Scouting Ireland in August 2012 found that no volunteers active in the commissioning organisation in 2012 were named in the legacy files but that is not the case according to the information aired in the RTÉ programme. How is it that an alleged abuser was able to continue in his role with Scouting Ireland even though the accusations had been reported in previous decades? Was his file overlooked in 2012? If so, why?

Scouting Ireland has provided a breakdown of 401 sexual abuse files it has in its possession, all of which have been reported to the appropriate authorities, which is reassuring. Of the total of 995 files in its possession, 457 were identified as involving abuse, 516 were identified as not involving abuse and ten were copies of files or legal notes. Of the 457 files involving abuse, 401 were classified as containing allegations of sexual abuse. Some 321 of them involved alleged adult-on-youth abuse. All of them have been reported to the appropriate authorities. Some 247 alleged perpetrators were identified.

Debate adjourned.

## **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

### **Road Safety Data**

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a theacht anseo inniu. Is gá obair a dhéanamh ar na spotaí is measa de bhóithre náisiúnta na tíre. Rinne Gamma Location Intelligence anailís ar na spotaí seo bunaithe ar eolas a chuir Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, ar fáil agus aisteach go leor, bhí ocht gcinn de na spotaí sin ar bhóthar amháin i gConamara. Tá sé in am breathnú ar an liosta, tosú ag a bharr agus rud éigin a dhéanamh faoin 20 bóthar is measa sa tír. Táim ag súil go mbeidh dea-scéal ag an Aire dom maidir leis seo, go gcuirfidh an Roinn ciste ar fáil, agus go mbeidh ceangail ar TII an t-airgead sin a chaitheamh ar na spotaí

agus na bóithre seo.

On 23 September, Gamma Location Intelligence published an analysis of TII data which identified the worst accident black spots in the country. It gives us an insight into which roads in our national network are deficient. The analysis only applies to national primary and secondary routes. It identified that the worst roads are clustered in counties Galway, Wexford and Longford. Eight of the 20 worst stretches of road are on the N59 in County Galway, with another just across the border in County Mayo. The road from Aasleagh Falls to Recess had nine of the worst accident black spots on national roads in the country. The spread of the 20 worst locations was: eight in Galway, four in Clare, two in Cork, one in Longford, one in Wexford, one in Mayo, one in Waterford, one in Leitrim, and one in Tipperary.

I believe in objective decision-making based on evidence and good data. The data are clear here. It is an impeccable source of data, which is used by insurance companies and anybody who is interested in this issue and wants good data. Will the Minister provide dedicated funding to TII next year and instruct it, as a matter of high-level policy, that it should tackle these accident black spots, starting with the 20 worst first and then working systematically through a long list of roads? I believe some of them could be resolved with quite modest amounts of money. Others will require more. It is interesting to look at the national map and see that there is a big cluster of black spots on the national secondary routes. They are very deficient but not very expensive to upgrade. Then there is a little cluster around the rest of the country.

Will the Minister take responsibility and save lives? He is always talking about saving lives on the roads. Now that we know where the worst accident black spots are, will he act and do something about it?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I thank Deputy Ó Cuív for raising this important subject. He has produced some extremely useful information and I have always said that I am happy to consider anything that is evidence based and bears scrutiny and to refer it to the appropriate people for consideration. I will not dismiss out of hand what he has produced today because it is too serious a subject. It appears to be credible evidence in a certain area. I cannot comment on competing data or interpretations that come forward, nor will I. I will certainly ask those who are responsible for considering it and acting accordingly to take it very seriously and to make decisions taking the Gamma Location Intelligence information into consideration.

First, I must explain that, as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing capital funding for the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, the improvement, upgrading and maintenance of individual roads is a matter for the relevant road authority in respect of local and regional roads or for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned, in respect of national roads. In the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan 2018 to 2027 has been developed by the Government to underpin the successful implementation of the national planning framework. This provides the strategic and financial framework for TII's national roads programme for the period from 2018 to 2027. In the ten years covered by the plan, over €11 billion will be invested in the overall road network. Following the economic downturn and the subsequent reduction in the availability of Exchequer funding, Project Ireland 2040 now provides for the gradual build up in funding for the roads network, but it will take time to restore funding to the levels needed to maintain the road network in a steady state condition, and allow for investment in new road improvement schemes.

Each year, the safety section of TII carries out a collision analysis of the national road network, in compliance with the EU road infrastructure safety management directive. The purpose of this exercise is to identify locations that have high concentrations of collisions. Notwithstanding this, the absence of sites from the locations identified in the analysis exercise does not preclude a road authority from submitting a feasibility report to TII for safety improvement works at other locations on the national or secondary road network. For example, there may be additional information available to the road authority or there may be unreported collisions at a location of which TII is unaware.

TII assesses the current condition and performance of the network, considering aspects such as capacity, traffic volumes, level of service, road pavement condition and condition of structures and safety. For TII to consider proposals from local authorities, the road authority is required to: carry out an analysis of the collision history at the location; design an appropriate scheme to deal with the safety issues identified; carry out an economic appraisal of the proposal; and to fully cost the scheme and prioritise it with regard to other works being proposed by the road authority. TII implements a programme of minor improvement schemes on the road network. These schemes are aimed at addressing localised safety issues by improving alignment, cross section and capacity issues. While funding is not specifically ring-fenced for the safety schemes programme, the following sums have been allocated for the years 2019 and 2020. In 2019 an allocation of €20 million was provided for the safety programme and it is proposed to allocate a provision of €21.6 million for the 2020 programme. These allocations do not include safety related funding provisions under other capital programmes.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The definition of “responsibility for overall policy” has changed dramatically since the Minister was appointed. It seems to me that he is simply the begging bowl for funding but that he does not dictate the policy. What is the point in having an Oireachtas and a Government elected by the Dáil if they do not outline the policy? I do not expect the Minister to choose the individual road, but I expect him to save lives. I am always interested in economic appraisals. This is a scientific study. The Minister spoke about validating the information. This information comes from TII data. That is the State agency under the Minister’s Department with responsibility for road infrastructure and certain rail infrastructure such as the Luas. It provided the data and all Gamma Location Intelligence did was map it.

Accidents are constantly reported in my area. We find that one stretch of road has the number one black spot in the country, as well as the number four and number eight. There were eight in the top 20 and they are on one road. When the Minister tells me that people’s safety is not an absolute overriding priority, I am very surprised because he has brought in law after law with the argument that he is saving lives. Will the Minister ensure that priority is given to starting with the top 20 accident locations in the country and that there will be adequate finance? As I said, some of these will not be expensive to resolve. Will money be provided as a priority to deal with these? We know that where roads are improved, and the ultimate example is the motorways, the accident rate per million vehicle kilometres travelled decreases dramatically. Will the Minister push it away again as if he has no responsibility for this or will he take action?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I wish to make it clear that road safety and saving lives are the top priority as far as I am concerned when addressing this subject. To suggest that I should, and the Deputy named particular roads-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I did not. The company did.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** He identified particular roads in his initial speech. He named the N59, if I am correct.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** And other roads. I named it because it happened to come up.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** He named particular roads. He says he is not expecting me to interfere with any particular roads and then he names particular roads as black spots where I should be interfering.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** If they are in Stepside, he deals with them.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Order, please.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** What the Deputy is talking about is not relevant to this debate. What I have to do is follow Government policy, which is that road safety remains a top priority, of course it does. What I said earlier is that I will not interfere with every individual road or individual black spot. Were I to do that, I would be running around the country doing it in my own constituency and other constituencies, and not doing something where I have actually allocated expertise in other places. I have, of course, asked TII to do what it is doing. The Deputy knows perfectly well we have allocated €20 million or €21 million in consecutive years specifically to save lives, and TII is doing that, and is doing a very efficient job.

I have to and will ask people far more expert than am I, and far more independent than the Deputy or I am, to make the decisions as to where this money will be allocated and where safety has a priority. That is what they are doing. I accept the Deputy's bona fides in coming to the House and looking after his own particular region and constituency. There is no doubt about his bona fides and I respect him for that. However, I cannot allow Members to come in here, say that a road in their area is less safe than another and that TII is doing a bad job. What I am going to do is continue to allocate money to the experts on road safety and to allocate what I think is a sufficient amount.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Here is the map.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy is pointing out particular roads to me.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I am pointing that eight out of 20 black spots are on one road. The Minister should listen to what I am saying.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Order, please. We cannot have that debate. Please allow the Minister to conclude.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** What I will do, because of the great respect I have for the Deputy's contributions to this House, is refer what he has said and the data he has produced, albeit from a particularly narrow standpoint, to TII for consideration, as well as to those who have an expertise on this issue, which he and I do not have.

## **Drugs Dealing**

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I want to ask about the Government's approach to open drug dealing in my constituency of Dublin South-West. This is a scourge on our communities and there is an inadequate and weak response from the Government and the Garda, which is more than aware

of the extent of the problem but seems reluctant, perhaps for resource or operational reasons, to act and close it down. In many cases, it is happening in plain view of CCTV and is not hidden away.

What can I or the Minister say to a constituent of mine who says that, every night, drug dealers gather outside their home to sell heroin or cocaine, including crack cocaine? There are children who have had to move from their own bedroom because they cannot sleep, with the shouting and noise from cars pulling up and speeding away, and because they are frightened, they want to move to their mother's bed. What does the Minister say to the shop owner who has to close early because of drug dealing in front of the shop? What does he say to a young person who has grown up looking at open drug dealing in their community and the normalisation of drugs and dealing among a new generation? What does he say to a person who, every day, leaves his home to go to school and sees drug paraphernalia littering his community, or many of his friends trying out drugs and developing an addiction? What does he say to the 12 year old, ten year old or eight year old who is selling or transporting drugs?

A recent report by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol found that Europeans are spending at least €30 billion on drugs each year, making the market a source of income for organised crime groups. The report states that Irish organised crime gangs are rigidly structured and extremely dangerous, which we all know. At the bottom of the criminal gang structure, the report states, is a lower tier of highly disadvantaged young people, generally involved in bullying, assaulting, stealing, vandalising and spreading fear on behalf of their network. The report states gangs in Ireland use intimidation to enforce their social norms within the drugs distribution hierarchy to discourage and punish informants, to recruit new members and to gain control over supply networks or territory. It points out that intimidation is escalating in certain parts of Europe, including Ireland, and much of this is related to drug debts and how the drug markets operate. The report states that many communities in Ireland have been severely affected by intimidation, with major impacts on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities and the function of local services and agencies.

