



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 10 Nollaig 2019

Tuesday, 10 December 2019

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: Community facilities, businesses, crèches, leisure centres, hotels, pubs, marts, you name it, are all under extraordinary pressure because of the rising costs of insurance. Many of us in this House have met a range of groups across the country that feel their enterprises are endangered by the dramatically escalating insurance costs and premiums. Many businesses are under significant threat. There are quite a number of fraudulent cases, which are a significant factor in the rising costs of insurance and in the culture of claiming at any cost. *The Irish Independent*, in a recent undercover investigation, has also reported that some GPs and solicitors are contributing to this culture of fraudulent and exaggerated claims by amending and holding back vital information in terms of medical reports and some sort of interaction between elements within both professions. In that context, it is fair to say that the Government's response to date, going back over the past three years and the various commissions that have been established, has been one of considerable inertia, with delay after delay and a lack of urgency in grappling with the essentials of this crisis.

I welcome the intention of the Government to support Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh's Perjury and Related Offences Bill 2018, which has been supported by my colleague, Deputy Troy, and the Fianna Fáil Party from the outset. We will help to fast-track this through the Dáil. I also point out to the Taoiseach that as far back as October 2018, former Deputy, Billy Kelleher, tabled legislation, the Civil Liability and Courts (Amendment) Bill, which would have mandated the courts to refer claims and actions which they dismissed as fraudulent to the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, so that fraudsters would face the full rigours of the law. We have been waiting and waiting for a response from the Minister for Justice and Equality about that legislation. The Minister is nodding. I have letters about it. Eight months ago, he indicated that he would deal with this within a month and it has not been dealt with. Deputy Michael McGrath also introduced legislation that would again have increased penalties for those making fraudulent claims. It would have added to the strength of our deterrence to people who would take such claims, especially since they would be obliged to pay the legal costs of a fraudulent claim. At the moment, the holder of the insurance policy or the establishment or the enterprise

has to bear the full brunt of the legal costs in many of these cases. Deputy Michael McGrath's Bill is still on Committee Stage. I welcome the fast-tracking of Senator Ó Céidigh's Bill but, equally, I put it to the Taoiseach that former Deputy, Billy Kelleher's, Bill should have been fast-tracked a long time ago, as should Deputy McGrath's.

It is more than 12 months since the completion of the final report of the Personal Injuries Commission. Incredibly, it showed that the level of damages for soft tissue injuries in Ireland is four and a half times higher than that of our nearest neighbours in England and Wales. Will the Government commit to fast-tracking former Deputy, Billy Kelleher's, legislation and Deputy Michael McGrath's legislation, which would have an impact on those making fraudulent insurance claims? When will the Government establish a publicly funded anti-fraud unit in An Garda Síochána?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which all in this House know is a significant concern for the business sector, sports clubs, crèches and community halls, all of which are facing the cost of rising insurance premiums. We and everyone involved in the sector, including insurance companies, the Judiciary and others, need to recognise that increasing insurance costs have a consequence. They can cause businesses to close and people to lose their jobs. None of us wants this to happen. We have made good progress in recent years on the broader area of insurance. We have seen motor insurance fall from its peak in 2016 by maybe 20% or 30%. Health insurance, which had been rising rapidly every year, has now levelled off for the past few years, and the same goes for home insurance. When it comes to public liability, we have much work yet to do. I join the Deputy in complimenting the *Irish Independent* on the investigation it carried out into the nexus that exists between some elements of the legal and medical professions when it comes to exaggerating and altering claims. That was a very timely investigation and it is something that we all need to pay a lot of attention to because, unfortunately, there is a profit motive there. Elements of both professions make a lot of money out of these claims.

With regard to Government action, as the Deputy acknowledged, we are pressing ahead with the Perjury and Related Offences Bill, which is being piloted by Senator Ó Céidigh and others. That will strengthen our perjury laws regarding those who make fraudulent and exaggerated claims. In addition, the judicial council will set up a committee, led by judges, to examine the quantum of personal injury claims. Those judges are independent and it is important to allow them to do their work independently. As the Deputy pointed out, the payouts for personal injuries in Ireland are four and five times what they are in other jurisdictions. As we all know, in around 90% of cases, people no longer need to attend treatment for their whiplash once they receive a payment. It seems the cure for whiplash in Ireland is a compensation payment rather than any medical treatment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty has also brought forward legislation to address this issue, for which the Cabinet approved two amendments this morning. We will bring that Bill through and it will result in greater transparency around insurance costs. Senator Ó Céidigh's Bill on perjury and Deputy Pearse Doherty's Bill on transparency are progressing, and most importantly, the judicial council is setting up its independent committee to review the quantum of awards paid to people who suffer injuries in Ireland. If the awards payments go down, we expect the insurance industry, which notwithstanding everything else is very profitable in Ireland, to respond with lower premiums.

I will have to come back to the Deputy about the Bills proposed by Deputy Michael Mc-

Grath and former Deputy Billy Kelleher. I will take a look at them and come back to the Deputy during the week on whether they can be progressed and find out why they have not been.

Deputy Micheál Martin: My understanding is that the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, was supposed to come back to us on that eight months ago. Former Deputy Billy Kelleher wrote to him about this matter. I got the Minister's response. It might have been eight months ago when he said he would respond within a month.

There are no data available on public liability insurance claims. Many of the Personal Injuries Commission's recommendations have yet to be implemented. The Taoiseach spoke of health insurance costs levelling off. There is a terrible air of detachment to that comment because most people are frightened and desperate because of the level of health insurance prices. Health insurance has a huge impact on people's incomes. The Taoiseach's statement that costs are levelling off would not resonate with elderly people, who cling to their health insurance, in particular. The cost of motor insurance has also increased by 32% since 2014. The Taoiseach should ask young drivers, returning emigrants, or even older drivers about this matter as they have huge issues with it.

The real issue here is the delay. The Taoiseach mentioned the Judicial Council Bill. How long has it been since that was recommended? This is a crisis. I do not believe there is a timeline for the judicial council to report back, but I ask the Taoiseach to indicate what it might be. We meet various interest groups which are paying insurance, and they are desperate about this. Take Killinarden community centre, for example. It may have to close some facilities because it simply cannot afford the 30% hike in premium it is facing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is happening all over the country. This is going on year after year and the Government's response is both delayed and seemingly ineffective.

The Taoiseach: The Judicial Council Bill only recently became law. Legislation only becomes law after it is passed by the Oireachtas and signed by the President.

Deputy Robert Troy: That is because the Government would not bring it into the Seanad.

Deputy Michael McGrath: We fast-tracked it.

The Taoiseach: While it only became law in the last few weeks, it is now possible for the Chief Justice to establish the aforementioned committee.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Taoiseach only brought the Bill to the Seanad to make the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, happy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: The Chief Justice is now establishing that committee. As the Deputy knows, the Judiciary guards its independence fiercely, and is right to do so. It is not for this House to set a timeline for its work. However, I will ask for the work to be carried out as expeditiously as possible. Perhaps the chairman of the committee, or the Chief Justice himself, can inform us as to what timeline they think they can meet.

In terms of the Garda response, it was recommended that a dedicated bureau be established

to deal specifically with the issue of insurance fraud. That is the Garda Commissioner's decision, and in his wisdom, he has decided that rather than setting up a dedicated national bureau which would deal only with insurance fraud, this issue would be best addressed at divisional and local levels and through the national economic crime bureau. I agree with his decision. The matter is being dealt with-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not.

The Taoiseach: -----in the way the Garda Commissioner thinks best.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He is only issuing guidance. It is not being done.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Today the Society of St. Vincent de Paul launched a report entitled, Growing up in the Cold, which exposes the grim reality of thousands of families living in energy poverty. One in six households spends more than 10% of its income on heating and electricity. Older and lone parents are particularly affected. Significantly, the report highlights that 42% of children living in the private rental sector experience energy poverty and 36% of children living in social housing have the same difficulties. The report clearly shows a relationship between poor-quality accommodation and energy poverty. The report states that 140,000 children are living in homes with leaks, damp and rot. One parent quoted in the report said:

There are six of us with two bedrooms, living room, kitchen and bathroom. We have one small heater, and we move it from room to room.

One small heater is a clear breach of minimum standards.

Two years ago, this House passed a Sinn Féin Private Members' motion on standards in the private rental sector. It called for an NCT-style certification system for private rented housing, adequate resourcing for local authorities to ensure meaningful inspection and enforcement and a review of penalties for non-compliant landlords. Two years on, what has changed? Last year, just 9% of private rental properties were inspected. Of these, 82% failed to meet minimum standards and less than half of these had their breaches resolved by the end of the year. This is simply not good enough. The Government's failure to resource the enforcement of minimum standards is leaving tens of thousands of people, including thousands of children, living in the cold and its failure to properly fund the maintenance of council housing is leaving thousands of the State's tenants in unacceptable conditions. In light of the depressing findings in today's report, will the Government fully implement the proposals in the 2017 Sinn Féin motion, which was passed without opposition in the House, and actively consider implementing the seven recommendations in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul report published this morning?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has given me the courtesy of a very direct question. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the chance to read that report so I would have to look at it before I could tell him which recommendations we can and cannot implement. I acknowledge that many people in Ireland experience energy poverty, or fuel poverty, if one prefers to use that term. This is particularly relevant at this time of the year during the winter as days get darker and colder. We are all aware that quite a considerable number of people every year across the western world, including Ireland, die as a result of cold-related illnesses.

What are we doing about it? There are four main measures. First, the fuel allowance will go up again in a few weeks in January. We are investing in retrofitting social housing to make sure we improve the quality of that housing and make those homes warmer. New building standards

mean that pretty much all new buildings and new homes are near zero-energy buildings. The better energy warmer homes scheme can assist people to retrofit their homes and make them warmer. Local authorities also have a role to play. Many parties opposite are in controlling positions in local authorities and can reduce or increase property tax or commercial rates. They also need to be held accountable for their decisions where they choose to reduce property tax instead of, for example, investing in housing and other services or perhaps choosing whitewater rafting as a priority over other issues when they get control of a local authority.

It would be remiss of the House not to acknowledge the significant progress that has been made in recent years in reducing poverty. Notwithstanding the many individual stories of people suffering and families in distress, we know from the CSO survey on income and living conditions, published last week, that poverty in Ireland has fallen for five years in a row. It is at its lowest in a very long time. Deprivation rates are falling and income inequality is at its second lowest since records began. This is a considerable achievement that perhaps does not always come across when we tend to focus on hard cases, however real they may be. We are seeing significant progress in reducing poverty, including child poverty, and deprivation in recent years. This did not happen by accident. It happened because we have jobs, the economy is being well managed, the minimum wage has been increased and incomes and pay are increasing. Take-home pay is increasing because of reductions in tax and increases in social welfare. Those will continue as long as we manage the economy and public finances well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The great difficulty is that under the Government's two-tier economic recovery, increasing numbers of people are being left far behind. There is a fuel allowance but it comes nowhere close to covering the rising cost of fuel. Retrofitting of local authority stock is ongoing but one must wait for two to three years to get one's windows or doors replaced. The new standards for building are very much in question when local authorities are not being funded by the Government to adequately inspect private rental tenancies.

Local authorities have a role to play but let us not forget that, thanks to the Government and its Fianna Fáil predecessor, local authorities lost 25% of their staff during the recession. That was the single greatest loss of staff in any sector of the public service.

I ask the Taoiseach to study carefully the report from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and its seven recommendations, and then come back to this House to tell us which of those recommendations should be implemented. I also ask the Taoiseach to respect the democratic decision made by this House in November 2017 and to implement fully the recommendations of the Sinn Féin Private Members' motion to ensure that all private rental properties are fully inspected and all minimum standards are fully adhered to in order that no child is living in energy poverty because of the failure of the Government to fund adequate enforcement of inspection of properties in the private rental or local government sectors.

The Taoiseach: I have immense respect for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as an organisation and I will look at the report. The Government will issue a reasoned response when it has had a chance to consider the report.

On the wider issue, everyone is entitled to their own opinions but they are not entitled to their own facts. If we had a two-tier economic recovery in Ireland, we would not see income inequality at its second lowest level since records began in 2004, nor would we see consistent poverty falling dramatically as it has in recent years. We would not see deprivation going down or 40,000 children lifted out of child poverty in recent years.

Things vary from region to region and the experience is not the same for every family but the experience in Ireland is, broadly, that we are going in the right direction. Unemployment is down and incomes are rising while poverty and deprivation are falling. Those are the facts and no amount of politics, populism or spin can cover those up.

The Deputy spoke about inspections of properties and the new Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act gives new powers to the Residential Tenancies Board and there are additional inspectors. The first cases are now under way. By 2021, it is anticipated that one in four properties will be inspected so, roughly speaking, every property will be inspected every four years. Money is being provided for this by central Government but it would be helpful if those parties in control of local authorities that could help to contribute to the cost of that would do so, rather than cutting the local property tax or investing in white-water rafting.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Since the Taoiseach has not read the report from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, I will read some passages from it:

Light, heat and power are fundamental requirements to participate in society and a prerequisite for social inclusion. ... [Last] year, SVP spent more than €5 million helping people with the cost of energy - an increase of 20% on the previous year. We are therefore concerned about the current and future impact of energy price increases on the households we are assisting - the majority of which are families with children. Furthermore, amid the current housing crisis, [the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is] meeting more and more families who are forced to put up with substandard accommodation, with issues like damp and mould commonplace. Members are particularly worried about the risk of poor health for children living in these conditions for long periods of time.

The report notes “A household is considered energy poor if it is unable to attain an acceptable standard of warmth and energy services in the home at an affordable cost.” Some of the figures in the report are stark. Households with children are more than twice as likely to be in arrears with utility bills than households without children. Some 140,000 children are living in homes that have issues with leaks, damp and rot, while 31% of lone parents are spending more than 10% of their income on energy and one lone parent in seven is in severe poverty.

I wish to raise a couple of issues beyond those raised by Deputy Ó Broin. The fuel allowance was increased to a generous €5 - I am joking - in the most recent budget. It is clear that it will go nowhere near meeting the increases in carbon tax that were brought in in the same budget. Moreover, not all of the poorest children who rely on social welfare are in receipt of fuel allowance. As a member of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, I pursued and won the support of this House for a fuel poverty study to be carried out prior to the carbon tax being increased. As the Minister and the Government failed to do that, we must revisit the question of fuel poverty among 140,000 children, who will be waiting for Santa Claus in freezing cold and who, the report states, will huddle together in one room in an attempt by their parents to heat that room rather than have them separated throughout the house.

I want to highlight three areas of the Taoiseach’s failure. The first is the housing policy and the over-reliance on the private sector. A private landlord can apply for grants to retrofit and secure a home with insulation. A tenant cannot do that. The second is the blind insistence on increasing the carbon tax for everybody, regardless of their situation. The third is the lack of ambition shown by the Government in its policies on retrofitting. The Government is leaving people in the private rented sector, as well as those who are council tenants, completely vulner-

able. Councils do not have a budget this year for retrofitting homes. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, is inadequately funded to do the job that is required.

The Taoiseach: I am not sure I can add much to the response I gave earlier but to reiterate, the fuel allowance, or the energy allowance, as it will be called, will increase in January and that will help people with their energy costs. The child dependant allowance also will increase, which will help the poorest families who have children with bills in general. We are retrofitting social housing. One of the policy decisions we made in the budget was to ring-fence any additional funding coming in from an increase in the carbon tax for climate action and just transition.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is pie in the sky.

The Taoiseach: We are using the proceeds of that carbon tax increase to pay for more retrofitting of social housing to increase the fuel allowance. We are also building more social housing. Approximately 11,000 houses will be added to the social housing stock next year, while 10,000 were added this year. Those houses, three quarters of which are new builds, are built to the highest standard and are warm homes. I have been in many of those homes and have seen how comfortable they are. They are a huge improvement on the very old social housing stock across the country that needs to be upgraded. That can only be done, however, year by year and bit by bit.

The fuel allowance goes up to €24 a week, not €5 a week. For those in receipt of the fuel allowance, it will compensate them, and then some, when it comes to the carbon tax. I appreciate that some people do not receive the fuel allowance but of the worst-off, the lowest income quartile in society, most do receive it. The cost of the carbon tax increase is approximately €40 per household but the fuel allowance increase is approximately €50, so it more than compensates those in receipt of fuel allowance. I appreciate it varies from household to household and people have different heating systems but that is the case, generally speaking.

The Deputy mentioned that the carbon tax applies to everyone. I wonder if she understands how carbon tax works. It is not possible to apply carbon tax to some people and not to others. The whole point of a behavioural tax like carbon tax, like the tax we have on cigarettes and alcohol, is that it does apply to everyone. The more carbon one produces, the more one pays. It applies to businesses as well. In fact, most of the carbon tax is paid for by businesses.

Deputy Bríd Smith: In case the Taoiseach is saying that the report the Society of St. Vincent de Paul issued this morning is some kind of fairy tale, I repeat that 140,000 children are cold this winter in the weeks leading up to Christmas. How does that make the Taoiseach feel? It makes me feel appalled.

I want to relocate where I believe the problem exists. The Taoiseach says the carbon tax is to change behaviour but he does not allow people to change their behaviour. People living in private rented accommodation cannot apply for SEAI grants and there is no compunction on landlords to have their homes up to standard. People living in council houses cannot apply for SEAI grants. The council must intervene and retrofit their homes. The Taoiseach, therefore, is penalising the most vulnerable and the poorest.

I will not repeat the statistics I read out at the start of my contribution but I wish to point out another major anomaly. Many people who move into council tenancy or buy their own homes are forced to go onto pre-pay power. A company known as PrePayPower Ireland released fig-

ures in November indicating that it has received a dividend in this country of €17.2 million. That is outrageous when people are forced to use these cards. Yet, we have the highest rate of energy arrears in Europe. There is something desperately wrong when a company is making vast profits and ordinary people have to suffer in this way without any returns from the company to help alleviate the poverty and cold that children are experiencing this winter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I appeal to the Taoiseach not to deny that what the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reported this morning is true. It is absolutely true and he should deal with the facts.

The Taoiseach: The fact that the Deputy feels the need to put words in my mouth and attribute remarks to me that I never made says to me that she is not interested in the facts.

The Deputy referred to council housing. As I mentioned, we have a retrofitting programme under way. That is in part being funded by the proceeds coming in from the carbon tax. We are building more social housing all the time. It is social housing to the highest quality ever.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is at a snail's pace.

The Taoiseach: Approximately 10,000 additional social homes will be provided this year. That is more than any year in the past 20 through the boom and the bust. It will be up to 11,000 next year and 12,000 the year after. Approximately 60,000 new homes will be added to the social housing stock over the coming five years. It is probably the biggest social housing programme that has happened in generations. It is happening with homes being built to the highest quality and with the best energy ratings.

Deputy Michael Harty: My question concerns the number of children in emergency accommodation. In October the number was 3,826 and now we approach Christmas 2019. I had proposed to put this question to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs but it was transferred this afternoon to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government for reply at a later date. It was to be a priority question. I am going to ask the Taoiseach the question instead.

In July 2016, I suggested to the Minister for Children and Family Affairs in a parliamentary question that the spectre of 2,177 children being housed in emergency accommodation was a blight on the nation. With projected figures of 4,026 children in such accommodation by this Christmas, I asked how the Minister would respond to the appalling deterioration in the figures. Of course I am now asking the Taoiseach instead of the Minister, who transferred the question.

When I put a similar question to the Minister in 2016, she replied that the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, which had just been published, had an ambition that within one year we would not be reliant on emergency accommodation to house children and families. She went on to outline the support services that would be put in place to support those children until mid-2017, when they would no longer be in emergency accommodation. The services included access to early years services, education and nutritional needs, Tusla services, and supports for pregnant women. The Minister intended to move towards a sense of normality for those children. It was to be a political priority to avoid lasting damage to these children.

Of course, the fundamental solution to addressing child homelessness is to provide them with a home, not to rely on emergency accommodation. That was to be phased out by mid-2017 but it has worsened. Instead of having 2,177 children homeless, we now have 3,826 and

the number is rising. When one considers that children move in and out of homelessness on a frequent basis, the figure is probably far greater than the 3,826 who are affected. This is my question to the Taoiseach: how does he respond to this appalling deterioration in child homelessness figures?

The Taoiseach: I think it is heartbreaking that so many children are living in emergency accommodation at any time of year, but particularly at this time of year. Even though they may go in and out of it quite quickly, as the Deputy said - perhaps six months or a year in some cases - that is still far too long and there are far too many cases.

I am unsure where the Deputy's projected figures come from. We know that in the most recent monthly figures the number of families who are homeless and the number of children who are homeless fell slightly. I hope that will continue in the coming months. The number of rough sleepers is also down. I recall the week when across the road from here on Molesworth Street John Corrie died in a doorway. At that time there were approximately 168 rough sleepers in Dublin. The most recent figures show that this figure has fallen to approximately 92. Many of these are people who need a great deal of support and it is hard to get them in. However, it demonstrates some of the progress that has been made. The rough sleeping is now down to its lowest level in approximately five years, but this is certainly a problem that is a real blight on our society, as the Deputy described.

When one talks about the fact that there are 10,000 people living in emergency accommodation, we should not forget that 14,000 people have been brought out of emergency accommodation, have been housed by the Government and are now in secure accommodation, and it is not the same 10,000 all the time. In fact, more people have been taken out of homelessness into secure housing now than are homeless but, unfortunately, people continue to become homeless every day and every week.

Deputy Harty asked how we respond. We respond in two ways. Provided in budget 2020, which the Deputy did not vote for, is €160 million in funding for the charities and agencies that work with us, both to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place - half of people are now prevented from becoming homeless in the first place - but also to help them through emergency accommodation, to run the family hubs and to then get out of emergency accommodation. That is not something the Deputy supported or voted for.

The second way is in stepping up our investment in social housing. Three years ago when this Government came to office, maybe 3,000 or 4,000 were being added to the social housing stock every year. That is up to 10,000 this year. It will be 11,000 next year and 12,000 the year after that. Not in any year this century have more houses been added to the social housing stock than this year. We will do better again next year and better again the year after. However, as the Central Bank pointed out today, we are catching up on a massive deficit. A country, such as Ireland, with our population and demographics should be adding 35,000 houses to its housing stock every year. We are not there yet. We have trebled the amount of supply, up from 7,000 a year three and a half years ago to more than 20,000 now. We will get to 25,000 next year. We will get up to 35,000. If we could do it quicker, if there was a cheque I could sign, a button I could press or a lever I could pull, we would have done it by now.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach is seven or eight years in government.

The Taoiseach: Our housing market was destroyed. Our construction industry was de-

stroyed.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach has only had seven or eight years in government.

The Taoiseach: Our banks were bust. Our Government was bust. We had a seven-year period when almost no homes were built in Ireland.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The question was about children.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach was there for seven years.

The Taoiseach: Two hundred thousand homes should have been built.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Will Deputy Cowen go to the State's bank?

Deputy Barry Cowen: It was their seven years.

The Taoiseach: No matter what anyone may say, it will take us many years to recover from that.

A Deputy: We shut you up, Barry.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The party is over, boys.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Deputy Barry Cowen is all about the party, is he not?