I have never seen the scale of drugs that are being openly sold in my constituency, and I am around this town a long time. Former Ministers with responsibility for drugs policy are saying the drugs strategy needs to change and the drugs crisis is escalating. It is not just about the Garda not having the resources it requires. New thinking, new strategies and a new approach are needed but I am not seeing that from the Government. I have never seen the situation as bad. It has become normalised, more violent, more vicious and more evident, and intimidation is widespread, with drugs freely available. It is not unusual for a 70 year old to present at Tallaght Hospital with health complications related to drugs, particularly cocaine. That is shocking. It is a wake-up call for us all when children and people in their 70s are involved, and it reflects the extent of the problem. My real concern is the open drug dealing and the message that sends to those communities.

**Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I take very seriously the points raised by Deputy Crowe and I acknowledge his work over many years on behalf of communities in his constituency. Tackling the sale and supply of drugs is a key priority for the Government and An Garda Síochána. The Garda is pursuing a number of strategies to tackle drug trafficking by organised criminal gangs, including the following: gathering intelligence on those involved in the distribution of drugs; conducting targeted operations on criminal networks based on intelligence; working with the Criminal Assets Bureau to seize the assets of criminals and disrupt their activities; and working in collaboration with other law enforcement agencies,



both within and outside the jurisdiction.

I spoke earlier today in the other House in regard to crime, in particular drug-related crime. As I said there, the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau leads in tackling drug trafficking and the supply of illicit drugs in Ireland, and it continues to have significant success in tackling these issues. I understand from the Garda Commissioner that, since its establishment in March 2015, the bureau has been responsible for the seizure of controlled substances with an estimated street value of approximately €167 million, the seizure of cash believed to be the proceeds of crime to a value of €10 million and the seizure of 108 firearms and more than 3,000 rounds of ammunition. I further understand that, this year alone, the bureau has been responsible for the seizure of controlled substances to the value of €20 million, cash believed to be the proceeds of crime to the value of €2.4 million and 17 firearms.

I am setting this out because it is important to recognise that the Garda is having significant success in tackling the problem of illicit drugs. While I accept there is more to do, we should not be blind to the ongoing and positive progress that is being made. I understand the Garda works closely with the communities within which it serves for the purpose of addressing drug-related issues experienced within those communities, including through overt patrolling by uniformed personnel and through intelligence-led operations targeting known criminals and gangs. Investing in capacity-building measures to support the role of law enforcement authorities is important in dealing with emerging drugs trends. The roll-out of the new operating model of An Garda Síochána now occurring meets a key commitment in A Policing Service for the Future, the implementation plan for the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. This model is the norm in many other countries, and I am confident it will serve Ireland well by providing a more agile, more localised and more responsive police service nationwide, including in the area to which Deputy Crowe referred. It will over time increase the number and visibility of front-line gardaí who will be available to combat all forms of criminality, including drug dealing. Ongoing investment in An Garda Síochána is supporting the ongoing and sustained recruitment of Garda members and staff. We now have more than 14,300 gardaí nationwide, supported by almost 3,000 Garda staff. The organisation is still growing towards the Government's target of an overall Garda workforce of 21,000 by 2021, including 15,000 sworn members of An Garda Síochána. I acknowledge the numbers in the Dublin metropolitan region south division, which have also increased.

I assure the Deputy that the role of community groups, the Department of Health and my Department is to ensure every effort is made to work with communities to stamp out what is a serious issue within society.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** The primary purpose of this Topical Issue matter is to draw attention to the issue and get a more proactive response to it. Every day I see drug dealing in my community. It is an attack on the community in which it happens, and no one should have to live beside it. That is the other big problem. I asked in my initial contribution what one says to those people living beside this open drug dealing. Should one tell them to ring the Garda authorities? They will say they have done that, that they do it nightly but they do not get a response. They want to see this open drug dealing closed down. That is not unreasonable, no matter where it is happening, and it is not just in my community. Anyone who goes outside this door will see it happening within ten minutes. It is happening everywhere.

I am trying to focus on what is happening in my community. I have been on the local alcohol and drug task force practically since its establishment. I was involved in trying to highlight

the problems throughout Dublin in the early days of the heroin epidemic and so on. I am one of those who has campaigned for resources and support for those who are in addiction. I am still involved in that work. I also want supports put in place for these communities. We need to empower and encourage people, and I do not see that happening, given the open drug dealing taking place.

To end on a negative, there are fewer personnel in the drugs unit in Tallaght now than ten years ago. I will be told that members of the Garda are all involved in tackling this issue. The reality, however, is that the community almost feels as if it has been forgotten and that it is almost acceptable to society that this drug dealing should be allowed to happen in certain areas. The message we need to send out is that we are aware of this and will act on it. I hope the Minister can do that.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I do not at all doubt the seriousness of the issue the Deputy raised. I stress that Ireland's national drug strategy represents a whole-of-Government response to the problem of drug and alcohol use in Ireland and adopts a balanced, health-led approach, aiming to reduce demand for, as well as access to, illicit drugs. I acknowledge the leadership in this regard of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, who has joined us.

I spoke earlier about some of the activities under the strategy but I wish specifically to mention debt and debt intimidation. The strategy is unique among national drug strategies across European member states in recognising the need to address drug-related debt intimidation at community level. The drug-related intimidation reporting programme has been in place since 2013, responding to the needs of drug users and family members experiencing such intimidation. It has been agreed that the effectiveness of this programme will be further enhanced through training, knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising.

The use of detection dogs is also having a positive impact on tackling drug crime. The Garda dog unit, based in Kilmainham, in the DMR south central region, has a national remit. The Commissioner recently indicated to me that he intends for An Garda Síochána to invest in the purchasing and training of additional dogs for drug detection purposes next year.

I met the Garda Commissioner and his senior team this week. We discussed the issues the Deputy mentioned. I acknowledge the fact that this is an ongoing challenge, but we were reassured about the co-ordinated response that has been mounted by the Garda. Action is being taken on community safety, intelligence and drugs and organised crime.

I assure the Deputy and the community in Dublin South-West that he represents and all other communities that the issue of drug dealing and drug-related crime is being taken seriously at the highest level. I would be happy to resume a debate on this in the new year.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The order of appearance of the next two Topical Issue matters, Nos. 3 and 4, by agreement with the Ministers and the Deputies, has been reversed.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I am grateful this Topical Issue matter has been taken. The subject, access to medicinal cannabis where there is a medical need, has caught the Irish public's

imagination over the past three and a half years. I have been quite vocal about it. The Minister of State will have to agree that this has been a very protracted process to provide legal access to medicinal cannabis in Ireland. Three years ago almost to the day, the majority of Deputies voted to allow the regulation of cannabis Bill I introduced go forward. That was a milestone in this debate on access to medicinal cannabis. Time is of the essence for people who need this medication. Over the period since that milestone, people have been forced to go abroad, to go to the black market or to go without. It is quite galling that people to whom this could be beneficial have to go without. The announcement last week that two cannabis-based products will be rescheduled will not make a major difference to most. People will still be forced to go abroad under licence, to go to the black market and to go without.

A six-year-old boy called Asseel Osman lives in New Ross. He has cerebral palsy with complex features. I have spoken to his dad many times over the past year. His dad has said to me that his son only knows a life of pain, but the administration of cannabis has made this young boy's life much easier and much better. The tragedy, however, is that Asseel's father is still forced to go abroad, still possibly breaking regulation. It is pretty immoral that people are being criminalised and forced to go abroad for a substance that could be beneficial to them. It is welcome that these two products have been rescheduled. It is a significant medical milestone in Ireland that two products that contained CBD and THC can now be prescribed by consultants. That is to be welcomed. I have been quite critical of the medical cannabis access programme, MCAP. It is too restrictive and the bar is too high since it is consultant-led rather than GP-led. The conditions for the programme do not stipulate chronic pain and that is very controversial. The best research is available for cannabis use to treat chronic pain.

It is welcome that these products are available. People who are listening tonight will wonder when the programme will be up and running, when these products will be available and who is educating consultants about prescribing medical cannabis. Most consultants have said that they know little or nothing about the subject. It is imperative that the people who prescribe these products know about what they are prescribing. One does not have to go university to know that. It is something that the Department of Health should examine. It is welcome but we need to understand when this will progress for the people who could benefit from medical cannabis.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne):** I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harris. I apologise to the Deputy that the Minister could not be here. Before I read the statement, I commend the Deputy on his resilience in bringing this topic to the floor of the House over the past year. People can now access medical cannabis but it has to be prescribed.

On 26 June the Minister signed legislation, which allows for the operation of the MCAP on a pilot basis for five years. This new legislation means that commercial medical cannabis suppliers whose cannabis products meet the specified requirements set out in the legislation and have been listed in Schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations will be able to supply these products to the Irish market via an Irish-based authorised wholesaler.

Once suitable medical cannabis products are made available by suppliers, the access programme will make it possible for a medical consultant to prescribe, in line with the published clinical guidance, a listed cannabis-based product for a patient under his or her care for the following medical conditions: where the patient has failed to respond to standard treatments;

spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis; intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy; and severe, refractory, treatment-resistant, epilepsy. Cannabis products will only be listed in the Schedule to the legislation once they have been accepted as meeting the criteria for such products to be added to Schedule 1 of the regulations underpinning the access programme. Based on the information provided by applicants, two cannabis-based products have been deemed by the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, to have met the applicable criteria set out in the legislation. These two products are Aurora high CBD oil drops from Aurora Cannabis Enterprises and CannEpiL from MGC Pharmaceuticals. The Minister has accepted the HPRA's advice and the products have been added to Schedule 1 of the legislation. As these products will be subject to international export licensing requirements, which are outside the control of the Department of Health, they are not expected to be available in Ireland for a further period. It will be the decision of the treating medical consultant, in consultation with his or her patient, to prescribe a cannabis-based treatment for a patient under his or her care.

Pending full operation of the access programme, doctors may continue to apply through the ministerial licensing route for a licence to prescribe medical cannabis for an individual patient under their care. Sixty-six licences have now been granted in respect of 31 individual patients.

Departmental officials and the HSE will meet next week to finalise plans for the MCAP patient register and reimbursement procedures. In the interim, the HSE has advised that for an application to be considered for reimbursement approval, prescribers must submit a valid medical prescription for the prescribed cannabis product, provide a copy of the ministerial licence, and the patient must have sourced and positively responded to the cannabis-based product. If approval is given, the primary care reimbursement service when authorised to proceed, will make the necessary arrangements to cover the costs involved for the patient.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** I call Deputy Kenny.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I am sorry that I am a bit slow. I have a cough.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** The Minister of State will be able to speak again.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Can the Minister of State finish?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** That is fine.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** The HSE has advised that in the previous situations where it considered reimbursement support appropriate, a number of steps were completed. The patient's consultant should be satisfied that all therapeutic options have been exhausted and be prepared to accept the responsibility for monitoring the patient's response to the cannabis product. A prescriber then applies to the Minister for a ministerial license and, following consideration, a ministerial licence may be granted. The consultant then completes an individual reimbursement form, setting out the therapeutic benefits for the patient. It is important that this is completed in sufficient detail for therapeutic benefit to be demonstrated. The individual's reimbursement form is considered by the medicines management programme, MMP. On review of the documentation, the MMP makes a recommendation for or against reimbursement support for the patient to the HSE, under the patient's eligibility, and informs the primary care reimbursement service of that recommendation. The Minister for Health has no role in the clinical decision-making process and section 6 of the Health Service Executive (Governance) Act 2013 bars the Minister from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service

to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

I am sorry again for taking so long.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** That is quite a long and detailed statement. It is informative for the people who are listening. I am somewhat concerned about some of what the Minister of State said, especially at the end, that this is not expected to be available in Ireland for a further period. How long is that further period? That is slightly worrying. People have been waiting for three years for these products to be approved. It is important that people get access to these products. People are being forced abroad and to the black market. They are also self-medicating, which is not appropriate or suitable, but when one is desperate, that has to be done. Regulation is very important. Is the Minister of State saying that most of the 31 licence holders will be reimbursed? People were previously getting the licence but were not being reimbursed, which caused serious hardship for the families. I welcome that, if people are getting the licences, they will automatically be reimbursed. What people have to do is somewhat bizarre. They have to go to a different jurisdiction with a licence and bring the product back four times a year. There is no other drug in the world for which this has to be done because of the stigma and rubbish relating to cannabis. Will the Minister of State clarify when this programme will be up and running and how patients can access it? Will she address the education of consultants who prescribe these substances? How do they educate themselves and interact not only with the Department of Health but patients themselves?

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I cannot answer the second last question but I will try to read back on the script. The Minister for Health looks forward to cannabis products being available to patients living in Ireland who come within the scope of the MCAP. The Department of Health's website continues to be updated with information on the scheme as it comes available. Until such time as cannabis comes available on the Irish market for use, access programme clinicians may continue to apply for a ministerial licence to prescribe medical cannabis for an individual patient under their care.

The Deputy asked when the product can come into Ireland, but I cannot answer that because it is clear from the Minister's reply that the proper legislation and the European programme must be passed first. Finding a supplier seems to be a problem as well.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** There is a supplier.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I have taken note of the Deputy's three questions and I will ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to reply to them directly. I do not want to give him any false information.

### **School Placement**

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to raise the issue of the shortage of second level school places in Wexford and Gorey towns. I thank the Minister for being here to respond.

The issue of the shortage of school places in Wexford town and Gorey featured in the by-election, but this has been a live issue for a number of years. I and others have been in communication with the Department of Education and Skills and with the Minister's predecessors



on this matter. The common response tends to be that the Department thinks there are enough second level places in the area. However, it clearly does not understand what is happening in Wexford and Gorey. Both are progressive and growing towns, and both primary and secondary level principals in the area know there is a problem because of the numbers coming through at primary level. Two school extensions were built in Wexford but they did not extend sufficiently to accommodate the growing number of students. A bus travels from Barntown, which is just 5 km outside of Wexford town, to New Ross every day with more than two dozen second level students so they can attend school there. There are two excellent schools in Gorey, namely, Creagh College and Gorey community school, but they have been under a lot of pressure for a number of years, about which we have been warning the Department. A sticking plaster arrangement was agreed last year to accommodate students. After speaking to the schools today, it looks like they could be short up to 69 places next year, although arrangements may be in place to accommodate them. I wanted to ask the Minister about this because he has visited the area and understands the problems first hand. Can he guarantee that every child in Wexford and Gorey towns and their immediate hinterlands will have school places in their respective towns? That is the immediate challenge.

The second matter is the longer-term challenge, because the school populations are continuing to grow. The problems of this year and next year will pale into insignificance in comparison with the numbers of pupils currently in fourth classes in the area. What provisions will the Minister make when we reach that demographic bulge? We have been seeking a second secondary school in Gorey for some time and have identified that need to the Department. Wexford County Council has said that a site is available, and if that site is not suitable, plenty of land can be zoned to facilitate that school. We need to start that process now because the planning and tendering will take some time. The key issue here is the worry it is causing parents and children who do not currently have school places. It is worrying for those who do not have an offer and are on waiting lists, but also for those with children in fifth or fourth class, as they know this problem is only going to get worse. I would be grateful if the Minister could inform us of the immediate plans for this year, as well as the long-term plans to address the demographic bulge.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Ar dtús báire, gabhaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta agus a chomhghleacaí ar son a mbua tríd an bhfothoghchán a chuaigh thart. Gabhaim onóir mhór orthu faoi choinne a bpoist nua, chomh maith leis an díograis agus an tsárobair a rinne siad tríd an toghchán. Gabhaim comhghairdeas leo arís.

The new Deputies are up and running. They are not going to hang about, and they have only been here a few hours. I extend my congratulations to both the new Teachtaí Dála in front of me in particular. They both have considerable education experience at both higher and second levels, which will add value to the debate in this House. This is where we need to continue to work and explore new ways of doing things. I wish both of them well.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As he noted, I am familiar with Gorey and I had the opportunity to meet different primary school principals when I visited the area. I was invited there by Deputy Michael D'Arcy. Long-term issues were on those principals' minds at that time, and they even pointed to third classes and where the pinch points would be in years to come. We continue to look at the demographics in such areas, using a geographical information system and planning permissions. We work very closely with the officials within the planning unit in Wexford County Council as well. Wherever there are options, we look at them seriously. We always look at existing capacity in schools within in area. There are over 314 school planning areas within Wexford, including Creagh College and Gorey community school

in the Gorey area, as the Deputy pointed out. I have been in both schools, and they are fantastic schools with fantastic leadership.

If there are issues, fears or uncertainties for September 2020, I ask the Deputy, through his own communication channels, to encourage the principals to get in touch with the Department. As of now, we have not had contact with the principals, but we are open to helping if there is any uncertainty. The Deputy used the word “worry” and said that parents are worried about 2020. There is a long-term worry as well, but I reassure the Deputy and anyone listening to this in the Gorey area that we will not allow a situation to emerge where there are no places for secondary school students in the Gorey area in September 2020. We will continue to work to prevent that happening. Other areas such as Kilcock have been raised in the House in the last few weeks, as well as north Dublin, Skerries and east Cork. There is also an issue in Trim. The principals and the officials in Tullamore are engaging with each other in each of those cases. We try to keep on top of such issues. Last August we dealt with a temporary situation in Ennis and provided a solution at that late hour. It is now December so we have good time to put this together, but I am not working on the basis of providing a solution for September 2020. We will continue to analyse the data and look at the projections and planning permissions. We are looking at the long-term issues as well, but that decision will be based on demographics.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I thank the Minister on behalf of my colleague and myself for his welcome to the House. We both look forward to engaging with him constructively on policy matters with regard to education.

I welcome his commitment and assurance that every child in Gorey and Wexford towns will be guaranteed a school place in one of those towns in 2020. That will provide some level of assurance. I appreciate that there will be difficulties but I welcome the Minister’s commitment that we will get the solution for 2020. However, there remains a long-term challenge. Looking at current projections is fine but if we continue to see young families moving into the area, in addition to the primary school enrolments, this will present a challenge. Nearly every board of management meeting in schools in the area deals with transfer requests so that is causing additional pressure. While I welcome the Minister’s commitment that we will not have a problem in 2020, what I would like to hear is that there will be some sort of commitment regarding looking at 2021 or 2022 because additional school places are certainly needed in Wexford town and in the case of Gorey and north Wexford. It is very clear and certainly the schools have communicated, as have Wexford County Council along with myself and others, that we need a third second level school in the town. The Minister will appreciate the length of time it takes for that to be built, a patron appointed and so on. We really need that process to start now to ensure this school is in place by 2021 or 2022.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I assure the Deputy that we will continue to monitor developments. He is correct in saying that there have been representations in terms of looking at future capacity. We are trying to build and project towards the future. Under Project Ireland 2040, our plan is to spend over €12 billion in capital infrastructure across the primary, second and third level sectors and to spend €8.8 billion in the primary and secondary school sectors between 2018 and 2027. We need to do it in a managed way, project and acknowledge the fact that Gorey is now a commuter town for Dublin city. I am very much aware of that. People are making the decision to move there and commute to Dublin so we must take all these factors into consideration.

A total of 840 students are enrolled in Creagh College. It has a capacity of 1,000. Obviously, there is no pinch point there this year but there is always the next round of enrolment.

We will continue to monitor developments. Where I would ask for the Deputy's indulgence and observations is in the area of inclusion. When I say that every student will not be prevented from going there, we will not be in a position in terms of space. We must continue challenging ourselves and that means everybody. There are challenges around special education. There are special education units in Creagh College. Other challenges will present themselves in the future in terms of a fully inclusive education system but I know that the Deputy's own considerable experience and that of his colleague beside him in education will be invaluable in this debate. One of our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a fully inclusive education system. This will require far more thinking around how we move forward as a country but also ensuring that we do not dismiss the things that are working because we have 126 special schools. I was in one yesterday. There is still a need for special schools but we must also continue to challenge ourselves in respect of parents' choices to either send their children to a mainstream or special school.

### **Report on Examination of School Costs, School Facilities and Teaching Principals: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills entitled 'Report on Committee's examination of School Costs, School Facilities and Teaching Principals', copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 4th July, 2019.

I am very pleased to be here today to speak about the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills examining school facilities, including the lack thereof in some cases, and the workload of teaching principals. We engaged with 20 different stakeholder groups and have made 25 recommendations. If even a few of them were implemented, it would bring about a significant improvement in everyday life in schools.

In the course of our considerations, the committee focused on four key areas. This debate took place over the summer of last year when we held our inaugural summer school. The first item we looked at was the school building programme. We examined whether the existing programme delivered sufficient school places to facilitate children attending local schools. I think the previous Topical Issue really illustrated how important that is. We also examined the potential costs resulting from children not obtaining a place in their local school. As we consistently see, this often happens, particularly around Dublin and commuter belt areas. The headline in today's edition of the *Irish Independent* read "Commuter belt buckles as new homebuyers forced further out". The article dealt with challenges we face with regard to transportation and schools. I certainly see that in Newbridge and south Kildare where we do not have enough school places for children who are starting primary and secondary school. Several recurring themes were raised by the witnesses, including the potential health and safety effects on staff and students due to overcrowding as well as the lack of facilities in some schools. I know the Minister visited St. Paul's secondary school in Monasterevin. Thankfully, that school is at least on the final track but when students in Coláiste Íosagáin in Portarlinton come out of a classroom, they can only turn left. They cannot turn right because the corridors are so overcrowded due to school overcrowding. The committee was told that additional resources are needed to address infrastructural deficits regarding the capacity of buildings to integrate new ICT as well

as special educational needs demands on school buildings in terms of access and accommodation.