Deputy Michael Harty: As I stated at the outset, my question was about children and child homelessness. The Royal College of Physicians has produced a report, *The Impact of Homelessness and Inadequate Housing on Children's Health*. The reason I was addressing my question to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, not the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government - it was transferred and I have no control over that - was that it was specifically about child homelessness and its impact on their health. It causes serious mental and physical illness to children who are in persistent homelessness. Some 25% are at an increased risk of physical and mental ill-health. There is a higher risk of pre-term pregnancies in women who are pregnant in homeless accommodation. There are higher rates of asthma, respiratory illness and infectious diseases, poor nutrition, and less access to development opportunities, play and recreational and social activities. They are more likely to be bullied. These effects on children's health go way beyond their childhood and go into their adult lives. These children are our future.

The Taoiseach's response failed to address any of the issues I raised. He failed to explain how, in 2017, we were not going to rely on emergency accommodation to house children and yet the figures have almost doubled in the lifetime of this Government.

The Taoiseach: I think I am correct in saying that when this Government came to office, or certainly when the current Minister came to office, the number of people in emergency accommodation was 8,000. It is now 10,000. That is not quite a doubling but it has got worse - there is no denying that - despite our best efforts.

In terms of what we have been trying to do to alleviate the situation, the most important thing is preventing people becoming homeless in the first place. As I mentioned, because we fund and work with so many charities and NGOs, we are able to prevent half of people becoming homeless in the first place. That is a significant change from where we were a few years

ago. We have also invested in the family hubs, precisely because we accept that hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation is inadequate. Whereas family hubs are by no means perfect, they are better. They give people dignity, their own door, their own cooking facilities, and their own play areas. I have been to visit them and I have seen them for myself. The people who spend time in family hubs get out of them into permanent housing much more quickly than those who self-accommodate. Above and beyond all that, the solution has to be more supply of social housing, so we can take people off the housing list and out of emergency accommodation, more supply of private housing so that people have homes to buy, as most people want to buy their own home, and also more homes for people to rent because lots of people will need to rent at some point in their life. We need to get to the point where we are building approximately 35,000 new homes in Ireland every year, as the Central Bank said. We have trebled housing supply just under the term of this Government of Fine Gael and the Independent Alliance.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The Taoiseach should use the word “children”. He should make it real. They are called children.

The Taoiseach: We need to do more and we will do more.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The business this week shall be as set out in the report of the Business Committee dated 5 December 2019.

In relation to today’s business, it is proposed that No. 14, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Universities Act 1997 (section 54(3)) (University Authorisation) Order 2019, back from committee; No. 15, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2019, back from committee; and No. 16, motion re appointment of a member to the Policing Authority, shall be taken without debate. In relation to No. 38, statements on the OECD report re SME and entrepreneurship policy in Ireland, the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with five minutes for all other members, a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time. Should a division be in progress at 8 p.m., Private Members’ Business shall be taken for two hours on the conclusion of the division, and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Private Members’ business. No. 64, Rent Freeze (Fair Rent) Bill 2019, Second Stage, shall conclude within two hours.

In relation to Wednesday’s business, it is proposed that No. 39, statements pre-European Council meeting of 12 and 13 December, pursuant to Standing Order 111, shall commence immediately after Taoiseach’s questions and conclude within 85 minutes and shall be followed immediately by the sos. Statements shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time. In relation to No. 41, statements on domestic violence, the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with five minutes for all other Members and a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State,

and all Members may share time. No. 65, Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2019, Second Stage, shall conclude within two hours.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that No. 17, motion re Supplementary Estimates, shall commence after Questions on Promised Legislation, shall conclude within 45 minutes and shall be followed immediately by the weekly divisions. The Supplementary Estimates shall be moved together and decided by one question. Speeches shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed five minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time. In relation to No. 42, statements on racism affecting ethnic minorities in Ireland, the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with five minutes for all other Members, a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to?

Deputy Alan Farrell: Last week, Members started to debate statements on Scouting Ireland but the debate was not concluded. I find it unusual that the debate did not flow into the following week, given there are new subjects for statements. Deputy Rabbitte was in possession and three or four Members, myself included, wanted to make a contribution on it. I suspect the matter could be concluded in well under an hour and I ask the Chief Whip and the Business Committee to consider putting it into the schedule.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne): It was not raised at the Business Committee meeting but we can take it on board and see if there can be a time slot later, depending on how business goes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: See what can be done.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Chief Whip. I did bring it to the attention of his office well before the Business Committee met.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputy Farrell now knows how awfully hard it is for us.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is going overboard.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed.

We have 25 minutes left and when people are thinking about asking questions, they should please consider promised legislation. I do not think I can accept questions that are more suited to Topical Issue matters or parliamentary questions. Members can put the question but if the Taoiseach cannot answer constituency questions, we are wasting time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On 28 September 2015, there was a banner headline in *The Irish Times*, "Nationwide ban on smoky coal due within the next year". Last Monday, there was again a headline in *The Irish Times* to the effect that the Government would take action on the smoky coal ban but when one reads the detail, one will see it is a consultation framework and it is being referred to councils. This is more ducking and diving, dodging of the core issue and

failure of backbone or to stand up to the vested interests. In a recent letter to Deputy Browne from the HSE on this issue, the HSE estimates that the cost to the Exchequer of poor air quality and associated health impacts is approximately €2 billion a year. In addition, the Environmental Protection Agency confirms the extraordinary impact of the introduction by the then Minister, Mary Harney, of the smoky coal ban in 1990 on air quality. The medical evidence shows a reduction in respiratory illnesses and premature death. Given the overwhelming medical evidence, it is extraordinary that a Minister was able to do it in 1990 but the Government is incapable of doing it. This Government seems to lack the bottle to take on the vested interests in the interest of good human health and air quality.

Several of us have been raising this for well over a year. The reason for that first headline was that the then Minister, Deputy Kelly, made that commitment. It was a legislative promise by the Government. He was in the previous Government. He was followed in office by Deputy Naughten, who made the promise. The former Minister, Deputy Naughten, is going around the place saying that if he was still there, this definitely would have happened. I assume he had access to the same advices that the current Minister has.

The Taoiseach: I know the Deputy is a lover of conspiracy theories but I am sure he does not really believe that I write the headlines in the newspapers. I have not quite got that kind of power.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He has written a fair few.

The Taoiseach: The issue of smoky coal is twofold. It is not 1990 any more. That was nearly 30 years ago and things have changed since then. We now know that turf briquettes and solid fuel are just as bad for air quality-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: They are 5% of them-----

The Taoiseach: -----as smoky coal if not worse.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Smoky Joe.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach wants to kill us off altogether. That is his agenda anyway.

The Taoiseach: People moving from smoky coal to briquettes or turf or wood does not improve the air quality.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is not right.

The Taoiseach: We have to bear that in mind. That is the environmental issue. There is also a legal issue-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Government should make a decision rather than have a consultation.

The Taoiseach: -----which is the risk that for that reason, an extension of the ban nationwide may cause the entire ban to be struck down and that would be a disaster.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is hiding behind consultations.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I will sue the Taoiseach if he bans it in Enniscorthy but not in

Dublin.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy goes off topic, I would like with his indulgence to go briefly off topic once as well. I want to acknowledge the fact that UN today published its development index which shows that Ireland is now the third best country in the world in which to live.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Not if you are a child.

The Taoiseach: When it comes to quality of life-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach must be the third best leader.

The Taoiseach: This is not my opinion; this is the UN's opinion.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach gets the bronze medal.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please. I call Deputy Eoin Ó Broin.

The Taoiseach: It is up from fourth place last year-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not the question I asked.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Eoin Ó Broin.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----and up from 17th place in 2012.

(Interruptions).

Deputy James Browne: Tell that to the 200,000 children on waiting lists.

The Taoiseach: That is based on the economy, jobs, life expectancy and education.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please-----

The Taoiseach: This has not come from a UN committee-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach might focus on the question asked.

The Taoiseach: -----or from a UN rapporteur.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: It has come from the United Nations Development Programme, which is a UN agency. I look forward to the "Prime Time" special dedicated to-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No one-----

The Taoiseach: -----explaining to the country exactly how we managed to get to fourth place in the entire world.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach is some man for one man.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Excuse me but no one in this House has the right to take up the time of Members who want to raise questions.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please refrain from going off script or off topic.

Deputy Alan Farrell: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle just let the leader of the Opposition speak for more than two and a half minutes.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Taoiseach raises whatever he wants-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No. Deputy Farrell should be very familiar with the role of the Chair. He is good when he is in the chair.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I am very familiar-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am protecting the rights of all Members. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin is next.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Page 127 of the programme for Government promises to invest additional capital to fund major public transport projects and to fund additional capacity to meet existing and future commuter needs. Today is the deadline for public submissions on the second draft of the BusConnects plan. Many of us in this House will have made detailed submissions to try to improve the final product. However, the success or failure of the final redesign of bus networks will be wholly dependent on Government funding. I ask the Taoiseach to confirm exactly how much funding has been committed to the network redesign as distinct from the cost of compulsory purchase orders related to the bus corridor project. Will the Taoiseach commit to the additional funding for the National Transport Authority and Dublin Bus that is needed to increase peak-time capacity on routes such as the 25, 39 and 18 which are already over capacity?

The Taoiseach: I do not have that figure to hand but will ask the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to provide it for the Deputy. Assuming we stay in office, I can commit to continuing to increase the capital budget for public transport, as we have done for the last two years. We will continue to do so for the next five years if we are given the opportunity. I know that the Deputy will want to join me in welcoming the considerable investment that has been made in public transport in the past few months alone. We have increased capacity on the Luas green line-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The election is on, clearly.

The Taoiseach: New carriages have been ordered which will increase capacity by 34% on the Maynooth, Kildare and northern lines.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We are getting a speech on everything.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: My question was about buses that are already at over capacity.

The Taoiseach: We are providing €1 billion for Irish Rail over the next five years to im-

prove the quality of our railways.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Do not interrupt the Taoiseach's speech.

The Taoiseach: Also, for the first time, there will be 24 hour bus services in Cork and Dublin. That has never been done before.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Brendan Howlin is next.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: For years we have heard the argument being trotted out that raising the minimum wage and giving low-paid workers enough money to make ends meet jeopardises jobs and is bad for business. However, this myth has been regularly debunked by organisations such as the OECD, the US Federal Reserve, the University of California at Berkeley and many others. In the Irish context, it has now been debunked by the ESRI in its analysis of the increase in the minimum wage in January 2018 from €9.25 to €9.55 per hour. The ESRI found that this increase had no effect on the average hours worked in the hotel and food industries, where the majority of minimum wage earners work. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to the House, in the run up to Christmas, that in the event of a deal being signed on Brexit his Government will immediately sanction the increase in the minimum wage recommended by the Low Pay Commission?

The Taoiseach: The short answer is "Yes". However, I would say ratified rather than signed because there is a difference there. Should the withdrawal agreement be ratified, the Government will implement the Low Pay Commission's recommendation to increase the minimum wage to €10.10 per hour. That will be the third increase in three years by this Government and will mean that we have the sixth highest minimum wage in the world.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As someone who played schoolboy soccer for most of my teenage years, as well as Leinster senior soccer, I am well aware of the absolute disgust and revulsion of grassroots soccer players, clubs, supporters and parents at the scandal that has emerged in the FAI. The programme for Government makes a particular promise to improve oversight of spending programmes. Given the obvious incompetence, mismanagement and obscene salaries of Mr. Delaney and his clique in the FAI, the Government must take some responsibility for its failure to investigate what the dogs in the street knew. Those at the grassroots of soccer knew that there was something rotten at the heart of the FAI. I am looking at an email response from the Taoiseach, when he was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, which was sent to somebody on 24 March where he was asked by the emailer to investigate the internal affairs of the FAI. His response was that it was not appropriate for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to comment on the internal structures of a national sporting organisation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He batted off the request for an internal investigation. Is that not just the problem when the Government hands out money to these quangos, which are run like medieval corrupt fiefdoms, and pays no attention whatsoever to the goings-on in entities like the FAI? The grassroots of soccer are now threatened in a very severe way. Indeed, the FAI's very viability is under threat because of a failure in oversight.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. The Government does not have powers of investigation when it comes to matters such as this in companies or sporting bodies. The Garda does and the

report is now with the Garda. This is a matter for the Garda and the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement, ODCE to investigate.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is the Taoiseach saying that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has nothing to do with it?

The Taoiseach: He does not have the power to carry out a Garda or ODCE investigation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ní mór dom a rá, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, go bhfuil sé deacair cloí leis na rialacha ó thaobh ama de nuair a ligtear don Taoiseach agus do cheannaire Pháirtí Fhianna Fáil dul thar am i gcónaí. Maidir le Bille na dteangacha-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Bhí mé ag iarraidh srian a chur orthu. Dúradh nach raibh mé ag tabhairt go leor ama dóibh.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tuigim go ndearna an Leas-Cheann Comhairle a dhícheall ach, d'ainneoin sin-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Níl sé furasta.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Níl sé furasta ach b'shin post an Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Maidir le Bille na dteangacha oifigiúla, thug an Taoiseach geallúint shollúnta an bhliain seo caite go mbeidh sé foilsithe roimh an Nollaig. Thug sé geallúint eile i mí Lúnasa go mbeidh sé foilsithe roimh an samhradh agus geallúint eile fós go mbeidh sé foilsithe roimh an Nollaig seo. An mbeidh sé ag comhlíonadh a chuid dualgas agus geallúintí maidir le Bille na dteangacha oifigiúla agus an mbeidh sé foilsithe an tseachtain seo nó cén dáta a foilseofar é?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Bainfimid triail amárach chun 30 soicind a thabhairt do gach duine agus b'fhéidir-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ní ceart an milleán a chur orainn. Níor sháraigh mise an t-am riamh ach sháraigh an Taoiseach agus ceannaire Pháirtí Fhianna Fáil é.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Fág agamsa é, a Theachta. Glaoim anois ar an Taoiseach labhairt.

The Taoiseach: Maidir le Bille na dteangacha oifigiúla, leagadh é faoi bhráid an Rialtais maidin inniu. Tá áthas orm gur tugadh cead é a fhoilsiú agus tús a chur leis an bpróiseas reachtaíochta san Oireachtas. Is céim mhór chun tosaigh í seo.

Cinnteooidh an Bille nua go leanfaidh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla de bheith ina thacaíocht do gach duine ar mhian léi nó leis seirbhísí d'ardchaighdeáin i nGaeilge a fháil ón Stát.

Creidim féin agus creideann an Rialtas go ndéanfaidh an reachtaíocht difríocht mhór don Ghaeilge agus do shaol na Gaeilge sa tír seo. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Kyne, agus don Roinn as an obair atá déanta acu air seo.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mattie McGrath. Maybe we will try the thirty-second rule.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The programme for Government is rich in its support for agri-

culture and agroforestry. There are huge concerns among farm and forestry contractors and, indeed, many farmer-landowners, over the desperate delays in getting tree-felling licences. This is going on for too long and I believe there is a serial objector out there as well holding it all up. We need to change the legislation here.

Between 2010 and 2018, the number of felling licence applications submitted showed a sustained increase from more than 1,700 in 2010 to almost 6,000 in 2018. This year, the number is way down to 1,800 applications. These people have long-term investments. They need to get the product out. As well as that, there are skilled contractors with huge investment in machinery and they need to be able to work. They will be idle in 2020 if something is not done here. Tá an tAire Stáit anseo. This is a serious situation where we need to amend the legislation to stop serial and frivolous objectors, and allow contractors to do their work.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank the Deputy for the question. We are very well aware of challenges that are out there. I believe the Deputy is wrong in his figures of application for felling licences this year. They are up again on last year.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am telling the Minister of State that I am not.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: The figures are up. Many more applications are being processed. There is a specific problem and the Deputy should check his facts.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister of State should check his facts as well.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I have the facts.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: None is being granted.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doyle without interruption.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: The Deputy just said there is a record number of appeals. They cannot be appealed unless they are granted. Go back and recheck-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There are objections.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: In fairness, due to a European Court of Justice judgment the appropriate assessment process and procedures have had to be revamped. This afternoon, appeals are being considered under the new procedures, which will hopefully speed up the appeals process. The industry engaged last week with the Department and all the stakeholders. I am aware of the case the Deputy mentioned. There is a list of applications which we are trying to process. We are trying to deal with this. We tried to introduce an amendment to the Act, but we will have to do it in a different manner in the new year.

Deputy Tom Neville: Today we learned about €10 million in funding for investment in broadcasting, with €9 million to go to RTÉ. I welcome the fact that an independent commission will be established to identify the challenges to local broadcasters against the backdrop of content provision delivered globally on global platforms. Is the Government aware of any implications for Lyric FM in Limerick city, which serves the county and the wider mid-west region? It is at the heart of the arts in the mid-west and encompasses the colleges there. What

are the implications for Lyric FM?

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet decided today to provide an extra €10 million for public service broadcasting in Ireland in 2020, with €9 million going to RTÉ and €1 million going to the broadcasting fund. Also, a commission will be established on the future of Irish public service broadcasting, to report by September 2020. The terms of reference include examining how public service broadcasting can be delivered in Ireland over the next ten years, how that work can be funded in a sustainable and secure way and how it can be overseen and regulated having regard to our EU obligations, including the requirements of the audiovisual media services directive. As part of this decision, the Government has given the view that RTÉ should not proceed with the part sale of its Donnybrook site until full consideration has been given to a green field option and that it should defer any decision on removing Lyric FM from Limerick until the commission has reported.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: My question is for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and is on an issue I have raised on many occasions in the House, which is the 5,000 homeowners in Donegal whose homes are affected by mica defective blocks. This time last year the Minister gave a commitment that he would publish a scheme to help those who need redress and financial assistance to fix their homes. A year later the scheme has not been announced and no homes have been fixed. This is the second last working week before Christmas. Can the Minister ensure, at the very least, that the scheme will be published before Christmas so homeowners will know they can apply for a scheme in the new year to get their homes fixed?

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Deputy and his colleagues in the constituency have been raising this issue continuously. I have been to both Donegal and Mayo and I have met families affected as well as the council executive. As regards rolling out the scheme, we are finalising the regulations with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform at the moment. As the Deputy said, there are two working weeks left in this year and it is my intention to have that work finished within the next two weeks so we can make an announcement of an opening date for the scheme.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: On page 63 of the programme for Government there is a commitment to provide for new procedures to ensure there will be efficient and timely recruitment of nurses. It is nearly ten months since the public health nurse in Baile Bhuirne retired. That was a planned retirement but there has been a stop-start service in the meantime. Is any effort being made to fulfil that commitment for a timely recruitment of nurses? I have raised this previously and it was highlighted to the HSE.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy gives me more details on the specific incidence, I will have it checked. Much of nursing recruitment goes through the national recruitment service which is somewhat cumbersome, but others can recruit independently and locally, which has led to financial management issues. If the Deputy provides me with more information I will have it checked out.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins to put a question, not make a statement.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will avoid referring to the programme for Government. Last Wednesday night, to allay many serious concerns throughout the country the Minister withdrew

aspects of the Gaming and Lotteries (Amendment) Bill 2019 relating to bingo. We were assured that was that but, for many genuine bingo players in west Cork, this is not the case. Four public houses in Cork South-West have been informed since last Wednesday that they can no longer hold bingo events in their pubs, a custom they had for many years, raising funds for CoAction and other fundraising events, and, most of all, giving an outlet for people to spend a few hours after a stressful week. The anger in my constituency is palpable and it is too much of a coincidence to be the same week the Government started tampering with the bingo Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Michael Collins: Will the Taoiseach explain why bingo has been denied to the ordinary people throughout west Cork in the past few days?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Are they going to stop them playing cards as well?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister for Justice and Equality. I thought everybody was happy last Wednesday night.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): So did I. Obviously, there are some people who are never happy. I would be happy to receive a copy of the correspondence from which the Deputy read and to see how we can deal with the issue. I have every intention to ensure there is bingo in west Cork between now and Christmas and well into the new year.

Deputy Michael Collins: Four public houses have been refused.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cowen. He knows the rules.

Deputy Barry Cowen: We know the rules. Let us see if we can play by them. With regard to the Taoiseach's response earlier to Deputy Martin, where he indicated he would favour a ban on turf, would he include in that the failure of his Government-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Barry Cowen: I will use the 30 seconds if I am allowed.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: More fake news.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Government brought forward statutory instruments earlier this year to address the issue in regard to horticultural peat and its harvesting. The decision of the High Court later in the year left the Government in a position whereby it would need new legislation in order to counteract that. It will face the loss of a further 4,000 jobs in that sector of that industry unless it addresses this in the near future. Can the Taoiseach assure the House his Government will do so?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on the same issue.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Because of political pressure from Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and others regarding the smoky coal ban, the Taoiseach was considering a nationwide ban on the burning of turf and timber. I am asking him not to stop the burning of turf or timber. Many people in rural Ireland, including Kerry, are very glad and proud to come home to a fire of turf

or timber on a cold, wet evening.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Elderly people and children work hard all summer to save turf and to store timber.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Come on, Deputy.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Deputy should not forget the dogs in the street.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I did not interrupt the Deputy. This is the house of contradictions. Deputies Boyd Barrett, Ó Broin and Bríd Smith say children are cold and there is energy poverty.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: What about promised legislation? This is a Second Stage speech.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Is the Taoiseach going to stop the people of rural Ireland from burning turf or timber?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: If he is, there is going to be a lot more energy poverty and a lot more people who are cold. They are entitled to cut turf and timber.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must be fair. The Deputy will not get in for the rest of the week.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They have done it for generations. There are a lot of other things to be sorted out before we even consider stopping them burning turf or timber.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. The Deputy will get no question for the rest of the week. That is the penalty. I cannot answer on this. I am referring the Deputy to the consultation that is proposed.

The Taoiseach: I can answer. I am happy to assure the House that neither I nor the Government are proposing that people be banned from burning turf or wood in their own private homes. However, this is-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: Withdraw the consultation.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He wants to ask the public about it.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is a wise enough man not to believe everything he reads in the papers.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am able to read well enough and it is there in black and white.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has no right to come in like that.

The Taoiseach: However, a ban on burning turf and probably a ban on the burning of wood

in people's private homes would be probably a natural extension of the policy that is being proposed by the leader of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Barry Cowen: We do not do "probably" around here.

The Taoiseach: It is part of its growing anti-rural agenda. It opposed the massive broadband plan, it wants to re-profile the roads projects and now it wants to ban the burning of turf. This is an anti-rural party.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: He knows that is twisting it. Withdraw the consultation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Rabbitte, please. This debate is getting too-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: The anti-rural party? He would not find his way to a bog.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Taoiseach should have heard the farmers on Sunday, some of them members of his own party.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies should restrain themselves. The debate is getting too heated.

Deputy Barry Cowen: So there is no consultation and no ban on coal.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are the first to get the black card. I call Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is they who are proposing it.

Deputy Barry Cowen: For a straight-talking man, the Minister does not have many answers.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is Deputy Cowen's leader who is proposing it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is the same in Donegal. We are asking that we be allowed to continue burning turf and timber.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae should let us look after Donegal.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: Today is Human Rights Day. As such, it is the 16th and final day of the 16 days of activism campaign to support survivors of domestic abuse. The campaign in Ireland is led by Women's Aid. The statistics released this morning are quite shocking. More than 53,000 women have looked for aid and support; 3,256 were turned away from accommodation because there was none available to support them in leaving violent homes; and 2,572 children were impacted.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: Has the Taoiseach ever been in Dolphin House, the family law court?

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I have.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I am asking the Taoiseach. Eleven organisations came together this morning regarding the absolutely awful situation in Dolphin House. I was there about three and a half years ago, not long after I was elected to the Dáil.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond. We are out of time.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: It is an absolutely appalling place where people need to go to look for supports.

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

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: The Minister promised four years ago that there would be a new family law court. Has the Taoiseach ever been to Dolphin House? When will there be a new family law court?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I strongly support the import of the Deputy's question. I have met many of the groups to which she referred. I, too, am very keen that progress on the new family courts structure be reported early. The Government has made available a sum of €80 million. I urge the Office of Public Works and the Courts Service to reach agreement early. Yes, I have been in Dolphin House on a number of occasions in the past.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I asked the Taoiseach.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I share the Deputy's concern. I will act early in the new year to resolve this issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Brassil, who I know will be focused.

Deputy John Brassil: I will lead by example, as always. In the programme for Government and in last year's budget a commitment was given to review the fair deal scheme, in particular for small businesses and farmers. Almost 18 months on, that change has still not been made and small businesses and farmers across the country are still suffering and unable to avail of the proposed changes. Will the Government follow through on the commitment that has been made many times in this Chamber and introduce the changes for those people caught up in this situation?

The Taoiseach: I will have to check with the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, the progress on implementing those changes. We want to do this. I acknowledge we have said we will do it for a very long time and have not done it yet. I will check with the Minister of State how that is proceeding and get back to Deputy Brassil.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Malcolm Byrne. I hope he has not picked up the bad habits already.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The Taoiseach referred earlier to page 127 of the programme for Government and the Government's planned investment in railways, but the one railway line he omitted in his long list was the Rosslare line. I have corresponded in my previous life with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport on investment in the Rosslare rail line, particularly as an alternative to the M11. I am aware that the Minister rarely attends these sessions, but perhaps the Taoiseach might ask him what plans are in place to invest in the Rosslare rail line. The Minister in his email correspondence to me has said this is primarily the responsibility of Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority. When I raised the point with him I was

not asking him to physically drive the trains; I was asking him to drive rail policy. Will the Taoiseach outline to me, first, whether the Minister is responsible for railway policy and, second, the plans in place for investment in the Rosslare rail line?

The Taoiseach: The €1 billion over five years allocated to Irish Rail by the Minister, Deputy Ross, only in the past two weeks is for all the lines around the country, including the Rosslare line. As recently as a few years ago we had to seriously contemplate closing some lines. We no longer have to do that. Now, rather than repairing faults as they arise, we will have a managed maintenance programme to ensure we have a well-managed, steady-state railway, something we did not believe we would ever be able to have again as recently as a few years ago. The €1 billion is for all railway lines in the country, not just the ones I mentioned earlier.

Deputy James Browne: Page 57 of the programme for Government refers to a plan for advancing neurorehabilitation services in the country, yet there is no neuro nurse in the south east, which has a population of almost 600,000 people and a level 4 hospital. People with multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, acquired brain injury, epilepsy and meningitis among many more conditions would benefit significantly from a neuro nurse. They would see a dramatic improvement to their quality of life and a decrease in suffering. There would also be a decrease in hospitalisations. At present these people must travel to Dublin. It is very difficult for them when they are dealing with these kinds of issues. Can we get a neuro nurse into the south east?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a specific question. Perhaps the Taoiseach will ask the Minister.

The Taoiseach: I will ask the Minister for Health to provide a written response to the Deputy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are almost there. I call Deputy John Brady. I ask him to be very focused. Let me make this clear: the reason I said we are almost there is that all hands go up when I come in and I am not able to get to everyone. I want to ensure I leave no one out. Those who were reached today will not get a chance tomorrow. I will take the remaining names and they will be on top of the list tomorrow. I cannot get to everyone.

Deputy John Brady: Yesterday 150 workers at Rondo Food in Arklow received the devastating news that the facility would close its doors towards the end of next January. It was not surprising news because throughout the 30-day consultation process in which Rondo Food engaged with representatives of the workforce, it undermined the entire process. It had engineers over from Germany measuring up the equipment and machinery to ship it back to Germany. This is obviously devastating news to the workers and their families, particularly at this time of year, but also to the economy in Arklow-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy John Brady: -----which has been reeling over many years. I have two questions for the Taoiseach. This company has received €400,000 from Enterprise Ireland since 2011. What measures are you taking to ensure that that money is paid back-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Taoiseach in a position to answer? Deputy Brady-----

Deputy John Brady: -----if the company has not met the terms of the grants? Second, will you immediately establish-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Brady is being totally unfair.

Deputy John Brady: -----an employment passport to bring new employment to the economic unemployment black spot of Arklow?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Brady will address the Chair.

Deputy Pat Casey: On the same issue, I wish to share my devastation at the news of yesterday's announcement that Rondo Food is closing and moving its facility. This will have a significant impact on the company's 150 workers and their families coming up to Christmas. What was most disappointing about this process was the 30-day procedure put in place. The works committee of the firm put forward practical, credible solutions that would have improved the efficiencies and the operation of the plant. Enterprise Ireland was equally involved in this process and put forward proposals. It is quite clear that this was just a box-ticking exercise by this company and that all it was doing was moving the operation back to Germany. Arklow has an incredible workforce, and it is vital we put a task force in place to deal with potential investment coming down the road that can deal with these job losses.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: None of us is a slow learner. We knew immediately what the question was.

The Taoiseach: I join the Deputies in expressing my sorrow and regret at the job losses in Arklow and the company's decision to relocate back to Germany. Since the announcement on 8 November, Enterprise Ireland has been engaging intensively with the company to see whether it was possible to find a solution that would avert the job losses. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible, and the company announced on 9 December, only yesterday, that the factory in Arklow will close at the end of January and relocate to Krefeld, in Germany. The company has confirmed that all staff have been offered redundancy packages which exceed the scale of mandatory redundancy packages.

Deputy John Brady: Half a week.

The Taoiseach: If the terms of the grants were not met, they must be repaid. Our agencies, IDA and Enterprise Ireland, stand ready to try to find alternative employment and to use the site for such employment for the people of Arklow.

Deputy John Brady: Does the IDA know where Arklow is? It does not know where Wicklow is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Brady may not interrupt the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: In addition, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Intreo stand ready to ensure that anyone who loses his or her job gets the benefits to which he or she is entitled, the option of retraining and all the range of supports made available by Government to people who have been made unemployed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Harty, who will be followed by Deputy Durkan. Deputies Casey, Donnelly and Thomas Byrne will be up first tomorrow if they so wish.

Deputy John Brady: Deputy Casey has already been up.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Members to watch the clock. They should not look at

me but rather at all their colleagues.

Deputy Barry Cowen: My question was not answered.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot be responsible for that.

Deputy Michael Harty: My question is on a just transition fund for west Clare, for the imminent ceasing of coal-burning in Moneypoint power station. In budget 2020, there was a commitment to set up a just transition mitigation fund for the midlands as turf ceased to be burned for electricity generation. The Minister committed to set up a fund for Moneypoint. When does he expect to make that announcement? How much money will be in that fund? How will that money be spent to support the local community in west Clare when Moneypoint ceases to function?

The Taoiseach: It is intended to end the burning of coal to produce electricity in Ireland by 2025. Any decision on a transition fund for Moneypoint would have to be made in advance of that. At least for now, it is intended to continue burning coal between now and 2025.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputies Donnelly and Thomas Byrne on the understanding that anyone who gets in today will not get in for the rest of the week unless there is time.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: My question is about Purple House, which is an amazing cancer support centre in Bray. Page 57 of the programme for Government states: "We will ensure appropriate care pathways are in place to improve cancer services." It goes on to refer to fantastic community-based services exactly like this. In short, the service has to leave the premises it is in. It has found a fantastic new premises, which will greatly expand cancer services provision for the community in north Wicklow. The Minister for Health has met Purple House representatives twice and promised that he would make the money available. They received a letter from the HSE today, which seemed to kick that promise into next year and it may or may not happen. I appreciate that the Taoiseach will not be able to answer directly. Will he ask his officials to look at this as a matter of urgency with a view to Purple House getting that funding so that it can secure the premises?

The Taoiseach: I am not aware of the specific facility but I will ask my staff to liaise with the Minister for Health about it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On Saturday, I met approximately 30 farmers from my constituency and the Louth constituency. There have been significant delays in their farm payments from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is causing considerable hardship in the south Louth and east Meath region. Will the Minister give these farmers an answer?

Deputy Andrew Doyle: We have got to the point where 96% of all basic payments have been made. I am not sure which payment the Deputy is talking about.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Various payments.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: If the Deputy gives us the details, we will find out what the explanation is. Some 97% of all payments have been made.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The maritime jurisdiction Bill is promised legislation. Is it intended to bring the Bill before the House before the second phase of Brexit begins with a

debate across the water?

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): It was listed for this session and it is more or less ready to go but it will certainly be early next session.

Insurance (Life Assurance and Life Insurance) (Amendment) Bill 2019: First Stage

Deputy James Browne: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit insurers, insurance providers, brokers or other such undertakings from failing or refusing to make payments under life insurance or assurance policies, including death benefit, where the person insured dies by suicide.

This is a Bill to prohibit so-called suicide clauses in life assurance and life insurance policies. The purpose of the Bill is to prevent insurance companies from failing or refusing to execute or pay out on an insurance policy, including a death benefit policy, in respect of a person who dies by suicide. For a long time, a discriminatory practice of refusing to pay out on insurance policies in cases of death by suicide has existed in Ireland. I believe this is wrong and is based on an outdated understanding of suicide. Its origins were based on the idea that suicide was a crime and that a person should not benefit from his or her own wrongdoing. Many families were the victims of this outdated view and policy. Families that suffered the loss of a loved one, and very often the loss of an income, only to be met with a refusal of financial support from an insurance company, had their loss compounded by hardship, uncertainty and financial instability. The insurance companies sought to benefit by wrongdoing, refusing to pay out.

Families that could afford to had to hire solicitors and barristers to challenge the refusal of insurance companies to honour their agreements. The legal teams of families had to put forward technical legal points that the insurance companies should pay out, with arguments such as appealing that people did not intend to kill themselves, but rather that it was a cry for help that went too far and, therefore, did not have the requisite intention to take their own lives, or that they were suffering from a mental illness and, therefore, were not capable of forming the requisite intention to take their own lives. Those arguments only added further to the distress of families. Perhaps if the insurance company was afraid it might lose in court, it might pay out some of the money, usually only a certain percentage, but it often paid out none. It is acknowledged that many insurance companies have recently voluntarily adopted a policy of not applying the suicide clauses 12 months after the date the policy was taken out. This is in line with UK legislation. Nonetheless, insurance companies are not bound to do so. It is, therefore, important to codify the law to ensure that no insurance company attempts to benefit from this outdated concept and understanding of mental health.

It is 26 years since suicide was decriminalised by the then Fianna Fáil Minister, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn. This Bill is another step to ending the stigma that still pervades many aspects of our society with regard to suicide. Much work has been done on this journey but there is still a long way to go. I understand that the Government supports the legislation going to Second Stage and has supported the principle behind the Bill. I thank the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, who has worked with me on this

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Bill. This is the fourth Bill that I have introduced to this House since being elected to the Dáil three and a half years ago. I was honoured by the support that I secured across the House for the other Bills, especially the Mental Health (Amendment) Act 2018, which was signed into law by the President. I was elected in part to legislate and propose solutions to the challenges that society has. I hope that I am doing that. I hope to have cross-party support for this Bill when it comes before the House on Second Stage. The Bill aims to prevent insurance companies from failing to provide financial compensation under a legitimate insurance policy when a person dies by suicide.

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 James Browne: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Universities Act 1997 (section 54(3))(University Authorisation) Order 2019: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Universities Act 1997 (section 54(3))(University Authorisation) Order 2019,
copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 19th November, 2019.

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2019: Motion

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2019,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd December, 2019.

Question put and agreed to.

Appointment to the Policing Authority: Motion

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann recommends, pursuant to section 62C(7) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, that Dr. Deborah Donnelly be appointed by the Government to be a member of the Policing Authority.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Citizens' Assembly

1. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly will meet to discuss gender equality. [48829/19]

2. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality will meet. [50048/19]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach his future plans for the Citizens' Assembly. [50360/19]

4. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly is due to commence the consideration of gender equality. [51240/19]

5. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach his future plans for the Citizens' Assembly. [51525/19]

6. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality will meet. [51634/19]

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

The establishment of the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality was approved by Dáil Éireann on 9 July and Seanad Éireann on 11 July this year. The Citizens' Assemblies Act 2019 providing for the use of the electoral register to select members for both Citizens' Assemblies was subsequently enacted and signed into law by the President on 25 July. The membership of the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality will comprise the chairperson and 99 citizens entitled to vote at referendums, recruited at a national level and randomly selected to be broadly representative of Irish society. Significant progress has been made with regard to the various elements required to establish the assembly. Dr. Catherine Day, the former Secretary-General

of the European Commission, has been appointed to chair the assembly. A secretary has also been appointed and a secretariat team is in place. The immediate priority was to secure the various services required through procurement with a view to holding an inaugural meeting of the assembly as soon as possible. This is now complete and member selection is under way with an inaugural meeting of the assembly scheduled for Saturday, 25 January 2020. The first full weekend meeting is planned for the weekend of 14 to 16 February 2020 and the dates for four further weekend meetings have been confirmed. As agreed in the Oireachtas resolution, the assembly will engage independent researchers to monitor and record, among other things, the deliberative quality of the assembly. An Irish Research Council call to select a research fellow to conduct this work has closed with a view to an appointment shortly. Consultation and public engagement are also important to ensure a broad spectrum of views is available to the Citizens' Assembly members and to ensure public buy-in and awareness of the work of the assembly. With that in mind, there has been extensive engagement with relevant experts in the field including through consultative round tables, and a public consultation will also be initiated.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The first question is from Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: How long will we have for each question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As we are running out of time, I suggest limiting questions to a minute.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a minute and a half anyway. What is the problem?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You can do it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: A minute and a half.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies can have a minute and a half.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Could we have a bit longer because-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, we cannot. The leaders have to agree-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have a long established mechanism that we work it out here.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was going to make a point about the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality. There are a huge number of issues-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are wasting time.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----that we are not getting a chance to raise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is something for the committee to look at.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is fair enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: When will we get a chance to discuss this Citizens' Assembly?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will there be another opportunity to discuss this matter in the

Dáil?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy can ask a question about it today. Her colleague has submitted a question, so I will call her in his absence.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have also submitted a question. I am just saying that it is very difficult to deal with all the issues of gender inequality in a minute and a half.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have lost a minute now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We do our own business. I was once in a Parliament where a minute was considered a long time.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It has always been two minutes. I have two minutes' worth of notes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It has not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It was last week. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is now cutting it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Perhaps I was too lenient then. I call Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is a bit of a joke that we are only being given a minute and a half to discuss a Citizens' Assembly on gender equality.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should bring this up in the proper forum. We are wasting time. Deputy Micheál Martin has a minute and a half.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It shows how seriously this issue is being taken.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not fair. These are Taoiseach's Questions, which cover a wide range of issues. I did not introduce this system, but since it came in via the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform, party leaders have been given a minute and a half. Anyone else who wanted to contribute has always been facilitated.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Micheál Martin-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is by definition-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was not asking-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not fair to brand this as a particular issue only being given a minute and a half. That is not fair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is reform.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is easy for the Deputy to say. He does not care about gender inequality.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not easy. That is not fair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy is branding people wrongly and she should not be

doing so.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I just asked-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: None of the Deputies is going to get any more than a minute and a half.

Deputy Micheál Martin: If we want to have a discussion on the broader subject, we can have it at the Business Committee

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Deputy is wasting more time than anyone else, by answering for the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies will have another opportunity to discuss this matter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy has a habit of creating a row. I am just trying to be helpful-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Coppinger should not make any accusations against the Chair.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I did not make an accusation against the Chair. I just asked if there was more time and the Deputy spent ages explaining.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I refer to the Deputy's last comment.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What was the last comment?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy can check the blacks.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The current Citizens' Assembly is primarily concerned with issues raised at the Constitutional Convention, the more grandly named previous Citizens' Assembly, which reported approximately five years ago. The assembly on gender equality is due to hold its first meeting in January and we wish it well in its work. This is different in that, unlike previous assemblies that dealt with issues such as the eighth amendment, among others, there is no parallel or detailed proposal for the Oireachtas to engage with the issue or the assembly's outcome. Are there any proposals for a process for considering the assembly's report?

On an administrative matter, this may be the first time a citizens' assembly is due to sit during a period a general election is likely to be held. Will the holding of the election have any particular implications for the assembly? Has it agreed to adopt the precedent of other bodies established by the Oireachtas to suspend public activity during elections?

In the years since citizens' assemblies were adopted on an all-party basis, much evidence has accumulated about what works and how best to put issues to them. Most people agree that the more specific the issue and the closer it is to a direct proposal for action, the more likely it is that the assembly will have an impact and assist in bringing an issue to a conclusion. Our position remains that assemblies should not be used to delay political action on urgent issues. Would it not be a good idea, before near permanent demands are made to put even the most uncertain and complex issues to such assemblies, to carry out a genuinely independent review of what works and the most effective means of using assemblies in the future?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Last month, at the inaugural #WorkEqual conference, the Taoiseach stated that the upcoming Citizens' Assembly on gender equality would specifically focus on pay inequality. To use the Taoiseach's own words, women are all too often "disproportionately represented in low pay sectors". At the same event, a survey of participants from the public, private and NGO sectors showed that better and more affordable childcare would do more to promote gender equality in the workplace than any other single action. Somewhat ironically, low pay predominates in the childcare sector, where 98% of staff are women. The average hourly rate of workers in the childcare sector is €10.96, which is barely €1 more than the minimum wage and €1.34 below what is regarded as a living wage. Unsurprisingly, a recent survey of early years educators revealed that the majority cannot make ends meet, with 84% unable to meet an unexpected expense such as a visit to the doctor, a car repair, or a utility bill. Consequently, more than half of current childcare staff are actively looking to exit the sector and are looking for alternative jobs. Will the Taoiseach ensure that the agenda for the forthcoming Citizens' Assembly includes the provision of universally available, high-quality and affordable childcare in this country?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also raise the issue of childcare and the necessity of including it as part of the Citizens' Assembly deliberations on gender equality. To say there is a crisis in the affordability and provision of childcare would be a massive understatement. The average cost per week of childcare in this country is €186, but it is €246 in my area. That is completely unaffordable. It is the same as having a second mortgage. The lack of provision of available, affordable places is shocking. It is all very well announcing programmes such as the national childcare scheme, subsidies, or two years of free preschool year after year, but people cannot find places. More recently, small community crèches are suffering the consequences of the backlash against badly-run, often big corporate, childcare facilities. The numbers of places in such small crèches are being reduced and costs are going up to meet Tusla's compliance standards, which is pushing prices even further out of the realm of affordability. This is one of, if not the biggest, contributing factors to gender inequality in this country. What is the Government going to do to provide affordable, universally available and sufficient childcare places in this country?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is very difficult to squeeze the issue of gender inequality into a minute and a half. I will have to drop the topics of the gender pay gap, unaffordable childcare, and the endometriosis briefing that took place earlier. I will focus on what was newsworthy today, namely, the Safe Ireland report, which stated that nine requests for help from women's refuges are unmet every day. In some cases, those women then stayed in violent relationships. What is the point of Department of Justice and Equality spending money on awareness campaigns if there are no places for people to go when they seek help? I refer specifically to the refuge based in Blanchardstown. On International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November, the refuge held a public meeting at which the CEO of Sonas spoke. She told us that up to 500 families are turned away from that refuge every year, which is in mine and the Taoiseach's constituency. Tomorrow, women from Blanchardstown will come here at 11.30 a.m. to hand in hundreds of letters signed by local people. I ask the Taoiseach to make the time to meet them and to take those letters. When I last raised this, the Taoiseach said that maybe we should look at something different and that maybe the perpetrators should leave. With all due respect, I think the women would have thought of that without the Taoiseach raising it. It did display an ignorance about being in a violent relationship and the dangers facing women. Why has €20 million been given to the entire sector nationally, a figure that is just slightly greater than that given to the greyhound industry, when the Taoiseach knows that up to four or

five times more people seek help than actually get it? We also need more outreach services for schools and prevention and a rape crisis centre for Dublin West. Why will the Government not increase the funding for this sector?

Deputy Joan Burton: As the founding chair of the Blanchardstown rape crisis centre, I would welcome any assistance the Taoiseach can give to this very important refuge that is built to a beautiful standard, as I am sure the previous speaker is aware, and that offers much-needed support to women and particularly their children. Consequently, I hope the Taoiseach can put that on the agenda.

What is the Government's position with regard to the Citizens' Assembly recommendations on climate change, which have been available since April 2018? I will address two specific issues. One is air quality in Ireland. There is a significant amount of air pollution. Emission levels in Dublin West have been exceeded recently on more than six occasions, which is a terrible outcome. We know from the work of the Asthma Society of Ireland that there is an asthma epidemic in this country, yet the Taoiseach is sitting on his hands when it comes to the issue of smoky coal and is finding a phony reason to long-finger it. Why does the Taoiseach not reassemble and recall the Citizens' Assembly on climate change to get it to say what the people of Ireland want?

The assembly also recommended the expansion of public transport. We know, however, that it is almost dangerous for a pregnant woman to travel on trains into town from Dublin West and Maynooth at certain times because it is so crowded. Could the Taoiseach look at recalling the Citizens' Assembly on climate change to get it to continue its work because it was a mechanism to reach agreement? The Taoiseach has opened a can of worms with regard to how he is addressing the smoky coal issue. It needs to be banned and people with asthma need to be given relief and clean air.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I start by thanking the assembly members for taking part in the process. We look forward to their recommendations. Their work will play an important role in shaping policy and political decisions that are necessary to end gender inequality. Having said that, much of the research and analysis that will come from this process is already known to us. For example, we know that women on average earn less than men. The latest figures for the European Union tell us that women in Ireland earn 86 cent for every euro a man earns. We know that the older one is, the larger that gap is. We know that women workers are disproportionately represented in low-paid sectors such as childcare, health, education and retail and that under 7% of company CEOs are women. They are not just problems we have today. They are problems we take with us throughout our careers and into retirement. In terms of cold hard cash, women earn less money so they consequently have less money to invest in their futures. The EU average pension gap between women and men is a massive 35.7%.

There are, of course, decisions the Government can make today that would start to address poverty in work for these women. Fine Gael and the Independents could introduce a living wage across the public sector. We know that women disproportionately populate the lowest-paid public sector grades. Aldi has committed to a living wage. It boggles the mind that the Government cannot do the same. The Government could also increase the national minimum wage. The Government has collectively refused to comply with the Data Protection Commissioner's instruction on the public services card in a really awful manner. If the Taoiseach is serious about this, there is a number of steps he can take right now.

The Taoiseach: I am not sure how we got from citizens' assemblies to the public services card and the minimum wage and all the way back again but I will do my best to answer as many questions as I can in the time allocated to me. When it comes to the proposed citizens' assembly, the model the Government has in mind is to follow the same process as we followed with regard to the Citizens' Assemblies on the eighth amendment and climate change. The assembly will sit and report, that report will be referred to an all-party Oireachtas committee specifically established to examine the recommendations of the citizens' assembly and the Government will respond to it. We will need the agreement and co-operation of the House to do that. Deputy Micheál Martin asked a very valid question about what we would do during a three to four-week election period - whether the assembly should sit or not. I am not sure whether it should sit but it is a pertinent question about which I will consult with officials. I will also consult with the chair of the Citizens' Assembly as to whether she thinks it is appropriate that the assembly should sit during that three to four-week period----

Deputy Micheál Martin: And party leaders.