In fact, the committee agreed at its meeting today that, as part of its work programme in early 2020, it will look at the area of special education, special schools and the demands on them and their buildings.

The groups from which the committee heard called for the additional accommodation scheme to be expanded to include extra office space for deputy principals and principals, as well as more general purpose dining areas, etc. That was something the committee was keen to include in its recommendations because we must support teaching and ancillary staff within their schools. The need for additional accommodation comes from varying demands but mainly from increased enrolment and the need for new classrooms for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. Those new classrooms are particularly required at second level because only 25% of the facilities needed have been provided nationwide.

Of particular note was the importance of making provision for facilities for practical subjects such as physical education, PE, halls. The committee was amazed to learn that only about 50% of schools have adequate PE facilities. Even in schools that have such facilities, parents raised the money needed in 72% of those cases. The parents of pupils in Rathangan boys' national school, which is close to me, got together to successfully fundraise for an all-weather pitch. We are leaving many of those sorts of things to parents and school communities and that is putting an awful lot of pressure on them.

We also need science laboratories, home economics kitchens, woodwork and engineering rooms, etc., because it is not possible to teach those subjects in standard classrooms.

The committee acknowledges that the Department of Education and Skills has invested €4.9 billion in school buildings over the past ten years and has earmarked a further €8.4 billion for the next ten years. This money will facilitate a focus on the refurbishment of the existing school stock with particular strands set aside for vital PE halls, laboratories and prefab replacement.

During the economic downturn ten years ago, the Department of Education and Skills introduced a moratorium on recruitment of caretaking, cleaning and secretarial supports, particularly in community and comprehensive schools. Despite the recovery in the economy, this moratorium remains in place and poses significant challenges for school management in maintaining school buildings and sites, which is important. One of the key recommendations in this report is the removal of the moratorium on recruitment of support staff.

The committee was very surprised to hear that there is currently no inventory of school facilities and we are recommending that this be carried out by the Department of Education and Skills at the earliest possible date.

The second topic to which I will refer is access to, and provision of, open and green spaces. The committee had good engagement with its stakeholders on the provision of new spaces and the protection of existing open green spaces for the use of students. It is concerning that the prefabs that are coming into many schools as temporary accommodation are being placed on existing green spaces and we do not want that to continue. With the prevalence of obesity in children on the rise and awareness that being outdoors helps improve mental and physical health, it is necessary for children to have adequate space to exercise and partake in sporting

activities. The committee recommends to the Department that it liaise with other Departments and State agencies to ensure that land around schools is protected to provide sufficient green space for students and ensure scope for future expansion as necessary, and that the plans for all new school builds include adequate provision of appropriate green or open spaces.

I turn now to the workload of teaching principals and safeguarding their mental health and well-being. The committee wanted to raise awareness of the pressures faced by the leaders of our schools and to give them a platform to raise these concerns.

The committee learned that more than half of primary school principals teach full time in addition to the full administrative duties of a principal which may negatively impact on the children in their care. A principal is in charge of leadership, has to manage teaching and ancillary staff, deal with issues arising with parents and be responsible to the board of management, on top of doing a day's teaching, in many cases in a classroom situation where two or three classes are taken together. That is really difficult and incredibly challenging.

The committee sat and listened to how this is impacting teaching principals. We heard from principals who have stepped back from their positions and that, in turn, leads to other issues because their time spent as a principal is not recognised and they have to go back to the end of the staff queue in a school.

The committee strongly recommends that teaching principals have the appropriate supports to allocate adequate time to undertake their leadership and management responsibilities. The only staff that are taken into account when calculating leadership and management days are mainstream teachers. Other staff members, such as learning support teachers, resource teachers, special class teachers, special needs assistants, ancillary staff and bus escorts, in addition to nurses and occupational therapists who are often allocated to special schools, are not taken into account for the calculation of these days. That is not good enough. We heard from one principal, Ms Angela Dunne from Tipperary, who is responsible for 24 people in her working environment and is still a teaching principal.

Principals must fulfil their teaching obligations, manage a full workload of administrative duties and fulfil the duties involved in managing staff. The committee recommends that the Department amends its categorisation to ensure that all members of staff are counted for leadership purposes.

On top of this burden, the committee wishes to highlight that as it stands, and as I mentioned already, if teaching principals want to step back from their leadership position, they are being forced to revert to the most junior position on staff. Having an appropriate step-down facility in place would also create career opportunities for others, rather than locking people into a position they may not want, or be able to do, anymore. This will not only impact their lives and stress levels but will also affect the ethos and environment of the school. The committee strongly believes that this practice should be reviewed to account for the dedication and experience that the teacher has given to the school.

The committee believes that every teaching principal should be given one day a week for school administration. The committee also recommends that schools are clustered together in groups of five so that permanent staff can be employed and one day a week is given to teaching principals. In the case of special education schools, we recommend that principals are solely designated as administrative principals.



The fourth topic with which the committee dealt related to school costs. We considered back-to-school costs, voluntary contributions, capitation grants and disadvantaged groups in seeking to examine the phenomenon of ever-increasing school costs. We did this piece just before the September school year started and it is appropriate that we are discussing this now, just before Christmas, another time when parents and families are under increasing financial stress. This part of the engagement put a spotlight on the variety of added costs associated with what purports to be a free education.

The committee examines this topic every year, as have previous committees. We recognise the financial burdens placed on parents and schools and, year after year, the committee, as its predecessors did, urges the Department to make significant changes to tackle this issue. We heard that one third of families will end up in debt to meet the back-to-school costs incurred in August and September. One quarter of families will resort to illegal money lending and that is a difficult place for any family to be. The cost of books remains the most expensive item despite many schools offering book rental schemes but it is important to say that such schemes are very expensive to start.

One of the recommendations we made was that funding for the scheme nationally be increased by €20 million. That would allow 200 schools to start a book rental scheme.

Why do parents go to moneylenders? It is because they believe approval processes in banks or credit unions would be difficult or they have no other option because they have a bad credit history. One of the recommendations we made was that the Department of Education and Skills engage with the Department of Finance to deal with this issue.

Another financial burden that has crept in is the issue of voluntary contributions, which are sometimes not all that voluntary. The committee heard that approximately three quarters of parents are asked to pay a voluntary contribution each year to help school finances. Of the parents who paid it, just over half indicated they felt under pressure to do so. We are not blaming the schools because they have to survive. They have to open the doors and turn on the lights. This finding was made despite reassurances by the Department that the contribution is a voluntary payment and there should be no pressure on parents to pay. The survey results show that is not the reality on the ground. These statistics suggest that the current level of capitation grant, which is 14% less than it was nine years ago, is not sufficient to negate the need for additional financial contributions by parents and guardians. This type of payment places particular pressure on disadvantaged groups such as lone parents and asylum seekers. It can also be a source of great embarrassment for the child and parents who cannot afford to pay. The committee recommends in the strongest terms that the Department carry out an independent assessment of the adequacy of the capitation rates and incrementally increase funding to schools to ensure that all children have access to a high-quality, free and inclusive primary and secondary education.

I sincerely hope the Minister will take on board the recommendations contained in the report and work with the committee to improve our education system. This is a cross-party report which received unanimous support in the committee.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Ar dtús, gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí agus na Seanadóirí ar an gComhchoiste um Oideachas agus Scileanna agus go háirithe an Cathaoirleach, an Teachta Fiona O'Loughlin, don obair a bhaineann leis an "Tuarascáil ar Iniúchadh an Choiste ar Chostais Scoile, Áiseanna Scoile agus Príomhoidí atá ag Teagasc". Gabhaim buíochas freisin leis an 20 páirtí leasmhar a chur ionchur rithábhachtach

ar fáil don phróiseas seo. Is léiriú é seo ar an luach gur féidir le coiste Oireachtais a sholáthar nuair a bhíonn sé gafa go cuiditheach le gach páirtí leasmhar chun eolas agus tuairimí éagsúla a shainscagadh. Is cinnte go gcuideoidh obair an choiste eolas a sholáthar agus cur le treo polasaí agus straitéise na hearnála oideachais.

The report is wide-ranging, spanning a number of different areas, including the school building programme, the retention of green spaces, the workload of teaching principals and back to school costs. I am glad to note that much progress has been made on these matters since the public hearings held by the joint committee in late August 2018. By way of context, I will set out first a broad picture of the capital investment under the school building programme. The school building programme, as Deputy O’Loughlin pointed out, is an integral part of the Government’s Project Ireland 2040 vision. Under Project Ireland 2040, the education sector will receive approximately €12 billion over the period from 2018 to 2027. This includes some €8.8 billion for the schools sector and €2.2 billion for higher education infrastructure. In 2018 and 2019 alone, my Department has invested more than €1.1 billion capital investment into the school building programme. We continue to make progress to increase the infrastructural capacity in the schools sector nationally in order to meet demographic and other demands over the short to medium term.

The roll-out of Project Ireland 2040 in the school sector has involved overall construction activity during 2018 and 2019 of 466 projects, which are expected to deliver more than 40,000 permanent additional and replacement school places and replace almost 600 prefabricated buildings. The pipeline of projects for delivery under the school building programme involves 367 large-scale projects and approximately 800 projects for delivery under the Department’s additional accommodation scheme. These projects are working their way through advanced stages of architectural design, planning permission and tendering processes and will be delivered as part of the €8.8 billion investment under the national development plan.

The current status of school projects being delivered is listed on a county-by-county basis on my Department’s website and is updated regularly as the projects go through the various stages. In addition, my Department’s design team procedures require monthly progress reports to be provided to school authorities to keep them updated on the status of their projects. My Department also regularly updates the Joint Committee on Education and Skills in respect of the programme for establishment of new schools.

I will now deal with some of the key recommendations under each of the four themes of the report, starting with the recommendations relating to the school building programme. The report makes reference to ensuring that “provisions necessary for good planning are put in place to ensure that adequate school facilities are provided to meet added demands on school places when developments are taking place”. By way of forward planning, my Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises to determine where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level. Requirements for school places can be met in a number of ways, including by utilising existing capacity, adding capacity to existing schools or by new school provision. The challenge for the Department is to identify where needs will arise and the most efficient and effective way of providing for same. To conduct the demographic exercises, the Department uses a geographical information system to divide the country into 314 school planning areas. Data from a range of sources, including child benefit data from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Department’s school enrolment databases, allow the Department to map where children are living or attending school. This information provides a degree of certainty in projecting demand in an area in future years

and identifying demographic trends in relatively small areas.

New residential developments also have the potential to significantly alter demand and timing of demand in an area. For this reason, the Department also takes into account planned housing development to help identify where pressure for school places across the country will arise. However, this process is not an exact science given the many variables involved with the construction and occupation of new housing developments. The pace of completion of such development can be subject to change depending on local circumstances as well as at a macro-economic level.