The Taoiseach: And party leaders as well. I was asked whether there has been an independent review of what does and does not work and the pros and cons of citizens' assemblies more generally. That was done. A report was submitted by Ms Justice Mary Laffoy, which gives her advice and experience, having chaired an assembly. It is a very good report on the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of citizens' assemblies that is worth reading. It is a very good piece of work for which I thank her in addition to her chairmanship of the previous assemblies.

I am not sure if any Government prior to this one has done more to make childcare more affordable or to improve its quality. I will give a few examples. Everyone now has two years of free preschool through the early childhood care and education programme. We have introduced paid parental leave and paid parental benefit for the first time, extended unpaid parental leave, increased maternity benefit and changed the rules, particularly around women whose children were born prematurely in order that they can have more maternity leave. We have increased paternity benefit, provided capital investment for childcare and in the past few weeks, have introduced the national childcare scheme. We will publish the initial figures from that tomorrow but I can tell the House that over 14,000 children have already signed up for that scheme. It means increased subsidies for those already receiving subsidies and for the first time, some middle-income families qualify for subsidies. These are families with a gross income of around €100,000. I think this is only right because people on middle incomes pay the most income tax and they should benefit from these schemes as well. I envisage the Government increasing the subsidies in the years ahead for everyone but also ensuring that more middle-income and middle-class families can qualify for these subsidies as well, because it would be wrong to expect them to pay very high amounts of income tax and USC but be unable to benefit from these schemes. This is very much the direction of travel in terms of policy. Regarding pay and terms and conditions in the sector, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zapone, is very much of the view that there should be a sectoral employment order for this sector to set minimum standards and wage levels. There is a process by which that can be followed. I believe the terms of reference of the assembly cover the issue of childcare. Obviously, neither I nor the House can change the terms of reference now but the fourth term of reference is to recognise the importance of early years parental care; to seek to facilitate greater work-life balance; to examine the social responsibility of care, including women and men's co-responsibility for care, particularly within the family; and to examine the gender pay gap scrutinising structural pay inequalities that result in women being disproportionately represented in low pay sec-

tors. The terms of reference are very wide.

Regarding domestic violence, two refuges are opening or re-opening in the near future. One will be in Rathmines and while I cannot remember where the other one will be, it is outside Dublin. This will bring us almost up to the level recommended by the Council of Europe. I think we were 28 short. The new refuges will bring us to being about three short of the recommended level. Two different measures are recommended but on the first one, it brings us almost to that level so we probably need to open one more. I will give the House the figures on funding for domestic violence services funding. This is done through Tusla's domestic, sexual and gender based violence services. The budget in 2014 was €17 million. It went up to €19.5 million in 2015, although €2.5 million was transferred from the then Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. In 2016, the figure increased to €20.6 million. The figure in 2017 was €20.1 million and in 2018, it was €23.8 million. As the figure for this year is €25.3 million, there has been a €1.5 million increase this year. I can give a breakdown as to how that was used. Separate to that, a lot of money goes through the Garda budget. The Garda is establishing special victims units in every division at the moment, most of which, although not all, are up and running. That is important but is counted as part of the Garda Vote, as opposed to the Tusla Vote.

On the question of climate change, there was a Citizens' Assembly on the topic, the report of which went to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, and then the Government produced its climate action plan. We now report quarterly on how that is being implemented. The first report has been done already and the second will be coming soon.

I responded earlier to the question about smoky coal. The air quality in cities is largely down to diesel cars and not particularly down to the burning of solid fuels. That goes back to a decision made by a previous Government to encourage people to buy diesel cars. That reduced greenhouse gas emissions but it made our air quality worse. We have been trying to unwind that policy mistake for the past two years.

Turning to the issue of railways, there will be a 34% increase in capacity on the Maynooth line in 2021. The necessary rail carriages are now on order but could not come fast enough.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What about funding for the Blanchardstown refuge?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are two more groups of questions to be answered. Questions Nos. 7 to 11, inclusive, relate to Israel and Palestine. We have already used up half the time designated for questions and another group of questions deal with the infrastructure committee. As we can only deal with one of those groups of questions, which group would Deputies like to take?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Let us take the questions in sequence.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We should take the questions in order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will take the next questions in sequence which are Questions Nos. 7 to 11, inclusive, and, if there is time left, we will take more questions. If there is not time left, those questions will have to roll over until tomorrow.

Dáil Éireann
Cabinet Committees

7. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the Cabinet committee at which Israel and Palestine is discussed. [48835/19]

8. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the Cabinet committee that addresses matters relating to Israel and Palestine. [49995/19]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the Cabinet committee at which Israel and Palestine is discussed. [50144/19]

10. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach the number of times the Cabinet committee on Brexit, Foreign and European Affairs has met to date in 2019. [51531/19]

11. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach the Cabinet committee that addresses matters relating to Palestine and Israel. [51613/19]

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

Cabinet committees are established to provide focused political oversight of relevant initiatives and developments in policy areas, including in particular where there is a need for co-ordinated action across Departments and agencies. Following a Government decision on 25 July 2019 on the establishment of Cabinet committees, Cabinet committee structures were reorganised. The six Cabinet committees cover the areas of economy; social policy and public services; infrastructure; Brexit, foreign and European affairs; environment; and security.

The Cabinet committee on Brexit, foreign and European affairs was established to ensure a co-ordinated approach in the areas of Brexit, foreign and European affairs, including Global Ireland 2025. The committee met for the first time on 10 September 2019 and met again yesterday, 9 December.

The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade has lead responsibility for matters of foreign policy generally, including relations with Israel and Palestine. The Tánaiste briefs the Cabinet on developments in the Middle East and, when appropriate, it is discussed at Cabinet and was so discussed this morning.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is this question about Israel?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is about Israel and Palestine.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That was not marked on my paper; I thought it was coming later.

The situation in Palestine has got dramatically worse throughout the year. Before the last Israeli general election, Prime Minister Netanyahu followed a strategy of becoming more extreme and anti-Arab by the day. Much of this was, frankly, racist. He was calling on Israeli Jews to be scared of their Arab fellow citizens.

However, he went much further and announced his intention to annex large parts of the West Bank, in particular current settlements and areas around them, should he win the election. This is essentially a plan to prevent any independent Palestinian state from emerging and to consign millions of people to permanent statelessness.

This country and Fianna Fáil have been consistent in supporting a two-state solution with parity of esteem and equality. As I say, the situation has become progressively worse and, quite frankly, it confirms the view of myself and my party, and the rest of the Opposition in this House, that we are correct to say that the time has come to take assertive action against creeping annexation.

The Government has said it opposes the legislation about the settlements that is before the Oireachtas because it is against EU regulations. However, there is no regulation stopping the Government from pushing for changes of policy and demanding action at European level.

I have had discussions with the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade on this matter. The Tánaiste has been unsuccessful in persuading Mr. Netanyahu to moderate his approach and was wildly over-optimistic more than a year and a half ago about the prospects of a peace initiative emanating from the Israeli Government. It is time for this Government to start proposing concrete actions in line with the seriousness of the threat of annexation.

On a separate matter, I have asked, at various times, for details of the likely economic impact of the withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland. Last week, the UK Labour Party released a leaked document from the UK Treasury which predicted that the impact of new east-west checks on Northern Ireland would be severe. There has been more than enough time to review the issue. Can the Taoiseach tell us if he accepts that the agreement will have a negative impact on Northern Ireland?

I apologise that there are two separate questions covered in that one contribution.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As the Taoiseach will be aware, today, we mark Human Rights Day, the anniversary of the day on which the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 71 years ago. Last week, my colleague, Deputy McDonald, raised with the Taoiseach the routine detention and prosecution of Palestinian children as young as 12 in the Israeli military court system. We know that child detainees have been blindfolded and deprived of sleep, had their hands and feet restrained and have been intimidated and assaulted at the hands of the Israeli military. In his reply, the Taoiseach stated he has not had any engagement with the Israeli Government or Israeli politicians. Was this continued violation of human rights raised by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade on behalf of the Government when he met the Israeli Prime Minister last week?

It also appears that the Tánaiste did not raise Ireland's opposition to Israel's illegal settlements in occupied Palestine, which are inconsistent with international law. It appears, from media reports, that the Tánaiste instead reassured the Israeli Prime Minister that the Government will not support the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill that would make trade with illegal settlements a criminal offence in Ireland.

Deputy Boyd Barrett asked the Taoiseach last week if the Government would call on the EU to take action against settlements by imposing meaningful sanctions. The rationale offered up for not doing so was that such a call could not secure the required unanimity to be enforced, yet the Taoiseach has a mechanism for Ireland to impose its own sanctions against Israel's continued flouting of international law through the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill and he has set his face against it.

Water pollution is not the leading cause of child mortality in Gaza, as the Tánaiste stated last week. The continued barbarism of occupation and the ghettoisation of Gaza is what is killing

Palestinian children and their families.

The State increase in investment for Palestine, announced last week, is welcome but the Taoiseach knows as well as I do that it falls far short of what is needed both in monetary and political terms. Will the Taoiseach reconsider his opposition to the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill and, by so doing, join with others in this Dáil to uphold the rule of binding international law?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One of the proudest things that this country ever did on the foreign policy stage was to implement a boycott against apartheid South Africa, prompted by the heroic actions of Dunnes Stores workers. That was done unilaterally. Nelson Mandela and many other leading fighters against apartheid made the point at the time that Ireland had made a unique contribution to bringing down the apartheid regime. Why does the Taoiseach hide behind the coat-tails of the EU and say that we can do nothing because we do not have qualified majority voting, when we took unilateral action against apartheid South Africa?

Israel flouts international law through its treatment of and detention of children. Its criminal siege of Gaza has reduced Gaza to being a place that officially is uninhabitable by human beings. There has been flagrant and brazen annexation of Palestinian territory in contravention of international law. The right to self-determination for Palestinians has been officially cancelled by the Israeli Government. Only people who are Jewish in the land that is Israel or Palestine, whatever one wants to call it, have the right to self-determination. Human and international rights are just gone.

This just goes on and on. Ethnic cleansing is a day-to-day reality for Palestinians. Why will the Taoiseach not take a leaf from the book of the Dunnes Stores strikers and what this country did in response to apartheid South Africa and support sanctions, including Senator Black's Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill? The Taoiseach should support, not block, that Bill and take a lead in calling for and imposing sanctions on the apartheid, racist, repressive and illegal activities of the Israeli state in respect of the Palestinian people.

4 o'clock

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Last week, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, stated that we, presumably the Irish Government, would be open to new thinking on the Israel-Palestine peace process. To be specific, in an interview he gave to the Israeli public broadcaster, KAN, he stated:

We will continue to advocate, yes, for new thinking because I think the solution now is probably not the same as what a solution looked like 20 years ago. A lot has happened in that time.

Every Member in this House knows a lot has happened in the past 20 years, most especially the illegal annexation of more Palestinian land by a succession of Israeli governments, led by Benjamin Netanyahu. For clarity, can the Taoiseach tell us the Government's new thinking in respect of the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute? As a House, we need to be crystal clear that it is no lessening of our total opposition to the illegal annexation of Palestinian land that has gone on unchecked.

The Taoiseach: The Tánaiste met with the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Foreign Minister, Israel Katz, on Monday, 2 December, during a working visit to Israel

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and Palestine. During the visit, the Tánaiste also met with a number of Palestinian political leaders including President Abbas and Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, and a number of UN officials also. The Tánaiste used these meetings to discuss how Ireland can support efforts towards a durable two-state solution to the conflict and to convey Ireland's concerns about the impact of the occupation, including in respect of settlement activity and the blockade of Gaza.

Yesterday, 9 December, the Tánaiste briefed Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels on his visit to Israel and Palestine. He highlighted two specific issues which merit further discussion at EU level - annexation and the need for free elections in Palestine. The Tánaiste is concerned by appalling evidence of creeping annexation in the West Bank. Ireland and the EU's position on Israeli settlements could not be clearer. They are illegal under international law and fundamentally undermine the prospects for a two-state solution.

Israel's violation of human rights and mistreatment of Palestinians was also raised in these meetings.

The Tánaiste also raised the potential for elections in Palestine, which may take place in 2020, and which have not happened for more than a decade. EU members states must encourage Israel to facilitate voting for Palestinians in east Jerusalem also.

Ministers will return to the Middle East peace process in more detail at the January Foreign Affairs Council.

Regarding new thinking, this does not mean any departure from the two-state solution.

Regarding the labelling of products coming from the occupied territories, a French court challenging the rules on the labelling of settlement products was referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union. Ireland, as an interested member state, lodged observations on the case to endorse EU guidelines on the labelling of settlement goods issued in 2015 and appeared at the oral hearing in early April. The court's judgment was issued on 12 November and found that foodstuffs originating in the occupied territories must bear the indication of the territory of origin and when these products originate from a settlement, that must also be made clear on the label. Therefore, a boycott by citizens is possible and indeed by business.

Regarding the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill, the Tánaiste has set out the Government's position in the Seanad and the Dáil. The Government's opposition to settlements is unequivocal. However, the proposals contained in this Bill go beyond what is in the Government's power to do. Trade is a matter of sole EU competence and that is clear in the treaties. Passage of the Bill would expose the State to legal action and to substantial and recurring damages and no Government could endorse that.

On settlements, we must choose policies which will be effective, are consistent with our position in the EU Single Market and customs union and will not be struck down as illegal, giving comfort to settlers rather than Palestinians. Informal soundings in Brussels indicate that the European Commission agrees that the Bill contravenes EU law as trade is a sole EU competence in the treaties and would take a legal challenge if the Bill was enacted.

On the issue of settlements more widely, all settlement activity is illegal under international law and contrary to Israel's obligations under the fourth Geneva convention on the treatment of civilian population under military occupation. It is also damaging the viability of a future Palestinian state. The Tánaiste spoke with the US ambassador about this matter when he met

him on 20 November, shortly after Secretary of State Pompeo's comments. The views of the international community on settlements are extremely clear on this point and are comprehensively expressed in UN Security Council Resolution 2334 but also in many other UN Security Council resolutions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): As there are just over five minutes remaining, I propose to the House that we roll over Questions Nos. 12 to 18, inclusive, to tomorrow as we will not have time to take them. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Acting Chairman. Very wise.

Ábhair Shaincheistanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): 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 Tóibín - to discuss an update on negotiations with the Irish Pharmacy Union; (2) Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - to discuss the ongoing delays with the new Macroom Garda station; (3) Deputy Barry - to discuss social insurance and pension entitlements of workers in the St. Vincent's care centre in Cork; (4) Deputies Buckley, O'Keeffe and Browne - to discuss the possible closure of greyhound tracks at Youghal and Enniscorthy; (5) Deputy Sherlock - to discuss post-primary school places for September 2020 in Carrigtwohill and the wider east Cork area; (6) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the recent EPA report on water quality; (7) Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan - to discuss the Community Policing Forum in Dublin north inner city; (8) Deputy Butler - to discuss waiting times for home care supports in Waterford; (9) Deputy Funchion - to discuss the impact of insurance costs on childcare providers; (10) Deputy Harty - to discuss the survival of Clare Bus in Clare and south Galway; (11) Deputy Fitzpatrick - to discuss housing developments in Drogheda, County Louth; (12) Deputy O'Loughlin - to discuss second-level school places in Newbridge and Kildare town; (13) Deputy Mattie McGrath - to discuss tree felling licence delays and the impact on farm contractors; (14) Deputy Brady - to discuss the 150 job losses at Rondo Food, in Arklow; (15) Deputy Brasil - to discuss the need for the provision of a general purpose room for a school; (16) Deputy Troy - to discuss actions being taken to tackle fraudulent insurance claims in his Department; (17) Deputy O'Rourke - to discuss the advancement of housing development at Hazelhatch, Celbridge, County Kildare; (18) Deputy Thomas Byrne - to discuss improving the pupil-teacher ratio in DEIS band 1 schools; (19) Deputy Ó Laoghaire - to discuss industrial action being taken by school secretaries; (20) Deputy Donnelly - to discuss the closure of residential admissions at St. Joseph's dementia care home, Shankill, County Dublin; and (21) Deputy Lahart - to discuss hospitals charging patients and visitors to charge their mobile phones.

The matters raised by Deputies Tóibín, Buckley, O'Keeffe and Browne, Sherlock and Thomas Byrne have been selected for discussion.

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Estimates for Public Services 2019: Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration the following Supplementary Estimates for Public Service for the year ending 31 December 2019: Votes 6, 7, 9, 12 and 17.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Childcare Services Provision

49. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she is considering putting in place support measures for parents in cases in which a crèche has been deregistered; and the measures being taken to increase supply in childcare. [51843/19]

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Is the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs considering putting in place support measures for parents in cases where a crèche has been deregistered and what measures have been taken to increase the supply of childcare? I have put forward this question because I met parents last week from Hyde and Seek in Glasnevin with Councillor Mary Fitzpatrick.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The safety and protection of children remains the first priority of Government. This is done through the enforcement of regulations which have children at the heart of their implementation.

The removal of childcare providers from the register of early years services is the ultimate sanction by Tusla, the independent statutory regulator for the sector. It comes at the end of an enforcement process during which Tusla makes every effort to support the provider to come into compliance with the regulations.

Deregistrations and prosecutions are evidence of Tusla's robust approach where it finds evidence of disregard for regulations.

I acknowledge that deregistrations can cause significant challenges for parents in finding alternative childcare provision. I have great sympathy for parents in this situation. Yet, I firmly believe that robust enforcement of the regulations is in children's interests and is the right thing to do. Where a service is removed from the register, the staff of 30 Department-funded city and county childcare committees throughout the country are available to support parents who need help finding an alternative service. Officials in my Department liaise closely with the relevant childcare committee to ensure that everything possible is being done for parents affected by closures. In recent cases, childcare committees have operated extended opening hours to sup-

port parents. The childcare committees have also been actively supporting and exploring the development of alternative childcare options in the locality. Tusla has agreed to prioritise or fast-track the registration of any new service wishing to open.

Capacity in the sector has doubled in the past five years and continues to rise. However, I recognise that capacity constraints remain. In 2019, I provided €5.9 million towards the creation of new places within the sector. I hope to announce details for a 2020 capital scheme in the coming months and I encourage providers to consider expansion. In time the draft childminding action plan, which I published in August for public consultation, will have a major impact in increasing capacity in the sector through opening up regulation and funding to childminders.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I suppose really my question was about what the Minister is considering and what the Department is considering. The Minister talks about locality and fast-tracking. I am aware of the issues because I met two of the providers in the area. They do not have the capacity. Capacity is at a premium, to be honest. I am looking for a commitment from the Minister today on how Tusla, the Department and the city and county childcare committees can work with the parents to keep them together.

The Minister referred to Tusla being robust. Yet, it took the agency 18 months to get the service registered. We are two years talking about this particular service. I have no wish to go into that, but these parents have no option and they are being left high and dry. They cannot find childcare in the area. They want the Department to come on board and have a mentoring system. Let us put someone in there who can help with management and administration. The parents speak well of the really good staff, the baseline workers. The parents have no option. Their backs are to the wall and they are pleading with the Minister to help in finding a solution.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: It is helpful for one of our representatives to meet with parents specifically in respect of certain services that have closed. I thank the Deputy for her correspondence on the matter. The county and city childcare committees have been offering support to parents, especially in those areas. For example, the Dublin city childcare committee has received notice from more than 50 services declaring availability. The committee looked for other services that may have additional capacity. That list of services with availability has been circulated to the 32 parents who have made inquiries. The Fingal county childcare committee has contacted 110 full-day services to establish availability. A total of six parents have been in contact with the Fingal county childcare committee. The city and county childcare committees have been working with parents on a case-by-case basis to try to match places with requirements. They are engaged in other ways to support parents as well. That is only the city and county childcare committee but I can refer to other things going on in my final reply.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The bottom line is that the current childcare sector is in crisis. We have a capacity crisis. I appreciate the good work and what went online in the past week. It is welcome to identify where there is availability in these areas. That is a welcome move. However, it does not address the position that these parents find themselves in. We are three weeks out from 1 January and in the particular area two services are closing because they have to get ready for re-registration. There is no capacity because parents have gone around and asked. They have asked me and the Minister to liaise with Tusla and the city and county childcare committees to see whether there is a chance of getting someone in place to work with the owners to put in a mentoring service. A new manager has been appointed. The parents are happy to come on board. Perhaps there is some way we can join some dots here. I would welcome the input of the Minister in trying to find a solution.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: In the first instance I know the city and county childcare committees are working with any parents who are in contact. They have tried to identify where places are available. If parents have not been in direct contact with the committees I urge them to make contact.

Deputy Rabbitte has explored a recommendation with parents. We have been thinking about that as well. The Deputy referred to putting in place interim management to ensure a service does not close. Unfortunately, it looks as if such a move needs legislation. There needs to be some changes to legislation to allow an interim management to come in to run the service. I have, however, asked the question. We are looking at whether we can fast-track amending the legislation to allow for the placement of interim management in a deregistered crèche. That is what is required. Second, Tusla is fast-tracking registration of some of the new services. Third, I am going to call for a meeting of city and county childcare committee co-ordinators from throughout the country early in the new year to look at whether there are any further solutions we can offer relating to the capacity and deregistration of services.

Domestic Violence Services Funding

50. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to explain the reason there has been no additional provision in budget 2020 for a refuge (details supplied) to receive funding for play therapy and counselling for children and women who avail of its services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51703/19]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: My question relates to the Amber Kilkenny Women's Refuge, which serves Carlow and Kilkenny. Why has no additional funding been granted for the coming year, especially for play therapy and counselling services for women and children? I call on the Minister to comment on that.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I am conscious of the Deputy's support for this important facility and I was pleased to have been able to visit it at her invitation last year. The Deputy will be aware that Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, supports Amber in Kilkenny as part of its role to provide care and protection for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Tusla has informed me that Amber has received €506,468 in funding in 2019. I understand Tusla is currently engaging with Amber on funding for 2020. Details of funding and required service provision will be agreed in a service level agreement.

A sum of €25.3 million in funding is being allocated to Tusla for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, DSGBV, services in 2020. Following budget 2020, I issued Tusla with its performance statement for 2020 in line with the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. In response to the performance statement Tusla will prepare a business plan for 2020. The precise level of funding to be allocated to individual DSGBV services will be considered by Tusla in preparing its business plan. The plan will be submitted to me shortly.

In 2019, I provided Tusla with an additional €1.5 million to provide additional targeted supports for domestic and sexual violence services. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that good progress has been made in the roll-out of these additional resources by service providers. I highly value the work of individuals providing services to victims of domestic violence, including those in Amber.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Deputy, you have one minute for a supplementary question.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Is it two minutes or one minute?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): You have one minute initially and then you will get another minute.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I appreciate the fact the Minister visited the service in January 2017. It was very much appreciated that the Minister took the time to go down and see the service. The service covers a vast area and includes the whole of Carlow and Kilkenny. In fact, there is an argument that Carlow should have its own women's refuge. Currently, it does not, but for various reasons, including family reasons, women in Carlow should be able to stay in Carlow.

The question is specifically on the counselling budget. To date, Amber has been running a fantastic service. I cannot say enough good things about the service being run. Women do not come from a domestic violence situation and wake up the next morning for everything to be okay again. They have to go through a process and counselling is a key part of it. Obviously, children who have been affected by or who have lived in a domestic abuse situation need counselling, which is often in the form of play therapy. Currently, that is coming from a charitable organisation and there is no ring-fenced funding. I know the organisation gets funding from Tusla, but there is no ring-fenced funding for counselling.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Deputy Funchion has identified a particular need within Carlow-Kilkenny. One of the precise recommendations that I made to Tusla, which is being taken up, was for the hiring of additional outreach support workers by refuges throughout the country. I made the recommendation because I met domestic, sexual and gender-based violence service representatives from throughout the country, especially those working outside the main urban settings. I asked whether they would recommend that the women go to their service or the service go to the women and they suggested outreach workers. Carlow-Kilkenny has already hired an additional one out of the 12 for whom I have provided funding. I understand the hiring of a second outreach worker is in process. It is important to state there are additional resources in that regard. I will come back to the final question at the end.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I was speaking to them today. That second outreach worker was finalised only yesterday or today. It is good. I welcome it. That is to service Carlow. Obviously, there are many people who must travel, as well as school issues, and it is not an ideal situation.

Part of the reason for the question is that services dealing with domestic violence are often asked to undertake a needs analysis. They spend a considerable amount of time, take it very seriously but then are still waiting on an answer or for those additional resources two years later. In fairness, there was one granted either yesterday or today. It is coincidental but is good news.

I specifically emphasise counselling and play therapy because these are so valuable. One cannot flee a domestic violence situation. One will keep returning to it, unless one has the proper supports, and counselling is key to that. At present, a voluntary charity is providing the counselling for them. If that runs out, which it will at the end of this year, it will put the whole counselling budget in jeopardy, although that is such a vital part of the work that they do.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will make two points on the specific issue of counselling and I thank the Deputy for raising it. She has put it on the record and Tusla will be aware of that. I hope and anticipate that counselling forms part of its negotiations, especially for 2020, to see whether there is any more scope for support for that particular aspect. My information, however, is that it has not raised the issue of counselling and additional resources for counselling on an ongoing basis. That is merely my information but I certainly hear the Deputy raising it.

Second, in respect of the children, one way we spent the additional funding in 2019 was that Tusla began to roll out what is called the TLC Kidz programme, which is a healing programme for children, in a number of Tusla areas for children who witness domestic violence. Facilitator training to support the roll-out was delivered in March and September of 2019. There were very high levels of interest and participation. I understand provision of that is coming to Kilkenny in January.

Finally, in terms of the second outreach worker, I did not have that information and I am happy to hear it. That recruitment process took longer than anticipated but it is good to know they have two in place.

Childcare Services

51. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the public consultation process on the draft childminding action plan will be extended in order to facilitate childminders who have attended focus groups in relation to the plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51844/19]

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I ask the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the public consultation process on the draft childminding action plan will be extended in order to facilitate childminders who have attended focus groups in respect of the plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I warmly welcome the high level of participation by childminders in the recent public consultation on the draft childminding action plan. I strongly believe that childminding has an important and distinctive role to play in the future of early learning and care and school-age childcare in this country and this is why I appointed an expert group, chaired by Childminding Ireland, in 2016 to revert to me with recommendations.

Childminding is different from centre-based provision. That is why regulation of childminding must be proportionate and appropriate to the home setting in which childminders work, and that is why it was important to have a consultation process in which the views of childminders themselves would be heard.

At the heart of the public consultation was a series of 31 focus-group meetings across the country with childminders. These were organised at county level by childcare committees. They took place in the evenings to make it possible for childminders to attend. In addition, one meeting of stakeholders took place during the working day to enable other stakeholders, such as parents or parent-and-children representatives, to take part, and I am delighted that some childminders were also able to attend that meeting.

The consultation also involved an online survey and a call for submissions. There were 471

respondents to the online survey, of whom nearly 60% were childminders. In addition, there were 14 responses to the call for submissions.

All aspects of the consultation are important and each will be fed into the final plan. The views of those who attended the focus groups were carefully noted and will make a significant contribution to the analysis of the consultation that officials in my Department are now undertaking.

If there are specific issues which the Deputy feels have not been reflected in the extensive consultation to date, my officials would be happy to consider them. However, given the scale of consultation already undertaken, rather than extending the consultation I believe the priority now should be to review the childminding action plan in light of the views childminders have shared, and then to begin the processes of reform that they have called for. My Department will continue to engage with Childminding Ireland and other relevant representative groups as the process continues.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Although approximately 19,000 childminders currently operate in Ireland, only 81 of them are registered. One child in ten aged between zero and 12 years of age is cared for by a childminder. When one looks at the preschool children where non-parental care is used, almost one third of these children are cared for by childminders. If we want childcare to be affordable and accessible, childminding must be part of the solution.

At present, a parent can only avail of the affordable childcare scheme by using a registered childcare facility. A big part of the reason that fewer than 100 childminders in Ireland are registered is that the current regulations are written with a centre-based setting in mind. Taking into consideration everything the Minister has said, there is a fear within the childminding sector that we will see a cutting and pasting of whatever has been done already for centre-based settings with standards and regulations to be forced upon childminders. That is why they are looking for an extension of the consultation. They do not feel that they were represented because they were not registered.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I agree with everything that the Deputy outlined in terms of the concerns, which is why we put in place an extensive consultation led by Childminding Ireland in the first place to recommend what the draft plan ought to include, the substantial majority of which became part of the draft childminding action plan that is still to be put out for further consultation. The Deputy's points are well taken, which is why I listed all the different ways in which we tried to have the consultation with childminders to inform the finalisation of that plan.

In fairness, we have done extensive work in including, enabling and supporting childminders to drive what will be in that plan. It is true to say that, ultimately, those are decisions for Government but it is not the case that we have not been asking or listening. There are several issues that the childminders are particularly concerned about, particularly what level of qualification will be required, but we certainly are hearing those issues. I agree the childminders need a bespoke set of regulations that are appropriate and proportionate for the childminding setting.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The reason that question was tabled is that childminders who approached me stated that the consultation had finished when the draft plan was released. They felt that they had not enough time to engage on it.

The childminders do not want academia to write the report. They want it to be childmin-

ding-child led. Childminding, as opposed to a centre-based setting, is a completely different animal. The childminders want to be in control of their own rules and regulations with everybody else because it is a completely different setting. I think the Minister would agree with me on all of that.

Can the Minister give me details of the appointments to the various working groups and expert panels? Can the Minister assure me of some of the names that come from the childminding sector that would reassure the childminders that their voices and representations are at the core of this?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: In response to Deputy Rabbitte's first question, it will not be academia that is writing it. In fairness, it was Childminding Ireland that led that first piece of consultation out of which the draft action plan was put in place ultimately. I absolutely agree with the Deputy. It will not happen under my leadership.

On the Deputy's second question, I do not have specific names in front of me. However, in terms of the steering committee that will be appointed to drive and oversee the implementation of the action plan once it has been finalised, I can state there is an explicit commitment that it will include representatives of childminders, parents and other key stakeholders within the sector. The role of the steering committee will include monitoring and reviewing of the implementation of the plan. During phase 1, it is proposed four advisory groups will be established and they will work with officials on regulation and inspection, qualifications and training, funding and financial supports and consultation and communications. I can only say that I expect and anticipate that, of course, some childminders will be part of that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Early Childhood Care and Education

52. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the actions she can take to address delays in the re-registration process for childcare providers as early years services which are causing concerns for the providers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51548/19]

59. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of childcare facilities which will be affected by the extension of the deadline for the submission of certain documentation to Tusla until 30 June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51555/19]

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am aware, on foot of information from some Kildare early years childcare providers, of delays in processing their re-registration, which needs to be completed by the end of the year. I ask the Minister to provide an update on the actions her Department is taking to address these delays.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 59 together.

The operation and maintenance of the register of early years services is a matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which is the independent statutory regulator. Since this is a regulatory issue, my Department does not have a direct role in the processing of registration applications or maintenance of the register. Tusla was given additional powers in 2016 which included the registration of services. The deadline for re-registration has been known to providers since then and indeed it appears on their registration certificate. Over the past 18 months, Tusla has been engaging with providers on requirements for re-registration, including through a consultative forum of stakeholders. Tusla issued further guidance to service providers in August 2019 on specific documentation required on planning permission as part of the re-registration process.

In order to be registered on 1 January 2020, providers must submit an application for re-registration by midnight on 12 December 2019. Providers were urged to submit their applications in advance of this date, given the large volume of applications expected. The deadline of 12 December was necessary in order to give Tusla time to process all applications. To minimise uncertainty for providers, last week, on 5 December, Tusla issued a further letter to all providers, offering assurance that any provider who submits a completed application with the specified essential documents by 12 December will be re-registered. All providers who submit a completed application will be issued a further individual confirmation of re-registration by 20 December and will be able to continue operation of their service in January.

I am informed by Tusla that the total number of early years services that are due to re-register by 31 December 2019 is 4,117. As of Monday morning, 3,752 services had commenced the application process on the Tusla portal. Of these, 3,081 applications had been submitted via the online portal for assessment. Therefore, 671 applications are commenced but not yet submitted and just 365 have yet to start the application process. I have a further update to add to that in the supplementary reply.

Submitted applications are currently being processed in batches through a series of specially convened registration panels. My Department has been working closely with Tusla to ensure there is adequate staffing in place to process applications on time, and to assist with effective communications with providers. In addition, my Department has supported city and county childcare committees to give advice and assistance to providers that need help with re-registration. In recognition of the difficulties many providers were experiencing in completing re-registration, as the Deputies know, Tusla decided to revise the timeline for submission of supporting documentation for re-registration. Under the revised arrangements, while providers must apply to Tusla by 12 December, they have until 30 June 2020 to provide some of the supporting documentation required, including on fire safety and planning requirements. On 27 November, my Department issued a letter informing providers that Tusla has revised the timeline for submission of supporting documentation for re-registration. That letter provided clear guidance on what is required by 12 December and what can be submitted up until 30 June.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive response. She has touched on many of the issue's complexities. It is a concern that as of today, 365 childcare providers have yet to start the process. Are those figures right as of today or is there an update on them?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: There is an update.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Minister might consult with Tusla on communication. I take

her point about the consultative forum with stakeholders. Is that with county childcare committees? Dealing with early years providers in Kildare, I find that there seems to be a disconnect in terms of communication. I presume it is because they are very busy running their facilities on a day-to-day basis. They are the backbone of our childcare system and provide a safe environment for our children to learn, play, grow and develop. It is really important. We should look at communication. There has been a lot of stress and concern and some of the information may not be getting down to the individual childcare providers.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive response. I acknowledge the additional time that was notified recently on it, which gives an opportunity to childcare providers that are under pressure. It is a significant burden on many of them. They want to be compliant and have everything in order and are making every effort. The time and cost of bringing in a chartered surveyor and expensive skills are a burden on the childcare providers. Those skills may not be readily available. Of the 365 providers that are not engaged, which is a large number of people, how many of them are from Cork? On the 600 that started and did not follow through, almost a quarter is in question there. Can the Minister clarify how many of those are Cork-related? Will these operators be in a position to access further funding, given that they will not be fully registered and fully compliant? Parents applying for the new affordable childcare scheme will want to know that the provider and operator will be accessible to them. What is their status in that regard?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: To be absolutely clear, as the Deputies probably understand, everyone who wants funding from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has to re-register by 12 December. They have to submit an application by 12 December. There is a certain set of documentation that is required for 12 December. Most of that documentation should be pretty much on hand, such as Garda vetting for the registered provider, two references for the registered provider, a certificate that it is registered, the registration number of companies from the Registration Office, a statement of the provider's purpose and function, a safety statement, signed declaration and so on. Those are pretty straightforward but they have to submit them by 12 December. Other documents on planning permission and fire safety that may be more complicated are not required until 30 June. They need to put in their application by 12 December in order to be re-registered.

I have just received a note today. Tusla put out a press release stating that more than 94% of the service providers have applied for re-registration ahead of the deadline. There are 230 remaining. That is a pretty strong and exceptional result. It is just a few days out and I urge the remaining 230 to put in to re-register because they cannot get funding if they are not re-registered. I do not know the number for Cork but I can see if I can get that information for the Deputy.

In response to the question about ongoing consultation, I hear that in respect of Kildare particularly. I think that is what the Deputy is raising and we can pass it on to Tusla. I have information on the consultative forum and ongoing engagement with the stakeholders, which I am happy to share with the Deputy. His general point is something I will take back to see if that can be improved.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Minister. I am not aware that there is a telephone line. Maybe if childcare providers had a direct line that they could use to call Tusla and ask specific questions, it would be most helpful and might take some confusion out of the process. I do not believe there is a helpline number for them. The Minister might follow up on that as well.

I am aware, from having talked to the childcare providers, that this potentially has knock-on impacts on their insurance, which is very serious, in addition to the need for them to get that application and the registration in for funding. On the re-registration, how long will it last and when will they have to renew it? Is it a once-off or an annual thing? Is the registration in any way linked to the national childcare scheme or is it completely different and only to do with the funding for the early years school providers?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I want to get an outline of where things stand with the Cork figures. If the Minister can get those and forward them to me, I would be pleased. What will be the position of the 230 who have not engaged next Friday? What will happen? Will funding be turned off if they are not registered and where do parents stand? Can the Minister clarify that? There is a real concern about what the status of the not-engaged people will be. Will the many families who use these services be made aware and what is their position going to be on Friday in the event that some or many of these 230 are not registered?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will do my best in respect of the 230 in Cork who have not begun the process. I will put a request in for a dedicated phone line, to see if that is possible, especially for these last few days.

What I have been trying to outline in the answer to this question and at a couple of other points is that they were communicated with from the time that they registered initially about the requirement to be re-registered in a three-year period. I have outlined the ways that Tusla has had some ongoing communication with providers in that regard. I have run small organisations and businesses so I understand that one gets to that point when one needs to do something when there is very little time left as distinct from way ahead. There are some people who have not gone on to the portal and put in the registration process. I call on them to do that. If they are not registered, if they do not do that, the Department will not be able to provide funding. I think the time that people have been given is very reasonable. We have been communicating that it is important to do. If people are having real difficulty in finding paperwork or understanding how to do it they should phone my Department and ask for assistance.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Will the Minister extend the deadline?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: It is part of the law. We cannot extend that deadline.

Childcare Services Provision

53. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to address the lack of crèche spaces and the unaffordability of the spaces nationwide and in south County Dublin in particular; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51543/19]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have raised with the Minister the plight of a crèche in my area where a significant number of parents faced a major hike in charges and some lost their places because of Tusla demands to change things in that crèche. Those parents are still asking to meet the Minister. I appreciate that she gave me a response recently but they are not happy with it. They are concerned not just about their plight but about the wider issue that has emerged that the highest childcare costs in this country, which are higher than in most of Europe, are in our area, and about the lack of places. They also do not accept Tusla's contentions about the circumstances which led to 20 places effectively going in that facility.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: This Government has delivered an unprecedented package of measures to improve access to high quality and affordable childcare. Investment in the sector has increased by 138% over the past five budgets. This investment has helped to bring about a doubling of capacity and a doubling of the number of children receiving State subsidies. However, I recognise that there are continuing capacity issues in parts of the country. Pobal data has shown a vacancy rate of 4% across all services, but these vacancies are not necessarily in the localities where parents are seeking childcare places.

Staff of 30 childcare committees across the country can provide practical assistance to any parents who have difficulty finding a service. Their contact details can be found at *myccc.gov.ie*. I am committed to further increasing the capacity of sector and I will be launching a capital grant programme for 2020 shortly. I will be inviting providers to apply for grants to expand capacity where demand exists. I also ensured that the national development plan committed €250 million for the expansion of high quality childcare. This funding will come on stream in 2023 and will provide a significant opportunity to develop further capacity.

Many parents opt for home-based or childminding provision. To this end, I have recently consulted on a draft action plan for childminders which, when finalised and implemented, will see increased capacity in that part of the sector also.

With regard to affordability, I am aware that this is a concern for many parents, particularly in the Deputy's constituency, which has the highest childcare costs in the State, as the Deputy has identified. I am very pleased that the national childcare scheme has now been commenced. It provides significant financial support to parents for childcare expenses. It provides subsidies on a sliding scale, so those who need most help will receive the highest subsidies.

In addition, I have recently established an expert group to examine the current model of funding for childcare, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services. One of my key objectives since becoming Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has been to address the affordability and availability but I recognise that this is an ongoing agenda, with more to be done.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Two parents working on the average industrial wage will get €20 a week towards the cost of childcare. The increase in the cost for the crèche I mentioned, because of Tusla's requirements for that crèche, is greater than that. The cost is now up to about €1,200 a month, which is mind-boggling. On that specific issue the parents would like to meet the Minister because that crèche was registered for 70 children in 2016. Now the parents have been told in the middle of the year that is too many. That is a specific problem.

They also want to discuss the wider issue of the cost which is not sustainable. The lack of places in our area is shocking. For example, as part of the planning permission for the huge residential development on the site of the old Dún Laoghaire golf club where there are thousands of new residences, there was to have been a major childcare facility. That never appeared. Crèches are full to capacity, too expensive and there are not enough places. We really need quite radical and urgent action to address that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I agree with what Deputy Boyd Barrett said. It is exactly the same in my constituency. Only yesterday I met some residents, some of whom are commuting to Dublin with their 18 month old babies. There are buggies on the trains from Meath into Dublin because the parents cannot find a crèche. Several housing estates have been built and last week

the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection said that all the facilities were in place. There are 250 houses occupied, 900 to go and no crèche. It is in the plans but there is nowhere for these children to go because the capacity is not there. I have raised this in previous questions about Dunshaughlin and Ashbourne. Another constituent cannot take up a job in Ashbourne because there is no childcare. There is no childcare in the commuter belt and it is not right that children have to go on the trains to Dublin. Parents stress out about this. It is a major failing of Government and it is time that a grip was got on it.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I am not questioning the couple Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned who get only €20 more a week but that €20 a week is a universal subsidy for any child under three years. If they are on an industrial wage they are entitled to further additional supports. Have they applied for the national childcare scheme which determines how much of a subsidy they will receive? They should be entitled to more, particularly on an industrial wage.

The Deputy raised the issue particularly of afterschool places. Is that correct?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: He talked about the need to reduce the numbers because they needed more space, etc. I said that was because of the regulations. We have to follow the regulations. I refer to the Deputies' questions about plans for new housing developments, whether there are childcare plans and the fact there are no childcare facilities. That is a difficulty. Difficulties arise when new housing developments include childcare facilities in their plans but such facilities are not made available. I will seek to examine the specific areas identified by the Deputy to determine why those facilities are not in place. The capacity issue is challenging but I have identified the different initiatives we are undertaking to try to increase capacity, although it is not always the case that such an increase will happen. It is too much of a charge to say that we just do not have the capacity and that this is a problem for Government. We are doing different things to address the capacity issue. That said, I hear what the Deputy is saying in terms of promises being made in the context of childcare places in new housing developments that did not materialise. I do not disagree with his point in that regard.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement of the issues. I will check if the people in question are availing fully of the subsidy-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I cannot believe that they are only getting €20.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will check that but, either way, the average cost in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown is off the Richter scale and I think the Minister would accept that point.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need to address that but the national childcare scheme will barely scratch the surface-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I disagree.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Indeed, there is nothing to stop the costs rising further as compliance requirements increase and the costs of same get passed on to parents, thus wiping out any benefit from the national childcare scheme. Costs are already unaffordable and there has been a failure to deliver new crèche places as part of major residential developments. The fact that those places were in the plans and were a condition of planning permission but were

not provided is absolutely unacceptable.

I ask the Minister to consider meeting this group of parents. They are not looking for a fight with her. They want to explain the issues to her from their point of view. They want her to understand the question of affordability, the specifics of their case and the problems more generally being faced in the entire south Dublin area. They would appreciate the chance to engage with her. I am sure that Deputies from other areas would want to make the same case but south Dublin has the highest costs and the biggest capacity problem in the country.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: We do not yet know or fully understand the impact of the funding model that has just been put in place under the national childcare scheme. There is a universal entitlement as well as a legal financial entitlement to a subsidy for childcare costs that is means-tested and based on the age of the child and how long the child will be in childcare. That is why I cannot believe that the people to whom the Deputy refers are only entitled to a subsidy of €20.

On the issue of fees, he is right to be exercised given the area he represents. I appreciate and understand that south Dublin has the highest childcare costs. However, under the scheme, it is not necessarily the case that costs or fees will increase. We will continue to monitor that. The expert group to which I referred is currently looking at ways in which we can link fee increases to improvements in quality. I have a list of vacant childcare places in Deputy Boyd Barrett's constituency. For children up to one year old, there are 13 vacant places; for children between one and two years of age, there are 14 places; while for children between two and three, there are 16 vacant places. This list, dated June 2019, shows that there are places available in his constituency. However, given the fact that he represents people from the area with the highest costs, I will meet the group of parents to whom he refers.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Minister for that.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will try to meet them before Christmas.

Child and Family Agency Services

54. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which a rapid response is available for children at risk or in distress with a view to ensuring a comprehensive and seamless programme to address the issues arising; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51480/19]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which a rapid response is available to children deemed to be in distress and the extent to which a comprehensive follow-up is also available.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The numbers of unallocated cases, or children who do not have an allocated social worker remains of great concern to me. Tusla has identified significant numbers of unallocated cases in five of its 17 areas. In September 2019, these five areas accounted for 56% of all unallocated cases. I assure the Deputy that where a child has not been allocated a social worker, he or she is supported and monitored by the duty social work team until a social worker is allocated.

Tusla has advised my Department that special measures have been put in place to improve

performance in the five areas. Staffing is the main reason unallocated cases are higher in these areas. There is an insufficient number of social workers on the teams carrying out the child welfare and protection tasks and this point has also been made by HIQA in its inspections of these areas. One of Tusla's specific initiatives is a bespoke recruitment campaign to fill the existing social work vacancies across these areas. Tusla has also put in place business support staff to free up social workers to focus on core child protection work.

With regard to rapid responses to urgent cases, Tusla operates an urgent system across all parts of the country. Section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991 permits An Garda Síochána to remove a child from a situation of acute risk. The child is then transferred to Tusla, which undertakes an assessment of the child's situation. Tusla may return the child home, if the environment is deemed safe, or apply for an emergency care order. Tusla also operates an out-of-hours social work service. This service provides access to an on-call social worker at regional or area level who can go the scene of an incident in specific cases of a serious nature.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. Is she satisfied that the supply of social workers can be addressed adequately to ensure the strength of the service is sufficient to meet the need, both now and into the future?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: That question goes to the heart of a lot of the challenges being experienced by Tusla. I just indicated to the Deputy that a recruitment campaign is being run specifically for the five areas where there is the greatest problem of unallocated cases because of a lack of social workers. Tusla is also conducting a number of other campaigns to recruit the number of social workers required. It is also putting in place a number of new retention initiatives on foot of a survey of staff throughout the organisation. I believe that some of those initiatives are happening now. Tusla is trying new things to increase the number of social workers and in that context, I am satisfied. The Deputy will be aware that a shortage of social workers is not exclusive to Ireland but is also an issue in many other jurisdictions. I am satisfied that Tusla is being innovative in its efforts to increase the number of social workers in the agency.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is a multiplicity of reasons for the shortage of social workers. It is difficult to retain social workers because the work is intensive, responsible and urgent. In that context and given the urgency of the situation, is the Minister satisfied that sufficient resources have been made available to her Department to deal with this issue? Our population is growing, with almost 500,000 more people living here than ten years ago. In those circumstances, is she satisfied that adequate provision is being made to address the issues that are arising and that are likely to arise in the future?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The shortage of social workers in Tusla is not a resource issue; instead it is an issue of recruitment difficulties as well as a shortage of social work graduates at university level. The next question deals with what we have been doing to change the latter. There have also been difficulties with retention which Tusla is attempting to address. It has a new workforce development strategy that it is beginning to implement. I am satisfied that this is not a resource issue. There are other issues at play here but Tusla is coming up with new ways of ensuring that it moves beyond the stasis of the recent past.