The Department continually reviews its approach to forward planning with the aim of ensuring, as best as possible, that school accommodation needs are provided in tandem with residential provision. Since April 2018, when the Government announced plans for 42 new schools from 2019 to 2022, the Department has implemented a number of measures aimed at strengthening the demographic analysis process. The first involves enhancing our engagement with local authorities. Local authorities now provide more detailed information to the Department on planned residential development than had been available previously. The second involves additional engagement by my Department with patron bodies relating to their local knowledge on school place requirements. In that regard, I acknowledge the leadership shown by many people in the Dublin 15 area over the past year in identifying new school provision for special education, in particular the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, and his team in that area.

The third measure involves putting a system in place to enable a national inventory of school capacity to be captured through the existing annual enrolment returns by individual schools to the Department in the primary online database and the post-primary online database. This year, schools have been requested to provide information in respect of overall demand for school places and available capacity within their schools. This is the first year of this initiative and the approach taken will provide an effective and efficient mechanism for enhancing our up-to-date knowledge on capacity across more than 3,000 primary schools and more than 750 post-primary schools.

Ceann eile de na moltaí tábhachtacha a tháinig ón gcoiste seo ná go gcuirfí soiléireacht bhreise ar fáil do scoileanna maidir le híocaíocht an deontais do mhionoibreacha. Tá mo Roinn tar éis dul i ngleic leis an gceist seo cheana féin. Faoi Thionscadal Éireann 2040, tugadh soiléireacht do scoileanna go n-íocfar deontas na mionoibreacha i Nollaig nó Eanáir den scoilbhliain. Tuigim go rímhaith an tábhacht a bhaineann le deontas na mionoibreacha do bhunscoileanna.

I am conscious that primary schools are waiting on minor works funding. The Deputies will receive this information but I want to assure them that the commitment given a number of weeks ago that the minor works funding will be paid in the first fortnight in December will be met.

Several relevant points arise relating to the recommendations on the retention of green spaces. The policy emphasis in the Project Ireland 2040 national planning framework is for compact growth and delivery of more housing and infrastructure within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and brownfield sites. Given this policy emphasis and the cost of sites in urban areas, it is important that demographic pressures can be managed in a manner that fully utilises the capacity of school sites. This may involve extensions to existing schools or, where technically feasible on larger sites, the creation of a campus development that facilitates more than one school on a site. A campus development can also create opportunities

for sporting or other facilities to be shared between schools.

The Department's design guidance on the provision of green spaces as part of school building projects is not prescriptive in terms of area for green spaces but indicates that, where space permits, grass kick-about practice areas can be provided. The Department's design guidance makes provision for the inclusion of hard play areas. The logic underpinning this approach is to provide a play and sport facility for ongoing and intensive use by schools on a continual basis throughout the year.

On the wider point of the retention of open or green spaces for use by schools, there are a number of matters to note. The zoning criteria applied and the type of development permitted within a certain zoning are matters for the relevant local authority. Local authorities are required to consider the potential need for school provision in the context of any proposed residential development. Where new developments are proposed, provision is generally made at development or local area plan stage for schools as part of the consultation process with my Department. My Department is included among the prescribed bodies to which local authorities are statutorily obliged to send draft development plans, local area plans or proposed variations to development plans for comment or observations. In its observations my Department will highlight, as appropriate, school requirements as informed by its demographic projections and knowledge of existing school capacity in areas.

Recommendations on the workload of teaching principals is an important area that I continue to raise publicly. In the recent budget we looked at easing the pressure. This was not my preferred place as the Minister for Education and Skills but obviously it was in the context of a no-deal Brexit. Since my appointment as Minister, I have met several teaching principals and I appreciate the pressures they face.

The Irish education system has certain characteristics that have influenced the evolution of the principal's role. The distribution of the population necessitates a relatively large number of small primary schools. While management and administration duties of principals in smaller schools are smaller in scale than those of larger schools, they must be undertaken in addition to full-time teaching duties. Earlier in the year, I hosted a symposium on small schools. This gave me an opportunity to restate the Government's commitment to small schools and to open dialogue with all the key stakeholders. The purpose of this work by the Department is to develop a policy proposal to help support and strengthen small primary schools throughout the country. The work now under way on small schools seeks to build on this in a sustainable way. I will continue to engage with the main partners through the primary education forum and my Department's small schools steering group to develop a new policy of supports for small schools.

Each school with a teaching principal receives an allocation of days, known as principal release days, to allow the principal time to undertake administrative duties. My Department pays for a substitute to be employed by the school to facilitate the administrative functions of the teaching principal. Budget 2020 is the third successive budget to provide for an increase in the number of principal release days. One additional release day will be allocated to each school with a teaching principal with effect from 1 September 2020. This will bring the number of release days to 19, 25 and 31, depending on the size of school. This is an increase from 14, 18 and 22 days, respectively, since 2015. In addition, a further four additional release days are allocated to schools with special classes. There are arrangements in place for schools to cluster principal release days into a full-time post. This will assist teaching principals to work more effectively and plan their release days for the benefit of the school. To assist the principal,

each school has a middle management structure consisting of a deputy principal and one or two assistant principals, depending on the size of the school. These were formerly special duties posts. Flexibility in identifying and prioritising the evolving leadership and engagement needs of the school and in assigning and reassigning post-holders to specific roles and responsibilities to meet the evolving needs of a school is an essential feature of this school leadership model.

The committee made recommendations on back to school costs. I will focus on three areas, namely, capitation funding, the voice of the parent and the student parent charter, and voluntary contributions.

I fully recognise the need to improve capitation funding for schools. The Action Plan for Education includes a commitment to restore capitation over a three-year period as resources permit. Budget 2020 provided for a further 2.5% on top of last year's 5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools. This increase will apply from the start of the 2020-21 school year. In addition to the increase in standard capitation, the enhanced rates of capitation payable in respect of students with special educational needs will be increased by 7.5% from the start of the 2020-21 school year. This is to match the total increase in standard capitation rates of 7.5% provided in 2019 and 2020. The combined increases provided in 2019 and 2020 means approximately 40% restoration will be achieved. The special class grant payable at post-primary level for students with mild or moderate learning difficulties in special classes will be increased from €191 to €205 from the start of the 2020-21 school year.

The Department published Circular 32/17, which details the measures to be adopted by schools to reduce school uniform and other costs. This circular provides parents with a strong voice in ensuring costs are always kept to a minimum. Schools also need to be more accountable to parents generally and we need greater levels of communication, engagement and transparency in how schools serve their communities. There are great examples of this transparency and good engagement and communication.

Many of our schools wish to put the area of voluntary contributions on a legislative footing. In this regard, full transparency on the use of any voluntary contributions is vital for parents. Under the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, which recently completed Committee Stage in the Seanad, every school will be required to provide information to parents how any voluntary contributions are used. This legislation will require every school to consult parents and students and publish and operate a student and parent charter. Each school will draw up the charter following a set of national guidelines. The policy of voluntary contributions is a policy of long standing and may be sought from parents provided it is clear to parents that there is no compulsion to pay and that a child's place in the school or continued enrolment is not dependent on a willingness to make a contribution.

Mar fhocal scoir, gabhaim buíochas arís leis an gcoiste agus le gach páirtí leasmhar de bharr an ábhair ríthábhachtach sa tuarascáil seo. Deimhním don Teach go bhfuil mo Roinn tar éis díriú go cúramach ar na nithe atá sa tuarascáil seo agus go ndéanfar dul chun cinn ar na ceisteanna atá ardaithe ann. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as ucht ceisteanna tábhachtacha a ardú, agus as ucht a bhfreagracht don tuarascáil seo. Beidh mé ag súil le tuilleadh plé a dhéanamh ar na ceisteanna sin. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas agus m'aitheantas do bhaill an choiste faoi choinne na díograise agus an tsárobair a rinneadar thar chúpla bliain. B'fhéidir go ndéanfaidh siad cúpla moladh eile anocht fosta.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** Deputies should note that if they stick to



the speaking time limit of nine minutes, we will get to everyone before the conclusion.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Nílím chun an t-am ar fad a úsáid ach tá mo chomhghleacaithe nua ag iarraidh labhairt freisin, mar sin roinnfidh mé mo chuid ama leosan.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an tuarascáil seo. Rinne an coiste oideachais a lán oibre maidir leis. Chualamar ó a lán daoine agus bhí díospóireachtaí maithe againn sa choiste. Tá súil agam go gcuirfidh an Rialtas agus an Aire moltaí na tuarascála i bhfeidhm go luath mar go bhfuil sé antábhachtach don chóras oideachais go dtéann an Roinn i ngleic leis na moltaí sin. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Uasal Alan Guidon, iar-chléireach an choiste, as ucht an obair ar fad a rinne sé fad is a bhí sé mar chléireach ann. I thank Alan Guidon, the former clerk to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, who is here in the Chamber. I thank him for all his help not only with this report but throughout our sittings. I also thank all those who appeared before the committee.

I am delighted that my two colleagues who were elected last week, Deputies Malcolm Byrne and Pádraig O'Sullivan, are here because they both have a background in education. It is great that Fianna Fáil, the republican party but also the party of education, has these two new Deputies going forward.

Notwithstanding the general success the Irish education system recorded in the PISA results earlier this week, it faces major challenges, none more so than in the school building area. In the tender published by the Department this week the Minister proposes to build between 20 and 30 new schools, although we do not know the exact number. All the schools listed are in the greater Dublin area. They are all badly needed. While they are needed, the Minister, in the tender, stated that they may happen and that they may comprise temporary or permanent accommodation. The difficulty he faces is that there are not 20 to 30 schools around the country crying out for accommodation. There are approximately 1,000 that we know of on the lists. This is a significant issue for him and no plan has been put in place to get these schools built all around the country.

The schools building programme is related to the issue of places. Deputy Malcolm Byrne, my colleague, raised the issue of Gorey and Wexford, which I had done on his behalf before he was elected. Now the Deputy can paddle his own canoe - I am delighted to be able to say that. Of course, I will continue fighting with the Deputy in respect of Gorey. The situation in Gorey is mirrored in Skerries, Malahide, Wicklow, Kildare, and particularly, in my own constituency, Meath East, where there is a severe shortage of places now in the Dunshaughlin area. Despite the Minister announcing a new school in the Drogheda-east Meath area, there is a shortage of places there as well. The lack of demographic planning is worrying. Given a series of new primary schools has opened in these areas, it is worrying that the relevant provision for second level has not been put in place.

This may well be one of the last set-piece education debates before the general election. There will be questions to the Minister on one or two occasions prior to that and perhaps a Private Members' debate as well. It is important to reflect on what we have achieved over the past number of years. I am delighted to have been my party's spokesperson when it insisted on a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio in schools to the lowest level in history, and we must make further progress on that. I am also delighted that the guidance counsellor service was restored at second level. That was crucially important, but further progress has to be made.