Child and Family Agency Staff

55. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures she is taking to increase the retention and recruitment of social workers in Tusla. [51522/19]

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My question is in the same vein as that posed by Deputy Durkan. I would like the Minister to outline the measures being taken to increase the recruitment and improve the retention of social workers in Tusla. I would like her to specifically address the low numbers of social workers being trained in the country and to outline what can be done to increase the numbers entering the profession.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Tusla has taken a proactive approach to the recruitment of social workers in a difficult and challenging recruitment environment.

5 o'clock

There is a shortage of social workers not only in Ireland but also in England, the US, Canada and Australia, as has been noted by HIQA. We made modest progress during 2019. Tusla has had a net increase of 65 social workers since the start of the year, and the turnover rate for social workers has fallen from nearly 9% in 2018 to 7.5% by 31 October this year.

It has been clear to me for some time that we must identify ways to increase the supply of social work graduates in Ireland. Our social workers are the linchpin of so many of our essential front-line services for the most vulnerable in our society.

For some time I have been encouraging Tusla to develop a strategic multi-annual workforce plan, which would reflect the realities of the labour market and the current limited supply of social workers. I am pleased that Tusla finalised a strategic workforce planning model in 2019 which I understand will be rolled out over the coming years. The model will seek to deliver on a strategic focus for Tusla, with a gradual transition to multidisciplinary teams consisting of the optimum mix of skills across social work, social care, therapeutic staff, family support, education welfare, and administrative support.

I welcome the focus on recruitment and retention as part of the roll-out of the strategic workforce implementation plan, assisting staff well-being through the assessment of workplace stressors and critical incident exposure in the workplace.

My Department has also taken the initiative to establish a social work education group which provides a forum for Tusla and other stakeholders, including the HSE and the Probation Service, to explore and take possible actions to influence the future supply of social workers.

A key initial priority identified by the group is the streamlining of student placements which does not happen at the moment. My Department has commissioned research to identify ways and alternative approaches to streamline this process through working with stakeholders. The final research report will be discussed at the next meeting of the group in January of next year.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister for her response.

We recently learned that since 2016, there has been a 125% increase in agency social workers being used by Tusla while at the same time it has actively recruited 3.8%. Tusla CEO, Mr. Bernard Gloster, appeared before the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs a few weeks ago and explained to us how it is going to try to transition some of the agency staff on

to the payroll of Tusla. I advocate this because children need continuation and support. When one considers that there are 6,200 cases of unallocated social workers at the moment, there is an urgency to this.

What have we done with the universities? Mr. Gloster mentioned Maynooth at the time of his visit. What programmes are in place so that we can increase the intake from 250 upwards to meet the demand?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Tusla is undertaking a significant agency conversion across grades in front-line services, an initiative I very much welcome. The grades to be included are social work, social care, family support and administrative staff supporting front-line teams. Tusla has had productive discussions with Fórsa trade union on the proposed conversion which could potentially involve up to 400 agency staff.

As Bernard Gloster said to the committee, 389 agency posts selected for conversion have now commenced offers from local Tusla management. The offers were started in recent days and are expected to be substantially completed by next week. A short turnaround is envisaged and subject to take-up rates by the workers, expected to be known to a large degree by the week of 20 December, there will be a commencement of the conversions in January 2020. In the event that the offers are refused - some may be refused and worker choice is a big factor - by the same token 389 posts are being offered, which is substantial progress.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: This is really welcome and I compliment the CEO and his staff on the work they are doing on that. We cannot survive on agency staff as it is not good enough for the families or for the children. The figure of 389 conversions starting on 1 January 2020 is a great start for Tusla. May it continue because there are many more staff who hopefully we can bring on to the conversion programme.

Can the Minister address the issue of Maynooth or whatever other colleges may be involved? Has she worked with the Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, or the Minister for Education and Skills on other courses where we can expand opportunities to recruit and to train and develop people in the sector? There are not enough spaces there, so how can we increase the figure of 250 upwards?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Deputy for her compliment for Mr. Gloster.

Tusla is exploring its sponsorship initiatives in an effort to increase the number of students studying social work, and thereby, increasing the supply of social workers available to the agency. This is happening and I expect this will produce some results as well.

We have been engaging directly with the Department of Education and Skills and there are officials from that Department on the working group established by my Department to look at how to increase the number of places at third level. The first thing that has to happen, as indicated in the first part of my response, is that we need to have a streamlined placement service for the students which has not happened yet. This makes it more difficult for universities to increase their supply of spaces unless it is easier for them to place students, as we do for doctors and nurses, etc. That will happen.

There are some changes in the retention. The survey of workers identified that if they are supervised and supported by a stable management team, and, in particular, a team leader, they will want to stay. If they have a manageable caseload, they will want to stay even more. If they

work alongside a fully-staffed, stable and experienced team, they will want to remain longer again. All those issues are being addressed.

Children and Family Services Provision

56. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department will work with organisations (details supplied), Tusla, the local authority and other State agencies to ensure that the supervised playground on Library Road, Dún Laoghaire remains supervised into the future; the steps she can take in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51544/19]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have raised with the Minister the fate of the supervised playground on Library Road in Dún Laoghaire before, and seeing as I am on a roll with her, I hope that there is something that can be done to save the supervision at this playground which is due to terminate. This amenity has been there for decades and has served a disadvantaged community and many children and parents. The supervision and the funding for it is going to be withdrawn shortly before Christmas unless something happens urgently.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Deputy for his question.

My Department has never funded the supervision of the playground in question. Funding provided by my Department for playgrounds is limited to capital spend, namely, the capital grant funding scheme for play and recreation. Applications for this scheme are made through the local authority play and recreation network. The funding of supervisory posts such as those referenced in the Deputy's question would not meet the criteria for this funding scheme, or indeed any other funding scheme operated by my Department.

I understand that the supervision currently in place is being delivered by Crosscare until the end of the year and that the supervision relates to supervision of play equipment, rather than direct supervision of children or young people. I further understand that the playground is currently open and will remain open in the future. I can again assure the Deputy that I continue to place a very high priority on ensuring that our children and young people have access to the best possible play and recreation facilities as one way to promote their physical and social development. I am happy to hear that this particular playground facility in Dún Laoghaire will remain open to the public to this end.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The playground will-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Can the Deputy allow the Minister to finish, please? Are you finished?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes, I am done.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My apologies, Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): I will take Deputy Boyd Barrett's first supplementary question now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will take her time as well.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): No, you will not.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: He could easily. It would not be a problem to him.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): I am sure you would like your colleague to get a chance to come back in.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The playground in question is in an area where very few people have front or back gardens. These are old terraced council houses. It is an area with a DEIS school and is a pocket of disadvantage in Dún Laoghaire. Many of the children who go there, from the ages of three and four up to 13, are children who would frankly not go to the other open playgrounds. There are a number of children with special needs. This is a community amenity and facility which caters for children with special needs in an area of disadvantage. It is not unique to have such a thing. I talked to Barnardos, for example, which runs such a facility in Waterford city. This is a good thing that works and is a glue for the community. It is very good for children. We often talk about early intervention and this is a form of it. The people who are there are trained and have Further Education and Training Awards Council, FETAC, qualifications. To remove the supervision would be retrograde and many of the children who go there will not return to it if there is no supervision.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: We have been in direct contact with Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB and its development officer for youth and sports. The information I have in the email is that the supervision was never for the children. It was for the play equipment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are playing games.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The Deputy is stating that, but I have information directly from the ETB that says otherwise. If the Deputy is arguing that there are people who are supervising the children, that is not the information I have. Who should I ask if not the development officer for youth and sports in the ETB?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Their names are Pauline and Jill. They have worked there for more than a decade. In Pauline's case it is probably about 20 years. Many of the children who go there now will not go anymore if the supervision is removed. Some agenda is operating here. I believe somebody else wants the building that they partly use, to be honest. That is what is happening and it is wrong and retrograde. Crosscare runs it and employs them and before that it was run by Catholic Youth Care, CYC. That indicates there is a childcare component to it. Why else would Crosscare have employed them for the last ten years? Now Crosscare is saying the children are too young for it because it deals with teenagers. The playground caters for children who are between three and 14 years old. It is retrograde that Crosscare is pulling out; I am disappointed with Crosscare. It is also retrograde that the council seems to think it should get rid of something that is working. The community and the children in the area will suffer consequences if the supervision is removed. I am seeking proactive intervention with the council, Crosscare or the ETB so we do not lose a good facility that works for the community.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I completely understand that the Deputy wants the children to go to the playground. If it has worked in the past, it would be fantastic if it continues. What were the people's names?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Pauline and Jill.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The Deputy says they are currently supervising the children as distinct from my information that there is supervision of the play equipment. We can com-

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municate to the development officer for youth and sports that the Deputy is claiming something different. I can ask Crosscare these questions. It could be raised with the county council as well to find out why this is happening. I have tried to answer as best I can with the information I have. I agree with the Deputy that we must support our young people.

Youth Services Funding

57. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has considered reviewing the system through which youth groups and services access public funding. [51523/19]

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Has the Minister considered reviewing the system through which youth groups and services can access public funding?

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department administers a range of funding schemes to support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country including those from disadvantaged communities.

Both the targeted and universal youth funding allocations for 2020 for organisations and services are currently being finalised in my Department.

These schemes have been subject to very significant review and reform.

I am currently working closely with officials in my Department to complete the final phase of preparation of the new targeted youth funding scheme, which will be launched before Christmas. I believe the new scheme will be highly beneficial to the most vulnerable groups in society.

This scheme is designed to support young people who are marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable and aims to provide services which support young people to develop the personal and social skills required to improve their life chances.

The design of this scheme has been the subject of considerable collaboration with the youth sector.

The experience gained in reforming targeted youth funding schemes will also assist us in reviewing the funding scheme for universal services. In this regard my Department plans to commence a review of the youth services grant scheme next year.

This scheme makes funding available on an annual basis to 30 national and major regional youth organisations.

In 2019, I provided an additional 2.5% in funding to this scheme, bringing the total allocation to over €11 million.

The review of this scheme will aim to enhance accountability, transparency and outcome measurement. It will also seek to ensure that the scheme responds as effectively as possible to the ever evolving needs of young people. My Department is committed to consultation with the youth sector in this review.

We have a professional, constructive working relationship with the national youth organisa-

tions, which my Department works hard to maintain, and most recently I met with the national youth organisations on 2 December last.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The reason I tabled this question was to understand the sequence of when funding would be released. I welcome the Minister's commentary on the targeted youth funding scheme. How can one apply for it? Must one be a member of the major groups? What are the 30 other national groups? I am trying to understand this because there appear to be many groups and this follows up on where Deputy Boyd Barrett concluded. Who works with the Department? Is it the education and training board, the city and county childcare committees or the county councils? Who is submitting some of these funding applications and how can one get advance notice that one can access this funding so one might not be left behind? That might have been the case in Deputy Boyd Barrett's area. I am asking on behalf of Tuam and Ballinasloe. We are trying to get a bus that can be part of the Irish youth justice system. I see the Minister smiling at that-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: No, I think it is great.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: -----but it would bring things together for vulnerable young people so they could have the same opportunities to engage throughout the county.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I am laughing at the Deputy's passion about one application, although I am sure it is for many. The targeted youth scheme was reviewed a couple of years ago. There were four types of schemes and different groups could apply to them to get grants and funding. The review recommended bringing it into one scheme as that would be more efficient and effective. Three years of consultation took place with the youth sector in many different ways. That is not to say that there was not some criticism and concern as to whether the groups currently getting funding would continue to get it. It is built into the scheme that they will be given time to reach the criteria for the scheme so they can continue to get funding, while new groups can also access it.

It will be administered through the ETB. I will launch it at the end of this year and the information will go out in the new year. If there are new groups that have not accessed funds, I expect that the information will be made known and available. If it is not, I ask the Deputy to refer back to me in that regard.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My understanding is that the funding applications will be made available in the new year and that the Minister will communicate that through the Department. Is that the full allocation of €11 million for the year? Will people know that is the pot of money and how to make an application to access the funding? What recommendations does the Minister think she will give to some of the groups? Some of them might never have applied previously. They might think they are too small or they might not be managed under a particular heading. Will it be driven through the ETBs, the county councils or other youth work organisations? I am trying to flag in advance for all the youth groups that there is funding coming and that this will be the main mechanism for accessing it for 2020.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Absolutely, they need to know. I anticipate that most youth organisations and services that are currently getting funding will continue to get it, but through a new vehicle. The Deputy's question about awareness raising and communications is a good one. To be straight, I am not sure if it is my Department that will do it or the ETB, but I will raise that question. As to whether the €11 million that is available is for the targeted youth

scheme, we have moneys for the targeted youth scheme, which I am describing now, and for the national youth organisations. I do not have the figures with me regarding how much is for one and how much is for the other. As I indicated, there has been an increase of an additional €8.5 million, or some 16%, for the targeted scheme since 2016, when I took over the Ministry, and a 10% increase for the universal scheme.

Foster Care

58. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on whether the background checks being carried out on potential foster carers by Tusla are robust enough to ensure the protection of vulnerable children and that concerns raised regarding the safety of children in foster care are being dealt with appropriately; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51552/19]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: The question concerns whether the background checks being carried out on potential foster carers by Tusla are robust enough to ensure the protection of vulnerable children, in particular given concerns have been raised regarding the safety of some children in foster care, and whether all of this is being dealt with appropriately.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Children in care are among the most vulnerable in our society, and it is the responsibility of Tusla to ensure they are placed in safe environments. While it is not possible to remove every risk, Tusla makes every effort to assess thoroughly all people who wish to be foster carers.

The approval process for general foster carers can take several months. The assessment is carried out by a qualified social worker under the supervision of a social work team leader. The assessment focuses on the capacity and suitability of the applicants to provide safe, secure care to a child. An essential part of the process is to undertake safeguarding checks on potential foster carers, to include references, medical assessments and Garda vetting. This information is included in the report prepared for the foster care committee to assist them in making a decision regarding approval. Children are not placed with the foster carers until they are approved. The process includes ongoing Garda vetting for foster carers and adult family members, including their own children when they reach 16 years of age. An important part of the assessment process is that potential foster carers attend at information and training sessions, which include sessions on how to keep children safe in foster care.

In the case of children placed with relative foster carers, the child care regulations state that for an emergency placement in foster care, the assessment must take place as soon as is practicable. This is in recognition of unanticipated situations for some children, where their best interests may be met, at least initially, by placing them with relatives. However, the standards are clear that safety checks, including Garda vetting, must take place before the child is placed.

As many of the children who are placed with foster carers have previously been neglected or abused, foster carers are advised on ways to be particularly mindful in how they care for the children in this respect. Foster carers have a link social worker, which is separate to the child's social worker, who provides support and supervision and is attentive to the impact of the fostering situation on all members of the foster carer's family. The protection of children in foster care from harm is of the utmost importance in all circumstances.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: One reason I asked this question is that we have seen various cases recently - I would include Scouting Ireland - where it is clear vulnerable children were let down by various organisations and the State. We have a history in this regard in this country. A first ever national fostering week was recently organised by the Child and Family Agency. While I do not have a difficulty with this, it obviously led to a huge increase in the number of inquiries. This is a good thing, on the one hand, because we definitely need good foster parents, who do an excellent and difficult job, one I do not envy and I do not know how many of them do it. However, we need to ask the questions, not just about background checks, but also about supports for those foster parents and whether those supports are ongoing. Other Deputies also raised the question of resources. For example, if we do not have enough social workers and aftercare workers, are we really in a situation where we can monitor foster care on an ongoing basis and do we have the resources to do that? That is the crux of the matter.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The Deputy mentioned the recent campaign Tusla conducted to see if it could get more people interested in providing foster care. As the Deputy indicated, it resulted in some 350 inquiries, which are now being followed up. That is substantial and I congratulate Tusla for doing that, in particular as it was the first time.

One of the reasons it did that was in regard to resources and the best way to spend them. The Deputy and others have raised previously the difference in cost between private placements for children in care and the cost of public foster carers, who are supported by Tusla. Given that difference in cost, Tusla ran this campaign to see if it could get more people interested in becoming foster parents. While it was not necessarily just cost driven, it was conscious of that. Obviously, the more foster carers or parents there are who are providing that service with Tusla, the more resources will be better spent in supporting those providing foster care.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Part of the reason for this question is that foster parents contact us and say they do not feel there is a huge amount of support. Particularly when people have been foster parents for a long time and they are well known as a good placement, they get asked to take emergency cases with very little support, and an emergency case can then turn into months and the children are still with them. People are often left with a lot of unanswered questions. I am always conscious of our history and how much we have failed children in the past. I hope we are starting off on the right foot. If it is going to have these types of fostering weeks and information sessions, this would always need to be followed up robustly and it has to be ongoing, not based on one check. First, foster parents themselves need support and, second, we need to always ensure that the most vulnerable children in our society are in a totally safe environment. That is my concern.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: As I have indicated, the child has a social worker and the foster carers have a link social worker, and those are considered to be forms of real direct support. I hear the Deputy's point that some foster carers may be making representations to her that they feel they could use more support. I will communicate that to Tusla. However, that should not stop Tusla from going out and looking for more. At the same time, it should be integral that if are increasing the numbers, we need to ensure there is additional support.

Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 52.

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Insurance Costs

60. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has raised or plans to raise the issue of insurance for childcare facilities with an organisation (details supplied); her views on whether increased costs of insurance for registered facilities are having a detrimental impact on the industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51334/19]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: My question relates to insurance issues for childcare facilities. It concerned a particular organisation but it is a general question relating to the increased cost of insurance for registered facilities and how this is having a detrimental effect on the industry.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Childcare services in this country are provided by more than 4,500 private or not-for-profit services. My Department engages with the services regularly through a number of organisations and representative groups.

Insurance costs and risks associated with this area for early learning and care and school age childcare services have very recently been flagged with my Department, and my officials are looking into this and engaging in a process. Information suggests that while insurance costs are a concern, to date they are not as significant an issue in this sector as in others. However, my officials have just been informed that one of the two underwriters currently in the Irish early learning and care sector insurance market has decided to withdraw from this jurisdiction. The broker involved has written to the services affected noting that, although the insurance market is at present restricted in this area, it is working hard to organise a smooth transfer to a new insurer. My officials are carefully examining the current situation and any challenges that may arise in the short to medium term. My Department has not entered discussions with the organisation mentioned, but will consider the suggestion of the Deputy as this work progresses.

Early Childhood Ireland, a national organisation representing about 80% of early learning and care and school age childcare services in the country, operates an insurance scheme for its members. Many avail of it, and my officials will be engaging with Early Childhood Ireland as this work progresses.

My Department oversees a case management system through which Pobal and local childcare committees offer assistance to services experiencing financial or governance difficulties. There have been some individual cases in which insurance costs have been a factor, but it has not been a primary focus to date. These services continue to be offered supports by my Department, tailored to their individual circumstances through a case management process. I will be happy to report back to the Deputy when my officials have completed their consideration of the issues raised.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister for the reply and it is good to know her Department is working on this. It is a reality that there is a higher cost of insurance, unless all of these issues just happen to be in the constituency I represent. This was raised on Leaders' Questions today. We know it concerns childcare, preschool, adventure centres and many other places that involve children and that have children moving and active, which we know is important. None of these things happens overnight. Senator Ó Céidigh's Bill is being progressed, but other Bills could have been progressed before it. There is a link between spiralling claims and spiralling costs. Childcare is just so important, and the Minister knows that better than anyone.

She knows the invaluable service it provides, not just for the children but also for the parents who can go back to work. It is certainly very important to those parents in Dublin Central who are in addiction and trying to get out of it and into recovery. As the Minister mentioned, the other insurance broker is pulling out now. If there will be only one insurance company left, it will have the market to itself. It is important that there is engagement with the remaining broker in order that it does not further increase prices.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: As the Deputy said, the issue of insurance costs across a number of sectors is of great concern. As she will be aware, the Government is pursuing insurance reform, although perhaps not in the way in which Deputies opposite want it to. Another Minister is in charge of that.

I will add to my initial information further information specifically about the childcare sector. My understanding is that the broker that was working with the underwriter that has pulled out of the market has informed its clients that it is actively seeking a new underwriter with which to partner. I mentioned Early Childhood Ireland, which I commend on its work in this area. It has a group scheme for insurance and has worked with us very closely to ensure that is the case. I encourage any childcare organisations that may have been impacted by the pulling out of the other broker to contact Early Childhood Ireland to see whether this group scheme represents another way for them to move forward with their work, at least in the interim.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: The reply from the Minister for Finance to the parliamentary question outlined how there are constitutional issues and then commercial issues. The cost of insurance working group and the Judicial Council Act may have some effect, but in the meantime there are increasing costs for childcare facilities, particularly community facilities. The private ones have other resources they can use that community ones cannot. The ones I know have been told their commercial rates could increase by 3.5% this year. They have had insurance cost increases of several hundred euro. Those few hundred euro mean a lot to small community preschools. They are also complying with all the fire safety work, which, of course, they agree with, but, again, that is a further cost on them. The other cost issue is payment to the staff. The pay is very low. Someone who has done a degree in early childhood care will not get the wage commensurate with holding a degree. This is part of a picture of early childhood care.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I agree with the Deputy. This is putting the childcare organisations in her constituency to the pin of their collar in terms of sustainability. The Department is available to work with, and support, these organisations through some kind of sustainability plan. If they have not asked, they should reach out. I have indicated that we have not heard concerns from many providers. If, however, the Deputy has identified a number that have concerns, I could meet her later and we could look at them and some of the ones within her constituency and see what the challenges and difficulties are in moving forward. As I said, I do not know the fees or the numbers. If, however, Early Childhood Ireland is offering a group scheme, I encourage providers to move in that direction.

Domestic Violence Services Funding

61. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to support a network (details supplied) that includes the vital local service provided by an organisation in view of the 16 days of action to promote domestic violence awareness, which has highlighted that 60% of abuse starts before 25 years of age and that Ireland has only one third of

the recommended number of refuge spaces; and her views on whether women's domestic abuse refuge centres are an important aspect of her Department. [51357/19]

Deputy Paul Murphy: Today is the last of 16 days of action to promote domestic violence awareness. I ask the Minister her and the Government's plans to support women's refuges and networks such as Women Together Tallaght Network in the context of some of the facts we have heard highlighted over these 16 days. One in two women murdered in Ireland is killed by her partner or ex-partner, but Ireland only has one third of the refuge space recommended by the Istanbul Convention.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Last Thursday I attended an event hosted by Saoirse Women's Refuge and Women Together Tallaght Network as part of the 16 days of activism campaign.

Before my time in government, I worked directly with the local communities in the greater Tallaght area. I strongly value the hard work and community spirit of the people of Tallaght.

I understand that the networks to which the Deputy refers receive funding from the Department of Justice and Equality.

Tusla has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic violence and provides funding for the provision of specialist front-line services. These networks do not currently fall under the remit of Tusla's funded services for domestic and sexual violence.

Younger people are particularly vulnerable to abuse. It is important that negative attitudes to women and girls are addressed early on. The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 is a cross-Government initiative in which many Departments, including my own, are involved.

Tusla has led on the delivery of the Manuela programme for 15 to 17 year olds. This six-week educational programme equips young people with the skills and behaviours to promote consent in personal relationships. More than 1,500 young people have participated in the programme to date.

The Deputy raised the issue of refuge accommodation. This is also important to me as part of the services and supports for victims of domestic violence. Refuge should be temporary. The Deputy will have heard the Taoiseach express in this House his views that the perpetrator, not the victim, should leave the home. I agree with that.

Responsibility for investment in new refuges falls under the remit of a number of Government bodies. The planning and resourcing of additional refuge accommodation requires cross-Government support. Future developments will be informed by Tusla's review of emergency refuge accommodation nationwide, which will be completed in early 2020, as well as the identified needs of service users throughout the country.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that five additional refuge spaces will become available in south Dublin this month and three additional refuge spaces will be available in Galway in January 2020.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I also pay tribute to the work of local women's groups in Tallaght, where not only paid employees but also volunteers make up in some cases for the inadequacies of State provision. I am sure it is the same throughout the country. I welcome the fact that a new refuge is being opened, and I accept that this is not purely the Minister's responsibility.

However, the fact that Saoirse Women's Refuge, for example, must do all this fundraising to fill the centre with furniture, equipment, etc., demonstrates a problem in that it is not sufficiently funded. Even with the opening of the new centre, does the Minister accept that compared with the Istanbul standards, for example, we still have significantly fewer spaces than we need? What long-term plans exist to keep refuge centres afloat in order that they not be forced to engage in all this fundraising from local communities as opposed to funding being provided by the State?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I am very much aware of the additional fundraising that domestic refuge shelters need to do because they talk to me too. I will answer the Deputy's questions in a couple of different ways. Regarding the ongoing resources they require, since the beginning of my Ministry, I have increased the resources to this sector by more than €5 million in recent years. I understand that is limited, but there has been an increase based on priority in the past year as well as this year, I expect. What is the best way to target the money? I have asked the sector and pulled together representatives of it to identify how best to use the resources to meet the greatest need.

I would like to address the issue of the standard of the Istanbul Convention in my final reply.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I wish to raise the question of the interaction between domestic violence or intimate partner violence and the housing crisis. Safe Ireland has reported that housing instability is four times more likely to affect women who have experienced domestic violence and that one in four homeless women cites intimate partner violence as a major contributor to her homelessness. This was illustrated by a woman who recently contacted me for assistance. This, again, does not directly relate to the question of refuges. This woman lives very close to her former partner, who is abusive and violent towards her. South Dublin County Council refuses to treat her as a priority for a transfer because she is a tenant of an approved housing body. The approved housing body has tried to assist but does not have appropriate alternative accommodation. She is left in limbo between the council and the approved housing body because the approved housing body said it does not have anywhere appropriate and the council simply refuses to treat her as a priority despite letters from Saoirse Women's Refuge, the Garda etc.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am aware of the interface between housing, homelessness and domestic and sexual violence. That is clearly an issue. Safe Ireland is one of our greatest organisations in this area and does excellent work. I am also aware of the issues that it raises and shares with the Deputy and I seek to address them. On the standards of the Istanbul Convention and how many refuge spaces we have, as the Deputy is aware, the Istanbul Convention recommends two standards. Tusla is following one. Safe Ireland and other organisations want us to follow the other, which would require us to increase the number of refuge spaces by significantly more than we have now. With the standard currently in use, we are almost providing the number of required refuge spaces. Space is available in five units in Rathcoole for five adults and 15 children. Nine units will be available in Rathmines in 2020 for nine adults and 27 children. There will also be additional spaces in Galway.

Tusla is reviewing what is required throughout the country. Those standards are going to be reviewed. I have indicated my preference for a standard that requires more refuge spaces.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): The Minister is out of time.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I am aware that it would cost considerably more money. One

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reason that Tusla and others are going with the first standard is because of the argument that we ought to spend our money to provide community services and integrate them into the community.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Pharmaceutical Sector

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): The first Topical Issue is in the name of Deputy Tóibín, to ask the Minister for Health to discuss an update on negotiations with the Irish Pharmacy Union.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Should I not wait for the Minister for Health?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I am here.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is taking this.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I thank the Minister of State for coming along to take this Topical Issue debate. Non-aligned Deputies do not get any guaranteed speaking rights at all in this Chamber. As any speaking rights that we get are purely on the basis of a lottery, when we manage to get a lottery question or Topical Issue addressed to the Minister for Health, it would be very useful for that Minister to be in the Chamber to answer it. In fairness, the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, has his own portfolio and objectives and may not be able to answer all of the questions. If we are going to have this idea of a Topical Issue where questions are asked of the Minister, it would be really useful if the Minister would show up and answer the questions.

For years, the Government has spoken about getting patients out of hospitals and into primary care. Pharmacies can play a significant role in the delivery of primary care. It is very obvious that pharmacies are not being utilised to the full extent in what they can deliver to patients. If we can get doctors' surgeries to take patients out of hospitals and pharmacies to take patients out of doctors' surgeries, it would make it far easier for the system to work. The Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, was given a commitment by the Minister for Health that he would enter into negotiations and that a new contract would be signed in 2020. He also committed to unwinding the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, among pharmacists. Pharmacy is the only sector in which FEMPI is not being unwound. Every other sector is in the process of unwinding FEMPI. Why is the pharmacy sector excluded? In October this year, the IPU was told at a meeting with the Department that €40 million to €50 million of cuts would be expected from the sector. No justification for that was given.

Given that we are looking for the pharmacy sector to take a bigger role in the delivery of primary care, why are we going down a route of threatening €40 million to €50 million of cuts

for the pharmacy sector? If one contrasts the pharmacy sector with the dental sector, the dental profession was not told that cuts were expected from it. The pharmacy sector is equivalent to the GP and dentistry sectors combined in numbers employed. I recently heard that there may be some rowback with regard to these cuts and some preparation for negotiations and a contract. Are these cuts completely off the table? Is it the case that the Government will not proceed with the cuts in this sector? Will the Minister of State guarantee that? Has the Government taken a new position just because there is a general election in the offing and it realises that the Government will be gone before any contract or negotiations are complete at all? The nature of the pharmacy sector has changed radically in recent years. Pharmacies are doing more administration and dispensing than they did ten years ago but with less money. Business costs, including rates, rents and insurance are radically increasing. We heard from a Deputy earlier that insurance costs are affecting many different parts of society. The Government's inaction in this regard also has contributed to it.

The cost of full-time security is increasing for pharmacies around the country, especially in Dublin with the cocaine epidemic there. There is demand-pull inflation because workers are dealing with higher rents and they are forced to look for higher wages to be able to cover those rents. Pharmacists are anxious to engage with the Government to reduce wastage in drugs, especially with the new higher costs of drugs that are absorbing increasing amounts of the drugs debate in the State. This can be done in negotiations too.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harris. I thank Deputy Tóibín for raising this important matter.

The Minister for Health values the important role community pharmacists play in the health service in the delivery of holistic patient care. The Minister is obliged, before the end of this year, to put in place a new framework to maintain a statutory basis for contractor fees as the existing regulations will be revoked from the end of this year, in accordance with the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017. Prior to the making of new regulations, the Minister for Health is required to consult the representative body for pharmacy contractors, the IPU. To that end, engagement between the Minister, the Department of Health and the IPU has to date been consultative in nature. Department officials wrote to the IPU on 10 October inviting it to discussions on the making of the new regulations. Subsequently, meetings were held in the Department on 24 October and 7 November, following which a detailed submission was received from the IPU. The consultation process has now concluded.

The Minister, Deputy Harris, met the IPU on 5 December and indicated his intention to commence a substantial review of the pharmacy contract in 2020. In this context, the Minister also communicated his intention to maintain the current fee structure from 1 January 2020. The comprehensive review of the pharmacy contract in 2020 will address the role to be played by community pharmacy in the context of Sláintecare. It will consider all aspects of pharmacy service provision, including delivery of a multidisciplinary model of service delivery for patients, ensuring clarity of roles and achieving optimum value for money. However, any publicly funded pharmacy service expansion should address unmet public healthcare needs, improve access to existing public health services or provide better value for money or patient outcomes. Accordingly, any measures to be considered must be evidence based.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is one of the reasons why I made the complaint at the outset. I asked specific questions and the Minister of State has a script which does not deal with any of the questions that I asked. We are unfortunately talking at cross-purposes. There is no com-

mitment with regard to the threatened cuts of €40 million or the unwinding of FEMPI. The Government and HSE have pointed out many times that there needs to be investment in primary care to deliver lower costs. Sláintecare talks about 70% of healthcare being delivered in the local community without a need to go to an acute hospital. The Government is only investing about 4.5% of its current health budget in primary care. If the Government seeks to pivot the healthcare system away from overdependence on the acute system, would the Minister of State not agree with Aontú that at least 10% of the health budget should be invested in primary care and communities? GPs are in a great space to do that. They should be at the heart of a responsive, proactive, cost-effective healthcare system and should be incentivised to offer a wider range of services, either in a direct fashion or as part of an integrated group practice. In order to do that, we need pharmacists to take patients out of GP surgeries. Pharmacists must be given a greater role in providing services in the healthcare system. They can, for example, carry out blood pressure tests, blood readings and many other practical services for patients. We are asking for a broad negotiation and a redesign of the pathways between doctors, pharmacists, and hospital services in primary healthcare. We need to make sure FEMPI is unwound, that there are no threats of any cuts, and that further money is given to primary healthcare provision as a proportion of the total healthcare budget.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I again thank the Deputy for raising these issues. I reiterate the Minister for Health's appreciation of the contribution of community pharmacists in delivering care to patients and re-state his intention to commence contractual discussions early in the new year. The issues the Deputy raised within the debate will be dealt with during that process. However, the Minister is also very cognisant of the fact that the regulations made under the 2009 FEMPI Act expire at the end of 2019, and that a new set of fee regulations will be needed in order to maintain a statutory basis for pharmacy payments from 1 January 2020. The issues the Deputy raised are very important. He spoke of wastage, insurance, security, and primary care, on which I agree with him. Those matters have to be - and are - a huge part of Sláintecare, as is the redesign and reform of all services. I will bring the Deputy's concerns back to the Minister.

Greyhound Industry

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the Indecon report and the possible closure of Youghal greyhound track. I have been told that nobody from Indecon visited that track and that the survey was conducted by email. That is getting off to a very bad start. It is a typical Irish thing to try to fix something that is not broken. Only two greyhound stadiums are making money at the moment. The Youghal stadium is making €4,500 to €5,000 a night because it was the first to introduce the Sports Information Services, SIS, betting scheme, which it piloted for two years for free - *gratis* - for the Irish Greyhound Board, IGB. Now there is talk of closing the stadium. It is also home to the oldest track supporters club in the country, which was founded in the 1950s. The closure of this track will be detrimental to the area and would be similar to the closure of Youghal Carpets when I was young. I do not know whether the IGB or Indecon - although it said it is not liable - will make the decision, but I appeal to the Minister of State to please not close this track.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for choosing this as a Topical Issue today. To be sharp with the Minister of State, last Friday was a black day for Irish sport. One other sport made major headlines, while this report was released without much coverage.

In the last three or four days, it has gained momentum, particularly in east Cork, through breeders, supporters and tourism activists. Earmarking this stadium for closure is a bad blow for east Cork and Youghal. I do not think the Indecon report has done it any justice in its comments and recommendations. The Youghal track has a good income, which is not all from spectators because many of them gain free entry during the summer. It also has the great facility of SIS TV coverage with the bookmakers' association, which has gone from one night a week to two and generates automatic revenue of almost €10,000 per week. Taking the greyhound track out of Youghal is like a village losing its post office.

Deputy James Browne: I raise the very important issue of the decision of Bord na gCon to withdraw funding from Enniscorthy greyhound track, and its inevitable closure as a result. I welcome the report's recommendations regarding care home facilities for animals to be opened next year, a fostering programme for dogs and the introduction of a 100% traceability programme involving microchipping. Animal welfare must be at the centre of this report. Anyone who abuses a dog or any other animal is less than one.

The closure of the Enniscorthy track comes as an economic blow to the town, which is only now getting back on its feet. The track makes a significant contribution to rural employment and developing the town of Enniscorthy. It is a profitable track, which makes it difficult to understand why it is being targeted by Bord na gCon. It makes little or no sense for the region. Between 30% and 70% of the dogs raced in Waterford are from Enniscorthy, so when those dogs leave Waterford, Waterford will come under pressure as well. It is difficult to comprehend this decision when so many other tracks are making a loss.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I am aware that this past year has been a challenging one for the greyhound sector. However, I believe that 2019 will be remembered as a key turning point. The Greyhound Racing Act was signed by the President on 28 May 2019 and this legislation strengthens the legal basis for the industry, with a view to fortifying the integrity of the greyhound racing sector and improving provision for greyhound traceability. The board of Bord na gCon remains committed to the protection of the integrity of the greyhound industry and to promoting the welfare of greyhounds. With the new legislation, together with the maintenance of the horse and greyhound racing fund for Bord na gCon at €16.8 million for 2020, the industry will have the tools to reform and to be strengthened.

According to the 2017 Power report, the greyhound sector provides and supports considerable employment both directly and indirectly throughout the country. It is estimated that in 2016, the industry supported 5,058 full-time and part-time jobs in the economy. In addition, there are 7,313 active greyhound owners in Ireland. The total number of people deriving economic benefit from the sector is estimated at 12,371. The welfare of greyhounds is a cornerstone of the greyhound industry. I am assured that Bord na gCon is striving to ensure the highest standards for the sport and its participants both on and away from the race course.

I refer to the enactment of the Greyhound Racing Act 2019. The greyhound industry has undergone a series of reforms in recent years, informed by several key reports into the sector which led to the enactment of new legislation this year. The future of the industry is dependent on a strong governance platform and on the industry having the highest standards of integrity and welfare. On this basis, I am confident that provisions in the new Act, which came into effect last May, will make a significant difference. The Act reflects recommendations for legislative change made in the Indecon report, the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine's

report on the greyhound industry and the Morris review of anti-doping and medication control. This new legislation strengthens the legal basis for the industry, with a view to fortifying the integrity of the greyhound racing sector and improving provision for greyhound traceability. It will also improve the governance of Bord na gCon, strengthen regulatory controls in the industry, modernise sanctions and improve integrity.

Regarding the Indecon review of greyhound stadia, a fully independent, systematic review into the sustainability of individual stadia and the wider industry footprint forms a key element of Bord na gCon's current strategic plan 2018-2022. Bord na gCon released an independent report undertaken by Indecon Economic Consultants on 6 December 2019, which reviewed the future needs of its 16 licensed stadia and made recommendations regarding the industry's footprint into the future. The recommendations of the report, which have been accepted by the board of Bord na gCon, provide a road map to underpin a sustainable long-term future for the industry. The brief for the study included the assessment of infrastructure and services available at all 16 licensed greyhound stadia in Ireland, an assessment of financial sustainability at each track, analysis of population catchments and motorway access, and detailed recommendations regarding each individual stadium.

The report has recommended restructuring the footprint of the greyhound sector; ongoing cost efficiency measures; targeted investment in animal welfare, marketing and infrastructure; and the ceasing of funding for four stadia, namely, Enniscorthy, Lifford, Longford and Youghal. These four tracks have a long and distinguished history and have been focal points for recreation and enterprise in their respective communities. The impact of their closure will be acutely felt, and I am cognisant that people's livelihoods will be impacted. The Indecon report highlighted several challenges facing the industry which are a threat to its long-term viability. Bord na gCon has already taken steps to address these challenges.

6 o'clock

I will leave it at that and I can come back on a supplementary as my time is up.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for his fairly lengthy reply. Unfortunately, Youghal was only mentioned once in it. It does not really deal with the detrimental effect of this. There is a thriving industry in Youghal. Again, I am asking why we are trying to fix something that is not broken. It says that the recommendations of the report, which have been accepted by the board of Bord na gCon, provide a road map to underpin a sustainable long-term future for the industry. If something is working, please do not try to fix it again. If we lose that industry in Youghal, it will affect our tourism. Many of the issues in this are slightly flawed because they are all about population, numbers and people coming in. In 2018, 1,016 races were held at 101 meetings. On top of that, the two months they do every year - July and August - that are free are not even in the report. This is a thriving business. I again appeal to whoever is dealing with this not to close this track because it will have a massive knock-on effect on local industry such as restaurants and hotels and the transport system. The caravan park behind it is jammed for the two months. It is probably the only outdoor sport that brings everybody in, including children.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: We recently voted for the 2019 legislation and approved the funding for the horse and greyhound racing industry. I wholeheartedly supported it but I did not know I was signing the death warrant for Youghal or the likes of Enniscorthy. I ask the Minister of State to take on board our concerns. I know submissions can be taken up to 10 January but

I ask him to take on board the concerns that have been raised. As indicated by my colleague, Youghal is a tourist town. We may as well use the facility during the vacation period in summer, particularly when the weather can sometimes be inclement. Youghal greyhound track has seen an increase in the number of race nights because of the SIS supports. There was recent adverse publicity regarding greyhound racing and the greyhound industry. We need to give things time to level out so that they improve again. We saw a massive response in Curraheen Park when a meeting was held to generate sponsorship for the Irish Laurels. The response was tremendous. Youghal plays a large role in local communities and fundraising up as far as my own backyard regarding St. Catherine's GAA Club in Conna. There are tremendous race nights and fundraisers in Youghal greyhound track. I ask the Minister of State to take on board submissions that come forward because it is a big issue of concern.

Deputy James Browne: The track in Enniscorthy is approaching its 90th year. It is a profitable track. Many of the other tracks that are to be left open are losing money hand over fist so the fact that Enniscorthy is one of the tracks to be closed makes no sense. I call on the Minister of State and Bord na gCon to meet with the track operators, an independent track in Enniscorthy, to review this decision. I hope this track will not close. If it is to close, we should remember that when a factory in any town closes, the Government springs into action with a support plan for that town. I ask that a similar support plan be put in place for Enniscorthy, Youghal and any other town that will lose a track because those towns depend on those tracks for their economic well-being. I also hope that the welfare plan in the Indecon report is not only implemented but that there is proper oversight to ensure it is implemented and these animals are properly cared for. What we saw on "Prime Time Investigates" was disgraceful and I hope we never see the likes of that again.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I do not pretend to be anything like an expert on greyhounds but I have visited Youghal and Enniscorthy tracks. I met some members of the Oireachtas Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport in Youghal and could see their progressive thinking. Regarding the Indecon report on the footprint and structure, pillar three of the strategic plan was to carry out an independent review so I had nothing to do with it. Bord na gCon had nothing to do with it other than with regard to the terms of reference. I urge people, including the tracks themselves, to make robust submissions before 10 January. When the Indecon report on the future of the greyhound sector, which involved among other things the closure of the Harold's Cross track, appeared, I as Chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine asked Bord na gCon to appear before the committee to explain the rationale behind what it was doing. Not everybody agreed. Doing this again would probably be a worthwhile exercise. I will admit to being somewhat surprised that these two tracks were chosen, not because I have visited them but because I am aware they are both profitable.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Profit-making.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: However, I cannot second guess what was done so it is really important that robust submissions are made regarding both tracks. I have no doubt but that the ability to do that is within the gift of the people who are interested so I will leave it at that. I do not think it would be appropriate for me to say anything more but I am listening.

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School Enrolments

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. Regarding the closure of the greyhound track in Youghal, I think Youghal is being sacrificed on the altar of expediency. It is a profit centre that is washing its face. The terms of reference set out with regard to the Indecon report seem to have worked unfairly against centres like Youghal. There will be a good fight by the people of Youghal regarding the proposal to close this track.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the lack of school places in east Cork. The Minister for Education and Skills will be aware of the proposal regarding Carrigtwohill community college. The people of Carrigtwohill are now being told that it could be 2023 by the time the school opens there and that a process is being gone through with Cork County Council. We have had some engagement with the education and training board. As late as last Friday, we were told that a certain number of places for the Carrigtwohill area for the 2020 intake up to 2023 will be provided. Notwithstanding that, I wish to put to the Minister the fact that we are receiving many emails and phone calls from parents who find themselves falling foul of the enrolment policy as instigated by the community college in Carrigtwohill through no fault of their own. They are bereft at the fact that notwithstanding the proposal to put in place new classes for September 2020, there is no guarantee that a certain number of those parents will have places for their sons and daughters for September 2020 and onwards. It applies not only in Carrigtwohill but in Midleton.

I know the Minister is a person of deep empathy who would be very mindful and conscious of the needs of families and will appreciate that at this juncture, there is no guarantee of places for those students in Carrigtwohill, which causes a massive amount of stress for those families. I wish to bear witness for those families because they are being told that by dint of the enrolment policy, particularly where there are two siblings, one girl and one boy, if the girl has received a place in another all-girl school, the boy who may wish to enrol in Carrigtwohill community college is not guaranteed a place. This is a function of the enrolment policy. I have been told by the education and training board that this position is entirely legal. I understand that to a certain extent but in an era where equality matters, it must be the case that the Government does everything it can to ensure that families are not divided in towns like Carrigtwohill by dint of an enrolment policy where there is no guarantee of a place notwithstanding the efforts of the education and training board to provide extra classrooms and the fact that the education and training board is engaging with the Department of Education and Skills as of 18 November regarding future provision of places. We must still ensure that no young student is without a school place so I ask the Minister to do his level best on this.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter because it gives me the opportunity to set out to the House the position regarding second level places in Carrigtwohill and the wider east Cork area. This is a matter that the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, has raised with me on a number of occasions. It is an issue that Deputy Sherlock and his colleague from east Cork, Deputy O’Keeffe, continue to keep on the radar. I realise and understand the importance of this issue.

Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date information on significant new residential development in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure

planning is keeping pace with demographic changes. For school planning purposes, Carrigtwohill is located in the Midleton-Carrigtwohill school planning area. Where demographic data indicates that additional provision is needed, as the Deputy is no doubt aware, the delivery of such additional provision can be provided through utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools, extending the capacity of a school or schools, or the provision of a new school or schools.

As the Deputy will be aware, in April 2018 the Government announced plans for the establishment of 42 new schools over the next four years, 2019 to 2022, including three new primary schools and one new post-primary school in County Cork. While the announcement did not include a new school for the Midleton-Carrigtwohill school planning area, or the wider east Cork area, the requirement for new schools is kept under ongoing review and, in particular, has regard for the increased roll-out of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

The following new schools were established in recent years to serve the Midleton-Carrigtwohill school planning area. Carrigtwohill community college, a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school was established in temporary accommodation in 2016. Scoil Chlíodhna community national school, a new 16-classroom primary school, was established in temporary accommodation in 2015. A campus development in Carrigtwohill, when complete, will accommodate three new schools: Carrigtwohill community college, with 1,000 pupils plus a three-classroom special education needs base; Scoil Chlíodhna, with 24 classrooms plus a three-classroom special education needs base; and Scoil Mhuire primary school, with 24 classrooms plus a three-classroom special education needs base with a total population of approximately 2,200 pupils. The site is over 10 ha in size which includes a road network. This will be the single biggest and most expensive schools campus ever built by the Department.