Fianna Fáil insisted on new legislative provisions for special classes but they need to be acted on. They need to be used not as a primary tool but rather as a tool where one cannot get schools to co-operate. We must ask schools to co-operate to provide special classes voluntarily and then if we have to, and only if we have to, use legislative sanctions.

The issue of green spaces has been mentioned. My colleague, Deputy Casey, tells me that the green space is on the roof of one school in his constituency. In my constituency, there is a campus at Ashbourne. I am losing track of the number of schools that the Government has built in the town - I think it is four at this point - over the past number of years. They were badly needed. I refer to Gaelscoil na Mí; Ashbourne Educate Together, which is a fantastic school and pupils of which I had in Leinster House yesterday; the new Ashbourne community national school, the principals of which we had to bring up to the Department to make that case. For a long time, the officials had been denying there was an issue; and, of course, Coláiste De Lacy. There is a real lack of green space there. The Department has land. When the Department is putting schools together in a campus format, it will have to provide for green space so that we can have primary schools and secondary schools competing at the highest levels in sports and that we can adhere to the important national objectives relating to children moving and running around.

There has been some progress on capitation rates over the past number of years, but not enough. That will feature prominently in the general election. I fully expect to be under considerable pressure, rightly, from teachers' unions and the education sector on capitation because it is only when we can get capitation back up to the appropriate levels, that we can tell parents it will be all right, regular contributions will not be needed, and they can have their raffle at Christmas or whenever, but they will not need to make up for the essential running costs of schools such as paying for toilet roll.

I will not take up too much time because there are two Deputies here, who are new as well. Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan has not spoken yet and he will need a lot of time.

Táim buíoch den choiste. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach, an Teachta O'Loughlin, as an obair thréan a dhéanann sí ar an gcoiste sin. Táim an-sásta go bhfuil seachtar nó ochtar Teachtaí ó mo pháirtí féin, a bhfuil an-spéis acu san oideachas, anseo. Ní fheictear an spéis sin ó gach páirtí ar an gcoiste. Is trua é sin toisc gurb é an t-oideachas ceann de na rudaí is tábhachtaí sa tír seo. Caithfimid seans a thabhairt do gach duine éirí sa saol leis an bpoitéinseal atá acu. Sin an fáth go bhfuil spéis faoi leith ag Páirtí Fhianna Fáil san oideachas.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I commend Deputy O'Loughlin and the joint committee on this report and the recommendations therein. We in Fianna Fáil are calling for the enactment of the recommendations.

The ongoing failure to adequately fund the day-to-day running of our schools is having a real and lasting impact on pupils, staff and parents. It is undermining the long-established tradition of free education and must be urgently addressed.

While broad in scope, the committee report attempts to tackle two prime issues - the need to provide additional supports to schools to deliver education and the cost to parents of providing an education. The report addresses, through better planning and staffing, additional supports to maintain and expand green spaces, supports for staff in small schools and back-to-school costs. The issues related to costs for parents should be given priority but they are not.

Some progress has been made on capitation rates but they have not returned to 2010 levels. Work has not been carried out on an independent assessment of the suitability of current rates and no large-scale action has been taken on the issue of school uniforms.

The joint committee is asking a number of questions of this Government and this House - whether the schools building programme delivers sufficient school places to facilitate children attending local schools; whether there is access to and provision of open and green spaces; what the impact is of the workload of teaching principals in our schools; and, of course, the need to address the ever-increasing school costs.

We have consistently raised concerns about the urgency, accuracy and focus of the schools building programme. The committee is putting forward real and meaningful solutions to the problems with the programme.

The moratorium on recruitment of support staff in community and comprehensive schools must be fully lifted. Consideration should be given to the appointment of a fully-funded administrative assistant or other appropriate management body support for school building projects above a certain size.

The additional accommodation scheme should be expanded to make provision for additional accommodation for more deputy principals and principals. Clarity should be provided to schools in respect of the payment of the minor works grant. An inventory of school accommodation should be undertaken.

The Department's schools buildings programme should take into account the provision of special classes for students with autism and other special needs and make the provisions necessary for good planning to ensure that adequate school facilities are provided to meet the added demands on school places where developments are taking place.

Through the Fianna Fáil Party, I have lobbied in the lead-up to the past two budgets on the issue of the workload of teaching principals in the schools. This is a significant problem and it must be addressed. If the Government values rural areas, it will have to ensure it values the smaller schools with teaching principals that are predominantly, although not entirely, in rural areas. We believe that reform is needed in this area.

Particular consideration should be given to expanding the number of release days to 36, regardless of the school size. Principals should have the appropriate supports to allocate adequate time to undertake their leadership and management responsibilities. Whether it is a one or two-teacher school, or a seven or eight-teacher school, the volume of paperwork and documentation that these principals have to deal with now is immense. In my county of Tipperary, the number of working principals who have stepped down from their roles is significant and if we do not make progress in this area, it will be difficult to get teachers to fill these positions.

Principals of all special schools must be automatically designated as administrative principals. Deputy O'Loughlin referred earlier to a principal in my own county, Ms Angela Dunne, who has 24 staff under her care and is still treated as a principal in a four-teacher school. The workload that principals, such as Ms Dunne, have is immense. We will not have people to fill those roles if this issue is not addressed.

These autism classrooms have really developed in the past couple of years and are giving

children with autism a great chance of equality in the education system. It would be beyond comprehension if a failure of this nature meant we could not give these principals the proper supports they need to be able to do their job correctly.

In respect of the summer works programme, I want to highlight a specific anomaly that came across my desk lately. A school that applied for essential funding in 2016 to carry out necessary health and safety work for traffic and parking on the school property is still waiting for support. We now have the announcement of the summer works programme for 2020. Even though this school was assured it would get funding under the 2016 programme, it has not happened. School principals are now telling me that the emphasis this year is on energy saving investment on windows and doors, which is important, but surely not to the detriment of health and safety issues in schools. I would urge the Minister to take these points on board and ask that he investigate this case if I send him the details. I am sure this is not the only case of schools that had work done under the 2016 programme and have not received support.

The treatment of school secretaries is also an issue that needs to be addressed. They fulfil an important role in the day-to-day work of the school and act as an important support to school principals and staff. Currently their pay and conditions are unacceptable and their status must be regularised. They must receive payment as all school staff do when the children are on holiday and must also have pension rights. In many cases, like the principal and senior staff, the secretary will work on days when the children are not in school. I am calling on the Minister to honour the contributions of our school secretaries and respect the role they play in our education system.

I heard the Minister referring to small schools, the symposium that was held in June of this year, and the ongoing review of smaller schools and the role they play, especially in rural areas. I ask the Minister that there be no reduction in the number of teachers in these small schools while the review he is undertaking is under way. I have had schools contact me because they were worried about a fall in numbers, perhaps of only one or two pupils in the case of two-teacher schools. To drop to one teacher would be a severe blow to their area and locality. While the review is under way I ask that there be no change in the number of teachers in those small schools. They play a vital role in rural areas. A school is a vital cog in the whole rural community. If a two-teacher school is reduced to one teacher, it makes its position virtually untenable.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** Is mór an onóir dom seans a fháil a bheith páirteach sa díospóireacht seo anocht. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gcoiste agus leis an Teachta O'Loughlin as ucht an obair atá déanta acu. Gabhaim buíochas lena lán daoine eile freisin. I wish to thank many people, like the voluntary church bodies, the voluntary boards of management, the voluntary parents' committees and the voluntary labour that is done in many schools, not to mention special needs assistants, school secretaries, caretakers and the teachers and principals who run our schools. The late Paddy Crosbie used to say, "The school around the corner's still the same." The school around the corner cannot be the same. As somebody who spent 35 years as a primary teacher and 23 or 24 of them as principal, I am acutely aware that the change has not happened in the way or at the pace it should.

Any CEO of any complex organisation is the person chiefly responsible for the smooth running of that organisation. His or her responsibilities include things common to all businesses of any size in making sure everything runs smoothly. To give just three examples, in any organisation the staff must be kept motivated and kept up to date with professional development, financial backers must be assured their money is being spent wisely and the board of directors

must have evidence that all professional, legal and other requirements are being met. School principals are no more or no less than the CEO of complex organisations of varying sizes. Every school principal works under the requirements I have just listed and the many others that every CEO is acutely aware of, as indeed they should be. However, schools are different from other businesses, because of two stakeholders that do not exist in many other organisations, namely, the children who attend the school and their parents.

Most of us have used the line “they are all different” when talking about our own children, because it is true. Every single child sitting in front of a teacher, often in classes of more than 30 as the Minister knows, has his or her own complex needs. They are complex little beings. They have different abilities, different home circumstances, different hopes, different fears, different aspirations and different levels of self-esteem. Indeed many of them live in different little worlds. The teacher’s primary job is, of course, to lead them in their understanding of literacy, maths, languages, science and all the other areas of the curriculum, but there is so much more to it than that. Children have to be developed as part of our society. School is where they learn to interact with others, where they learn concepts like taking turns, decision making and considering the needs of others as well as themselves. School is where children develop as people. It is where we all made our first friends, and possibly our first experience with those who were not so friendly. It is where we had many of our first successful endeavours, and maybe some that were not so successful. Our experience in school played a large part in making us the people we are. One of the most important factors in that experience were the teachers we met along the way.

Teaching is a very complex profession. A teacher is primarily responsible for all the aspects of children’s development that I have just mentioned. It is also a very unpredictable job. Every day, sometimes every minute of the day, is completely different. Teachers literally do not know what is going to happen next, so they have to be able to deal with whatever comes at them. Let us now consider teaching principals. To all intents and purposes, they are doing two jobs at the same time. They have all the requirements and responsibilities of teaching a class and helping the children they teach to become the best they can be. Simultaneously, they must fulfil their CEO role by making sure that the administration of the school runs effectively and efficiently. It is like asking someone to manage a garage while spending their day under the bonnet. If the Minister thinks I exaggerate, he might consider this. In any given hour in any school in Ireland a teaching principal has to deal with situations such as a phone call from a parent whose child is upset; possibly a phone call from Tusla; a child who has a sudden and unexplained headache; a child who wants to know the Irish for climate change; a grandmother dropping off a lunch; a toilet that will not flush or indeed a toilet that will not stop flushing; the large dog that is running around the yard; a man selling posters or a lady looking to sell computer software. Most importantly of all, the same teaching principal has a class or classes that are his or her primary responsibility and should not be deprived of that teacher’s complete attention for one minute.

I am calling for the urgent enactment of the recommendations of the education committee; adequate funding for the day-to-day running of our schools; and additional supports to maintain and expand green spaces thereby providing every child with adequate access to PE; and that the Department must liaise with other Departments and State agencies to secure land around schools for that type of use. We need more supports for staff in small schools and supports for parents in respect of back to school costs. The notion of free education is a myth and must be addressed. Capitation must return to 2010 levels. Any analysis of any small school will show that when the insurance, heating, lighting and oil are paid for the parents have to pay for the rest.



The funding for the school building programme needs to be increased. In my area I am trying to help three schools which have been refused funding under the summer works programme. One school has asbestos, another has a front door that will neither open nor close on occasions and cannot even be locked. It needs those funds and I call on the Minister to address that immediately.

Proper forward planning for access to schools is dear to my heart particularly for children with disabilities. We know that in many instances, oftentimes from birth, that if proper planning is done for the child who is going to attend that local school the facilities will be in place long before they go there. I have spoken already about the workload of the teachers and the primary school principals particularly. Pay equality issues need to be resolved and the unhappiness and feeling of inequality in lower paid teachers in conjunction with the stress felt by principals in leadership roles means that the system is being squeezed to the detriment of the children and everyone in the school community.

I have read reports from the National Principals Forum and the Irish Primary Principals' Network and there are serious complaints about the lack of engagement on the part of the Department when support is sought. The rate of dissemination of circulars and initiatives is far too fast. The response received to queries is normally a standard response, failing to address the unique query posed. The quality of leadership in schools impacts directly on the quality of education the pupils receive. School principals must have their issues addressed and the funding issues must be addressed immediately. The undervaluing of primary education must not be allowed continue as this will impact on the overall education system with a consequent high cost to the Exchequer. How has the Minister helped our teaching principals to cope with these workloads? He has reduced the hours in which they have access to a secretary and a caretaker. He has smothered them with initiatives and directives, ignored their stories of work overload and burn-out, and their call to be given just a little more time away from teaching duties so that they can cope, to the benefit of both themselves and their classes. The Department needs to pay serious heed to this report.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I congratulate all the members of the committee and in particular Deputy O'Loughlin for chairing it. It is an extremely deep report. It excited me because cross-party support shows that something can be achieved. We have similar examples with the Sláintecare and the future of mental healthcare reports.

We have been listening to queries about school buildings programmes in our offices over recent years, not months. As the new Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan and the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, are aware, there have been ongoing issues in Carrigtwohill in my constituency. The difficulty of school campuses seems to be replicated around the country. When a committee of all parties and none comes together and can thrash this out and come up with doable and credible recommendations surely it is a blueprint and a plan. These should be followed. I welcome the fact that the school buildings programme is taking into account provision for special classes for students with autism and other special needs. There seems to be huge demand for that. I recently met Educate Together in Midleton and it too is looking for an additional secondary school and an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit. It is a question of moving things forward. Education is the key to opening any door. We have a fabulous education system. If we can give children the best that they are entitled to that is one of the strongest stepping stones in life. Everybody who has spoken tonight seems to be very passionate and honest about it. I always have been honest about it because we in this House have an opportunity to do things right.

Barnardo's did a survey some time ago and calculated that it would cost an additional €130 million to deliver free primary education to all children. In the context of the large budgets we deal with here that does not seem to be a lot. It would take immense stress off schools, parents and teachers. The question of voluntary contributions, school raffles and so on were mentioned but if the stress was taken off the parents, the principals and the teachers, they would have less to worry about if the education was provided free at the point of entry. People would then be willing to give a few bob and that is how the school can guarantee getting green areas for PE and so on. That has a positive effect. Barnardo's said that an additional €126 million was needed for the secondary schools. These are not unrealisable sums of money to do the right thing and make education free as it has never been.

I am in this Chamber with many teachers but the Minister of State sitting across from me, Deputy Stanton, taught me in school many years ago. I may not be that young but I am certainly younger than Deputy Stanton. He can remember much more about the school than I can. Maybe some days I did not want to be there.

People have said that principals of special schools should automatically designated administrative principals. That would be an invaluable support and would have a positive effect. In respect of capitation rates and funding for schools, if the Government was willing to take on what is in the education committee's report and the Barnardo's report it could eventually have inclusive free primary and secondary schools. The effect of that would be less stress on families and the community and on the system. When people appreciate something that works they buy into it and will give it more support. That model should be seriously considered.

Another recommendation of the report is generic uniforms. That is putting unbelievable stress on families, leading to them going to moneylenders, borrowing from anybody. It has reached the stage where parents are taking the badges off old clothes and sewing them onto generic clothes. That puts stress on the children going to school. If children do not have the up-to-date uniform and so on, they will be victimised, which is very unfair.

In response to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister for Education and Skills said:

[The capital programme] also provides for devolved funding for additional classrooms, if required, for schools where an immediate enrolment need has been identified or where an additional teacher has been appointed. Details of schools listed on this programme can be found on my Department's website.

Many speakers in this debate have spoken about parents panicking and I see it in my office every day. They are panicking because they have no clue where their children will go next year. It is not just an issue for secondary school, but also for primary school. I wrote to all school principals in east Cork recently and the replies I have received so far are very worrying. I am not sure how the Department calculates its figures and I do not want to cause problems for the schools in question but there are 160 children on one waiting list and 128 on another. Parents are phoning me and emailing me about this constantly. At 5 p.m. this evening I received an email from the parent of a child who has moved from No. 90 to No. 60 on the waiting list, wanting to know what can be done. This is causing such stress for people. The Minister has said that where an immediate enrolment need has been identified, contact should be made with the Department. Is it possible for elected representatives to contact the Department on behalf of school principals? This is also putting school principals under severe stress. They are dealing with families every day who are phoning or calling to the schools and asking if their child can

be guaranteed a school place next year.

The report is extremely inclusive and provides a wonderful blueprint for the future but I worry about our ability to drive it on. My biggest fear is that it will sit on a shelf like many other reports produced in this House. Another important issue is the abolition of salary gaps for new teachers. I would urge those working in the education sector as well as parents and community groups involved in educational projects to read this report and in particular, its final recommendations. In that way they will educate themselves about what we are trying to do in this House. We are trying to improve education in this country. The report has received cross-party support. I assure the Department that Members on this side of the House will do our best to drive this forward and make the necessary improvements.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Gabhaim buíochas do na daoine thíos i gCorcaigh a vótáil dom an tseachtain seo chaite. I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to speak this evening on this report. This is my first time speaking in Dáil Éireann and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion. Until recently I was a secondary school teacher in Coláiste an Chraoibhín in Fermoy, a school in which Deputy Stanton also taught many moons ago. In that context, I would like to think I have first-hand knowledge of many of the challenges that face secondary school principals and teachers today. At the outset I must state that we have an excellent education system in this country and I was glad to be a part of it for over 14 years working with Cork Education and Training Board. However, there are a number of challenges ahead, of which the school building programme is just one. I note that one of the recommendations in this report is for the appointment of a fully-funded administrative assistant for building in schools. My own experience tells me that this is a prerequisite to ensure the proper management of large-scale projects and to alleviate the burden placed on already overworked school boards of management. The lack of such a person in my former school in Fermoy meant that the school principal took on many of the duties and much of the stress that came with running a school on what was effectively a building site for over five years. I do not think that such a situation can continue. It is placing undue pressure on the boards of management of the schools affected.

It is also important to highlight the ongoing difficulties, as referenced by Deputy Buckley, with the project in Carrigtwohill. This is one of the largest educational campuses being built in the country and if ever there was a case to be made for the appointment of an administrative assistant, this is the project to make it. While I am loath to say that boards of management are ill-equipped to deal with many of the difficulties arising from building projects, they do need advice and help from planning consultants or administrative assistants which should be provided to them by the Department. The campus in Carrigtwohill has been beset by many difficulties with land ownership and delays in obtaining planning permission. All the while, the school has been operating out of a commercial premises. This situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Recommendation No. 8 in the report calls for the provisions necessary for good planning to be put in place to ensure that adequate facilities are provided to meet added demand for school places. I am concerned at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's response to the effect that the zoning of land is the responsibility of local authorities and not its responsibility nor that of the Department of Education and Skills. I was a county councillor for six years and I fully understand that it is the responsibility of local authorities to zone land. However, the Department must take a much more proactive stance in advising local authorities when there is a requirement for land to be zoned. There should be engagement by all Departments during the development plan process at local authority level. My experience

as a councillor was that local authorities only drove zoning for educational purposes after an intervention by the Department of Education and Skills. In my own area of Glanmire there are two secondary schools, Glanmire Community College and Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, both of which are bursting at the seams. Both of them have long waiting lists and are turning away students every year but the local authority has not sanctioned additional land for a third secondary school in the locality. The Department must actively advise local authorities of its envisaged requirements rather than taking a reactive stance, which seems to be par for the course. This *laissez-faire* policy is not working and I would urge the Minister to consult local authorities to the best of his ability.

Unfortunately, up to now I have spent much of my time talking about planning permission and bricks and mortar when we all know that the key to quality education is what happens within the four walls of the classroom. We need to look seriously at how we fund our schools, particularly in terms of capitation rates. These rates have not recovered sufficiently and stood at €296 per student in 2018. This constitutes an 11% decrease since 2010. I urge the Minister to undertake an assessment of the adequacy of the current capitation rate. Too many schools are now reliant on fundraising or voluntary contributions to keep the lights on. We need to look seriously at the funding of our schools and at capitation rates as a whole. The current system is undermining the long-established tradition of free education and must be tackled urgently. I serve on three boards of management at present, at one primary school and two secondary schools. Every year when we go through the audited accounts we see that heating, lighting, electricity, insurance and other bills are going up. Schools are struggling to keep up with this price inflation.

I would also like to reference the workload of teaching principals. If this Government really values smaller schools then it needs to introduce drastic reforms in this area. Consideration must be given to expanding the number of release days for teaching principals to ensure that they can adequately administer the affairs of the school while also leading teaching and learning and supporting their boards of management. Finally, reference must be made to the plight of the estimated 850 children with special needs across the country who are receiving home tuition this year because space could not be found for them in a local school. All new schools and new buildings for existing schools should be built with facilities to accommodate children with special needs. It is not acceptable that some of our most vulnerable children are treated this way. In the area where I live there is no capacity to meet the demand for ASD facilities in our schools. Two years ago Glanmire Community College opened up two ASD units. It was the first school in the locality to do so. There is already pressure on the school in that regard and it has agreed to open a third unit next September. It is already oversubscribed. Four or five such units could be filled in the locality. The capacity in the area does not meet demand.

Every year, Deputies face the challenge of getting a space in a local school for children with special needs. Many are turned away and end up travelling for up to an hour, often by taxi, to access their right to an education, while many others receive home tuition. Education should be at the heart of every community. People should have the opportunity to be educated in their community. It is incumbent on the Government to implement the recommendations of the report. I commend Deputy O'Loughlin and the committee on producing it.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Cuirim fáilte freisin roimh an tuarascáil an-tábhachtach seo. Many points noted in the report have been well made by Deputies. The fact that there is cross-party consensus on the matter speaks to the importance of education for the Irish body politic and for achieving social and economic goals for the country.

My colleague, Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan, referred to planning. A key element of catering for the increase in population of 1 million by 2040 will involve the provision of education and training at primary and post-primary levels, as well as the increasingly important process of lifelong learning. We need to look at imaginative ways to use our schools and training centres to provide learning opportunities within the community. I worry that the planning unit of the Department is not sufficiently equipped to meet the projections in respect of school numbers or the type of education we will need in the coming decades.

That brings me to the issue of IT equipment in schools, which was raised in submissions by the ASTI. The union pointed in particular to a 2016 ESRI report on the infrastructural deficit in that regard. I am worried that not all schools are sufficiently equipped with information and communication technology. Given the technological revolution we will face through the next decade which will involve challenges such as automation and artificial intelligence, we need to ensure that learners and teachers in our schools are sufficiently equipped with resources so as to be able to face them. I wish to see a clear set of plans, building on the report, in respect of how schools and teachers will be equipped to deal with those challenges.

An issue which has not been addressed is that of physical education, PE. A submission by the joint managerial body noted that only 50% of schools have full-sized PE halls and some 72% of those halls are fully or partly funded by the school. All Deputies are aware of the challenges of childhood obesity, the importance of engaging people in sport and that it has been shown that those who are physically active enjoy a better learning environment. A strategy is needed in that regard. The report notes that the Department stated in 2018 that there would be an audit of sports facilities in schools within a two-year period. It is now late 2019. What is the status of that commitment?

Several Deputies referred to the workload of teaching principals. Some 57% of primary principals have the dual responsibility of managing the school and teaching full time. The challenges in small schools have been outlined. There are issues arising from a lack of middle management in larger primary schools. Since the time of the moratorium, those issues have not been addressed, which is a further source of pressure on teaching principals.

Along with several other Deputies, I note the cross-party consensus on the issue. Politics is about providing solutions and the report contains several very effective recommendations. I am very happy with the work of the Chairman of the committee, Deputy O’Loughlin, and how she conducts her business. While there surely are several easy wins to be had from the report, it also highlights some of the challenges in the system.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):** I formally congratulate my two new colleagues from Fianna Fáil on their by-election wins. It is great to come into Leinster House for the first time. I wish them well with their careers. Should I have said “their long careers”? I am sure they will, at least, be productive.

I note the presence of a former student of mine, Deputy Buckley. I do not know where I went wrong. It goes to show how time flies. Like the Acting Chairman, Deputy Breathnach, my career in education dates back a long time; to the 1960s in my case. There is no comparison between the situations then and now.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne referred to technology. The first computer I saw in a school was an Apple II. It had a green screen and one cursor and made beeping noises. We have come a long



way and technology is moving very quickly. One sometimes wonders what impact it is having on our children, particularly when one hears principals talking about special lockers for mobile phones such that they are not used in classrooms, their not being permitted in school, the apps available on them and the significant amounts of time which students spend on them. Technology is welcome but we must be mindful of its dangers.

Deputies Buckley and Pádraig O’Sullivan referred to the situation in Carrigtwohill. I too am frustrated by the rate of progress there. It is the biggest single project ever undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills, with a total spend of approximately €38 million to provide on one campus two primary schools and a secondary school. The latter will cater for 1,000 students. The project is ready to go and funding for it has always been available, but it has been beset by problems relating to the purchase of land, obtaining planning permission and so on. It is being driven on as quickly as possible. The delay has led to frustrations.

Deputy Buckley referred to various waiting lists. In many parts of the country, parents enrol their child in more than one school and sometimes as many as three or four different schools. That is a source of frustration for principals because as the year goes on, the lists get shorter, which makes planning very difficult. We may need to come up with a system for admission to secondary schools which operates along the lines of the Central Applications Office college admission process. That is being done in Limerick, where it works quite well. It may be a measure which should be implemented where there are difficulties in respect of school waiting lists. There were very long waiting lists in my area at the start of last year but by August the waiting lists had diminished such that almost every student was catered for. It causes frustration for parents and worry for students if the child is number 90 or 100 on a waiting list. There was reference to a child moving from 90th to 60th on a waiting list. The list keeps moving as the year progresses. Last August, a woman whose child was enrolled in two schools contacted me, wondering to which school she should send the child. She was holding up a place for another child. Parents enrolling their children in more than one school is a problem. They may be worried that their child will not get a place. Major building works have been completed in approximately 15 schools in my area in recent years, including extensions and new schools. That is happening across the country, thankfully.

I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the debate. The combination of the committee’s work and this debate will help inform policy on these important matters. I spent five years on the justice committee and it produced many reports. The reports feed into policy. Committees have a major role to play in this regard. What has struck me, however, since I left the committee and undertook my current role is that it might be useful sometimes if committees would cost the proposals they put forward, that is, how much the proposals would cost the taxpayer. We can have wish lists, but it is important to go through them to see how many millions or tens of millions of euro they are going to cost. I am not sure if that has been done here. I have not seen it, but perhaps it has been. All of us should take on that responsibility if we are making proposals.

Much progress has been made on the matters outlined today since the public hearings held by the committee in late August 2018. This is evident in the many initiatives the Minister for Education and Skills has taken since his appointment. The symposium on small schools gave an opportunity to restate the Government’s commitment to small schools and to open a dialogue with all the key stakeholders. The improvement of capitation funding for schools will apply from the start of the 2020-21 school year. The combined increases in standard capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools given in the budgets for 2019 and 2020 means

restoration of approximately 40% will be achieved. There is support for principals through the commitment to revise the number of available posts of responsibility to take account of retirements during the school year in order to maintain the current level of posts of responsibility and to increase the number of principal release days. The increased number of release days is important, especially for schools with a teaching principal. Budget 2020 is the third successive budget to provide for an increase in the number of principal release days.

Under the current Action Plan for Education there is a commitment to increase the financial support for book rental schemes for schools in order to reduce or eliminate school book costs for parents. When I was teaching many moons ago we started a book rental scheme and it was very successful. Schools must also continue to take a pragmatic role and do everything possible to keep costs down for parents. Schools can do many things to keep costs down, such as with regard to the generic jumper with the fancy crest. This stuff is not needed for education or for schools. Under Project Ireland 2040 the Government is investing €8.8 billion in the school education sector between 2018 and 2027. This will enable the Department to make good progress in delivering on the significant number of projects in the pipeline and increase the infrastructure capacity in the school sector, while ensuring that the schools being built are being future proofed and taking advantage of new technologies as they come on stream.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne spoke about PE in schools. I agree wholeheartedly on the importance of physical education. Part of my role at present is developing a youth justice strategy. I believe it is extremely important that young people are involved in sport, and very often they can learn a new sport in schools. It is also important that we do not just close down schools at 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. The facilities, sports halls, gymnasiums and sports fields should be available to the wider community as much as possible outside school hours. Other clubs and organisations should be able to use those facilities as well. That is happening in many areas, but we must start to maximise the use of our resources and facilities across the country, especially when the taxpayer is funding them.

I thank the Chairman of the committee for the great work she has done in this report. It is important to shine a light in this area. The report is very good and it will certainly inform policy and debate into the future. I thank the Chairman and the members for the time they put into this and for taking it so seriously.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I wish to record my delight at having two more colleagues on this side of the House. The fact that Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan chose to make his maiden speech about the importance of education is significant. Deputy Malcolm Byrne also spent a long time working in the education sector and we might say he made his second maiden speech on education. They will be two valued colleagues not just in the Fianna Fáil Party but in terms of their experience in the education sector. That experience will be directed to the improvement of education policy in the country and not just on this side of the House. We hope and expect that their influence and interest will lead to positive results.

I will pick up on a few points, and all the points were very well made by the Members. As I mentioned, the report covered a number of key issues in the education sector. We have put practical suggestions in the report and a number of these came from the stakeholders. I thank the 20 stakeholders who came to meet the committee for a very good engagement on this issue.

In terms of the points the Minister made earlier, he referred to communication. It certainly is better. About two years ago we had the opportunity to look at many areas where there were

new builds, but there was a very difficult system of communication. I acknowledge that it is better. In particular, the recommendation we made about having a dedicated person liaising with each school regarding a new build or a sizeable extension and somebody working on behalf of the school is crucial.

I also welcome the initiative on common enrolment policies. I could never understand why that was not done. In Newbridge, the 11 primary schools in the parish had this system, and it also certainly worked in terms of ensuring greater integration. I am glad there is a national initiative in that regard.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan spoke about the need for more engagement with local authorities. That engagement right across the board is very important. When I was a councillor, we dealt two successive times, seven years apart, with one plan in regard to a particular area, Athgarvan. Within the local area, a piece of land was zoned for educational purposes, even though everybody knew the person who owned the land was never going to sell and repeatedly said he was never going to sell the land for education purposes. Despite telling the planners and those involved, they said this was the best place for a school and they kept it zoned and would not look anywhere else. That makes no sense and shows no joined-up thinking whatsoever. The practical experience of being involved in the school community is important.

The whole area of ASD classes is very important. At present, particularly for those who are leaving primary school and need to go into a mainstream secondary school, we only have 25% of what we need. In all of our constituencies, we all know of the huge frustration from parents who, since their child was born, have been fighting to get early intervention and get a place within the school. To then discover, eight years later, when there is a natural progression, that there is no place at second level is an appalling indictment of the education system.

We have an increasing population, of that there is no doubt. Despite what the Minister of State said about the Department looking at figures on forward planning, I do not think they are captured appropriately. We made this point in Tullamore, when we went to meet the Department in regard to forward planning, and some of the areas we highlighted were not in the original list of 42 new schools that the Minister of State mentioned. More schools have had to be added since, given that what the committee was bringing to bear proved to be correct.

The Minister of State mentioned the whole notion of facilities being used outside of school hours, and I could not agree more. I could never understand why school facilities would be locked at 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. I know insurance has been an issue in many cases but I believe that, in any new build, there has to be a situation where general purpose rooms and PE rooms have an independent door that can be accessed from outside and which the community can use. In Two Mile House, just outside Kilcullen, the school had no PE facilities but it now has a site, donated by the parish, and is starting, together with the community, to try to get the LEADER funding for a hall which will service the community as well as the school, which is the way to go.

I thank the Minister of State and thank all involved for their positive and proactive engagement. I want to offer final thanks to the secretariat and a particular mention to our now former clerk, Alan Guidon, who this week has gone on to another role in the Oireachtas. Alan's help, support, experience and wisdom have been invaluable over the past two years to me, as Chair, and to the committee as a whole. We wish him well in his new appointment.

I note the Minister of State has taken on board some of the recommendations and we look

forward to him taking on board the rest of the recommendations we have made.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.53 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 10 December 2019.