The building project for the Carrigtwohill campus is being delivered under the Department's design and build programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external project management team to progress the project through the stages of architectural planning, tendering and construction.

Carrigtwohill community college is currently in interim accommodation and a planning application for the permanent accommodation campus was lodged in May 2019. A request for further information was received in August 2019. The Department's project management team is actively working on this request for further information. It is expected that a response to the local authority's request for further information will be submitted shortly.

In February 2019, the school was approved for rental of additional temporary accommodation of a 100 sq. m science lab and three mainstream classrooms to cater for additional enrolments. All of that accommodation has now been installed.

Planning has also been secured for an additional two classrooms to facilitate enrolments for the 2020-21 academic year and these will be installed during the summer holiday in 2020.

Representatives of Cork Education and Training Board, ETB, which is patron of Carrigtwohill community school, recently met officials from my Department regarding the provision of further additional accommodation. The ETB and the Department will continue to engage regarding the provision of this further accommodation. I understand that officials of Cork ETB met parents on 21 November 2019 to update them on the accommodation position for the school and I understand that a further meeting is due to take place in December 2019.

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Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank the Minister for his reply. Notwithstanding the facts about the additional two classrooms and ongoing engagement between his officials and the ETB that the Minister has laid before the House, there remains the problem that, even when that capacity is achieved, there will still be unmet demand from parents and students in the east Cork area.

It should be taken into account that 2020 is the timeline for the delivery of the school campus. I should respectfully correct the Minister and say that this has been on the agenda since 2012. Even when that temporary infrastructure is built and the demand for places is met through the new campus, parents will still not know where their children will be going to school and that might be the case into May of next year. We cannot countenance a situation where we have uncertainty that is causing major stress and strain for parents. Parents would be reassured if that could be looked at. There is no guarantee from the ETB that demand can be met at present. That is what the ETB is telling us.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I understand the frustration and anxiety. Frustration builds if proper information is not given and communication channels are not kept open. That is why it is so important that Cork ETB and the officials in Tullamore continue to liaise with one another and continue to ensure that relevant information and updates are put out there. I am confident that is already happening.

I am also confident that this major project is being treated with seriousness. There are some important areas to address and examinations that need to be done before moving onto the next stages, including the procurement of additional topographical surveys and further liaison with Cork County Council to firm up the extent of revisions to the public road areas once the topographical surveys are complete. These surveys have been commissioned and were due to take place on 29 November. Project managers have liaised with the electrical department of Cork County Council and also continue to liaise with Cork County Council on flood alleviation works. It is a big project.

The Deputy expressed concerns about September 2020. If there is outstanding demand for school places in September 2020, we have vigilant officials who will deal with that. They will stay in touch with the different people and bodies, including principals or, in this case, the ETB. It is really important that we continue that conversation.

We are now in December 2019 so we have time to deal with the outstanding issues and I assure the Deputy that we will continue to be vigilant in that regard.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. On the issue raised by Deputy Sherlock, Deputies from all across the country, including myself, are raising the issue of the lack of places at second level, week in and week out, in this Chamber. The Minister needs to take that matter very seriously. Deputies, including myself, have raised such concerns and it is a worrying situation in all parts of the country. That is a considerable challenge for the Department of Education and Skills.

As the Minister is aware, there is currently a campaign under way calling on him to reduce class sizes for delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, band 1 schools. The campaigners argue that it is unfair and that the smaller class sizes achieved under the confidence

and supply agreement in recent budgets have not seen corresponding reductions in class sizes for DEIS band 1 schools and this needs to be rectified. I agree with those campaigners. When the pupil-teacher ratio reduction was negotiated, it was assumed that it would be passed on correspondingly to DEIS band 1 schools but it was not and we have not seen those reductions.

I am proud that the DEIS scheme was established by Fianna Fáil to provide the supports needed to ensure that every child can reach his or her potential. The DEIS scheme works and it should be protected and enhanced so that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can have a greater opportunity to reach their full potential. The DEIS scheme appears to be working.

The Minister will know that the evaluation of DEIS schools at the post-primary level shows that the achievement and attainment gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools continue to narrow in the performance of students in the junior certificate and in retention rates. There has been a rise in the percentage of students in DEIS schools taking English and mathematics at higher level. The evidence is that the scheme is working and results and school completion rates are going up in key areas. The issue is the rate at which it is improving. It is not improving at a rate that would allow pupils to compete at the same level in the very near future. While I accept that the additional supports that have been provided will take time to appear in data, there is a need to continue increasing support to speed up this process.

There is already a recognition in DEIS band 1 schools that a reduced class size is of significant value and smaller class sizes are already included in the original specification. However, the pace at which progress is taking place needs to be accelerated. As the pupil-teacher ratio has been lowered considerably in the general national school system, the competitive boost given to DEIS band 1 schools is being eroded. This could result in the comparative progress which has been made in this area also eroding. Is the Minister considering the proposals raised previously in this House and that are currently being raised by the INTO in particular? I thank the INTO and all the teachers involved in the INTO campaign. It is refreshing that, as they have always done, teachers took time out of their own day to try to advocate for their students. I look forward to hearing the response from the Minister.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue of delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS. It is the main policy initiative of the Department of Education and Skills to address educational disadvantage at school level.

The DEIS plan is based on the findings of an extensive review of the DEIS programme, which involved consultations with all relevant stakeholders. It sets out the vision for future interventions in the critical area of educational disadvantage policy and builds on what has already been achieved by schools that have benefited from the additional supports available under the initial DEIS programme introduced in 2005.

This year, my Department will spend in the region of €125 million on the DEIS programme providing for smaller class sizes in urban band 1 schools as well as other supports, including DEIS grants, enhanced book grants, home school community liaison co-ordinators, curriculum supports, priority access to continuing professional development and the school excellence fund for DEIS. Evidence from the various evaluations of the DEIS programme demonstrates that it is having a positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage and is succeeding in improving educational outcomes.

Within the DEIS programme itself, in the 2019-2020 school year there are 891 schools

serving in excess of 185,000 pupils. This represents approximately 20% of the overall school population, with 231 of the total number of schools being DEIS band 1 schools and availing of smaller class size.

The DEIS programme allows for a reduced class size in urban band 1 primary schools, with the application of a preferential staffing schedule to these schools of 20:1 at junior classes and 24:1 at senior classes to support those students at the highest risk of educational disadvantage.

The DEIS plan acknowledges that the allocation of teaching resources to DEIS primary schools with the highest concentrations of children at risk of educational disadvantage has served to improve learning outcomes and commits to the evaluation of the level of teaching resources for schools participating in DEIS to be undertaken to inform future policy in this area, and work has been undertaken in this regard.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Minister for his response. The changes required are comparatively small compared to the changes that would be required across the entire education system. Fianna Fáil wants to see lower class sizes. That has been our stated objective for a number of years and we succeeded partially with the lowest class sizes on record as part of the confidence and supply agreement. That work has to continue in the general national school system but it also must be extended to DEIS. We will be strongly advocating that that would happen and that the Minister would make arrangements for it to happen.

The INTO has reported that many DEIS schools are facing growing mental health and literacy challenges. There is also the challenge in some parts of the country of organised crime affecting children in schools, sometimes in DEIS schools but at other times, as the Minister is aware, in non-DEIS schools also where criminal activity is influencing the way children behave and how they develop later in life. The extra supports DEIS band 1 offers are one way of helping to tackle criminality spreading to very young groups. People may say that is an exaggeration but I am speaking from the experience of teachers in junior primary schools. What is going on is frightening. The Minister's officials graciously met a delegation from a particular school affected by this which is looking to get DEIS band 1 status. It sees the lower pupil-teacher ratio in DEIS band 1 as potentially being of significant help in dealing with challenges it faces due to criminality in its area. That pupil-teacher ratio must be reduced further.

I accept that consideration is taking place in the context of the broader DEIS review. The review has been ongoing since last year and will provide important details on progress. It is my understanding that all schools are considered in the context of the review of DEIS. Can the Minister confirm that the pupil-teacher ratio for DEIS band 1 is being considered and that a reduction in that is being considered by the group? If not, will the Minister commit to a short review to be published at the same time or soon after the DEIS review and the working group review also?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Everything is on the table in terms of class size. That is the reason the working group was set up. It includes representatives from the social inclusion unit, the special education unit, the teacher allocation unit, the statistics unit, education stakeholders such as the INTO, the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the Catholic Primary School Management Association. Education and Training Boards Ireland and An Foras Pátrúnachta were also represented on the working group, as was the Education Research Group, so it is a fairly extensive group. It has done a lot of work. That work is almost complete. We will be producing that report in a few weeks' time. All aspects of class size will be examined.

There is a twin-track approach. While that is going on we are reviewing the DEIS scheme. We are at a significant stage now in respect of that. I am aware it is an area of interest to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in terms of the value of DEIS, its impact and the history of DEIS. It was introduced in 2005, very much on a geographical basis due to the socioeconomic indicators, but life has got much more complex. The Deputy raised issues to do with crime and other pressures on the system. We have to be very targeted in respect of the support.

Regarding the working group, that work is almost complete. We will be following through on that in a few weeks' time. Significant progress has been made in respect of the review of DEIS as a collective. It is more nuanced and complex but we have to ensure that it is targeted. There is a massive amount of work involved in that. That is not to take from anything we have already but to build upon the momentum because there have been massive gains in respect of tackling educational disadvantage through DEIS supports.

Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019: Order for Report Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I move: "That Report Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019: Report and Final Stages

Bill received for final consideration.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As there are no amendments we will proceed to Fifth Stage.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Deputy Michael McGrath: We welcome the passage of this legislation. The Credit Union Restructuring Board, ReBo, played an important role in the restructuring of the credit union movement. It is fair to say that only a fraction of the overall fund that was put in place has had to be used. Are all the arrangements now in place to give effect to the measures in this Bill? I assume that ReBo is essentially stood down at this stage. I presume the transfer of the remaining fund into the central fund provided for in the Bill will now happen immediately.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on Fifth Stage. Sinn Féin will support this legislation. The Bill will wind down the Credit Union Restructuring Board, also known as ReBo. When the board was established many feared that the credit unions would be the next to collapse on foot of the banking crisis. While many difficult years followed for the credit union movement, credit unions got through that difficult period less damaged than many people expected at the time. By utilising their own resources and harnessing the voluntary commitment and social ethos of their members, they came out the other end.

I am proud to be a member of a credit union since I was a child. The first voluntary work I did was in the credit union movement. It is a fantastic organisation across the State. As Members are well aware, it allowed ordinary people to access funding to pay for Holy Communions, holidays, school books and so on.

While at the time the Government put the banks first, the credit union movement had to rely on its own members. Credit unions showed their resilience with only €20 million of the ReBo fund being utilised. The restructuring board enabled nearly 100 restructuring projects in more than 150 credit unions, all on a voluntary basis. This is testament to the efforts of the credit union movement, which has secured its sustainability into the future. This is only a good thing for the many communities who rely and can depend on their credit unions.

While ReBo is no longer required and has been dissolved it is essential that the future sustainability of the credit union movement is supported by the Central Bank. Sinn Féin has for a long time called for reform of the lending limit rules that are applied to credit unions. Therefore, recent changes made by the Central Bank are welcome. We encourage further changes to allow credit unions to become bigger players in many sectors, including the housing market. Given the current housing crisis and difficulties of so many mortgage holders with the banks, the credit union movement is in a unique place to offer sustainable solutions for mortgage holders and those looking for a home. Sinn Féin also understands the challenges the credit union movement will face in competing with retail banks as they seek to attract younger members. It is crucial that credit unions are supported as the financial landscape continues to change. As I said earlier, credit unions have served communities well for decades. They are not like other financial institutions. Their social ethos and voluntary ethic provide services to communities and families that can be trusted. As the Bill winds down the restructuring board, I commend the credit union movement on its perseverance.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank all Deputies and members of the Opposition for their support of the Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019. I wish to reinforce some of the comments made by Deputies.

The Credit Union Restructuring Board, ReBo, which was established under Part 3 of the Credit Union and Co-operation with Overseas Regulators Act 2012, has completed the performance of its functions and has been operationally wound down since 31 July 2017. I trust that answers Deputy McGrath's comment. The contracts of all ReBo employees expired on or before 31 July 2017 and board members have also resigned from that date. I wish to put on record that my brother served as a member of the board. Legislation is required to dissolve the legal entity and to effect the transfer of all assets and liabilities of ReBo to the Minister for Finance. A caretaker board consisting of two Department officials and the Central Bank nominee will remain in place until dissolution is effected.

In its short lifetime, ReBo has facilitated 82 restructuring projects involving 156 credit unions with assets totalling approximately €6 billion across 24 counties. The Government provided €250 million in the credit union fund specifically for credit union restructuring, with only approximately €11.6 million of this fund used. The lower than anticipated spend on restructuring is essentially due to the fact that the majority of credit unions participating in restructuring financed the projects from within their own resources. Moreover, in certain cases where there was a shortfall financial assistance was provided by the Irish League of Credit Unions using its savings protection scheme.

The Act provides that when the Minister for Finance is satisfied that ReBo has completed the performance of its functions under Part 3, he may by order dissolve ReBo. Prior to dissolving ReBo, section 43(2) requires that the Minister conduct a review of the operation of Part 3 to determine whether ReBo has, in the Minister's opinion, completed the performance of its functions. In accordance with section 43(2), a final review of the operation of Part 3 was carried out in June 2017. Following an in-depth examination by Department officials the review concluded that ReBo had completed the performance of its functions with positive results. On foot of this review, the Minister for Finance decided to proceed with the orderly wind-down of ReBo. Advice from the Office of the Attorney General stated that while the Act provides for the dissolution of ReBo by ministerial order, it does not provide for specified sections of Part 3 to remain in full force and effect notwithstanding the dissolution of ReBo. As a result, for the relevant provisions to continue in full force and effect post-dissolution, the Office of the Attorney General has advised that the safest approach to adopt is to proceed by way of amendment to the Act. Therefore, it was required to bring this Bill forward to formally dissolve ReBo. I thank the Deputies for their co-operation and the co-operation of all parties in the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Inadvertently, I did not give Deputy Lawless an opportunity to speak. He will make a short contribution.

Deputy James Lawless: I apologise for coming in somewhat out of sequence. I appreciate the opportunity. I welcome that the Bill is passing Final Stage. It was a significant tranche of work, as has been mentioned by Deputies who have spoken.

I saw this up close in my constituency of Kildare North, where we had significant restructuring. What was Naas Credit Union expanded into Maynooth at the time of the trouble with Newbridge Credit Union. Then the Croí Laighean Credit Union incorporated much of north-west Kildare. There was fear, uncertainty and doubt among the members of those credit unions and the general public at the time. I imagine that was mirrored in many other parts of the country. However, there is a happy ending. It has got to a stage where those credit unions are stronger, better resourced, better funded and on a stronger footing with the fitness and probity and compliance regulations now in place. The board members were typically people of good character and ethos and the work was voluntary in nature. The extra scrutiny and vigilance now in force benefits everyone. It is a credit to the boards and to people like William O'Donovan and Peter Fullam in Naas Credit Union as the credit union expansion across the county was met with some trepidation. However, it was the right thing to do. I credit the board and all involved. The fact that it is now at the stage where its work is done and it can be stood down is a success in itself.

Question put and agreed to.

Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2019: Order for Report Stage

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I move: "That Report Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2019: Report and Final Stages

Deputy Denis Naughten: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, after line 28, to insert the following:

“(b) Schedule 3 to the Principal Act, shall not apply to policies that fail to provide cover for day case and inpatient care in model 2 hospitals.”.

The amendment arose out of discussions on Committee Stage. This is an issue regarding model 2 hospitals, including those in Roscommon, Nenagh, Ennis and Bantry. Following the reconfiguration of acute services in the country, these hospitals are supposed to be the work-horse of the health system. They are supposed to deal with routine surgeries, day surgeries, day cases and inpatients that had traditionally gone to model 3 and model 4 hospitals. They do not deal with urgent or emergency cases but the conditions treated can become chronic conditions if left over time. The work includes colonoscopy and urology appointments, computed tomography scans, X-rays, magnetic resonance imaging scans and so forth.

All these hospitals have urgent care centres and patients stay over in hospital as a result. These patients do not end up in our accident and emergency departments, many of which, sadly, are chaotic at the moment. Two hospitals in particular hit the headlines on a regular basis, namely, University Hospital Galway and University Hospital Limerick. Funnily enough, those two hospitals are serviced by the hospitals in Roscommon, Nenagh and Ennis.

The difficulty arises because we have one cowboy insurer in the country. It has decided under one of its policies that it will not cover patients with health insurance who are going into model 2 hospitals. This issue needs to be nipped in the bud now.

We took decisions in the House to ensure everyone has equality of treatment in terms of access to health insurance. I was one of the Members who brought through the legislation at the time. The intention was to provide everyone with equal access to private health insurance if they could afford to pay for it. Whether a policyholder was 18 or 80 years of age, he or she would pay the same as others for the same policy. Now, we have one insurer that has decided to undermine the health structure in this country, even though the health structure is about encouraging as much work as possible in the local hospitals.

I see the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, in the House. The hospital in Monaghan is another one affected. This insurer has decided that people cannot go to the hospitals in Monaghan, Roscommon, Ennis, Nenagh or Bantry. Yet in these hospitals, patients do not have to wait for months to get a colonoscopy or access to X-rays or CAT scans; they can have the service within a few hours. If this particular organisation gets away with this, I have no doubt others will follow. I want the Minister to amend the minimum benefit regulations here and ensure that all the insurance companies provide cover in every one of the model 2 hospitals in this country. That is in the interests of putting work through those smaller hospitals. It is in the interests of taking pressure off the waiting lists in the larger model 3 hospitals, such as Portlinculla, Sligo and Castlebar, and the model 4 hospitals, such as Galway University Hospital, where people have been waiting for years to get access to care.

Thankfully, smaller hospitals, such as Roscommon, are dealing with the backlog of waiting lists. We are trying to move more work from the bigger hospitals to the smaller hospitals. This is an issue I raised with the Minister recently regarding the charges for accessing the urgent

care centres, which I firmly believe should be less than for people attending an accident and emergency department. If our policy is to encourage people to attend the smaller hospitals with less complex needs, then we should clearly define that in both the policy and the charges, and similarly in respect of health insurance. We are saying that we will encourage people to go into Galway University Hospital, Portiuncula Hospital and Castlebar and Sligo hospitals, where patients are lying on trolleys at present. While we are saying that we will incentivise those hospitals to take a private patient instead of taking someone off a trolley, we are not prepared to ensure that such private patients can access what probably would be better care in the model 2 hospitals, such as Roscommon and Nenagh, where there is less pressure in emergency departments and admissions. We are saying “No” and that this insurer can have a blank cheque in this regard. This cannot be allowed to happen.

I came across a constituent who, unfortunately, had a policy with this company. The constituent went for an inpatient procedure in the local hospital, Roscommon hospital, only to find out that the insurer will not cover that person. I found out that my own policy was the same and that I was not covered. Unfortunately, I was with the same insurer, as are many other people, because it has a strong standing in other areas in Ireland and has now got involved in the health insurance area. It should not be allowed.

I ask the Minister to give me a commitment today that an amendment will be brought forward to the minimum benefit regulations, rather than dividing the House on this particular issue.

Deputy James Lawless: Deputy Naughten makes a good point.

Prevention is the best cure. The elective procedures of the type Deputy Naughten mentioned and the prolificacy of urgent care centres for such admissions, which are springing up nationwide, is an important part of the health service.

The point on model 2 hospitals is well made, particularly in regard to the minimum benefit regulations. The Deputy has talked about community rating, which is the pillar underpinning the health insurance system we have had for decades. It is important that it is protected. The point has been made that whether one is eight or 88, one pays a common price regardless of health status, age or other factors that may be priced into a risk market where that would be brought to bear in a competitive pricing model. We do not have a competitive pricing model for reasons of public policy. For that reason, we cannot discriminate against those insurers that apply the principle properly, equally and fairly across the country and across all benefits.

The minimum benefit regulations were introduced at a time of the minimum benefits legislation. Health insurance policies initially were extremely comprehensive and covered almost every ailment under the sun. With the advent of competition in part and of risk pricing and of the greater risk profile, it was becoming far more expensive and health insurers were put to the pin of their collars to fund those. Even with community rating, they could not afford to keep paying for all benefits all the time and they began to scale back the plans. It was in response to that scale-back, in which benefits such as outpatient cover were removed from health insurance plans, that the minimum benefit regulations were introduced to provide that there is a certain bar below which an insurer cannot drop in terms of provision of cover. If one is an insurer providing a health insurance plan, one must have a certain minimum level of cover. There are certain anomalies in that cover but at the same time, the principle is good. The principle of community rating is good. Deputy Naughten’s point is well made. That applies to the universality of cover geographically as much as it applies to the benefits themselves and to the procedures covered.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Naughten for bringing forward this amendment. I will not be able to support it at this Stage but I will explain what action I intend to take following on from his request.

First, it is Government policy and the policy of the Oireachtas to drive more patient traffic through the smaller hospitals. It makes sense to fully utilise our hospitals. I visited Roscommon hospital with Deputy Naughten, where we worked together to make that hospital busier in recent years and that is and must be the direction of travel.

While it is fair to say that there are significant capacity pressures in the Irish public health service, it is not entirely fair when others suggest that there is no capacity because there is underutilised capacity in some of our smaller hospitals. My colleague and friend, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, brought me to Monaghan Hospital, where there is a capacity to do more. We are using the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, as a vehicle to drive more procedures through the smaller hospitals, such as, for example, the cataract theatre in Nenagh. The NTPF should no longer be merely a vehicle for outsourcing to private hospitals but we should be using it as an access tool to make our smaller hospitals busier. That is Government policy.

Second, Deputy Naughten made a fair and timely point on urgent care centres and minor injury clinics. The Deputy suggests the fee for them should be lower than the fee for attending an emergency department. I agree with the Deputy. I was intending to make this announcement tomorrow but I will make it this evening. I will be signing a statutory instrument within the next week to reduce the fee to attend a minor injuries unit from €100 to €75, making it a little more costly than going to the GP if one does not have a medical card but lower than going to the emergency department, ED. I hope that will particularly help during the winter pressure period. I very much accept the Deputy's counsel in that regard. That is probably the quickest resolution the Deputy has ever got to an issue.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Naughten also raised the matter he has just spoken about at length on Committee Stage, when my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, took the debate on my behalf. My officials were in a degree of provisional contact with Deputy Naughten in this regard. My officials have also consulted with colleagues in the Health Insurance Authority and with the Department's internal legal advisers.

I very much understand and accept the Deputy's motivation. It does not seem to make sense to the Deputy, to me or to this House that where the fee for providing the procedure would be the same in one hospital versus another, why a specific public hospital would be excluded, particularly a level 2 hospital. Indeed, on Committee Stage Deputy Naughten stated:

insurance companies should not refuse cover in small hospitals such as those in Ennis, Roscommon, Mallow or Bantry. People should automatically get cover in these hospitals.

For the record of the House, I need to clarify today that many insurance companies provide cover in these type of hospitals. The Deputy acknowledged that as well. Insurers operating in the Irish market are required to provide services according to the Health Insurance Act 1994 (Minimum Benefit) Regulations 1996. All of the plans available on the Irish market have been approved by the Health Insurance Authority, which is, as the House will be aware, the statutory regulator of the private health insurance market.

Pursuant to Article 9 in Part VI of the 1996 regulations, insurers may exclude specified services and specified providers in their policy. Therefore, it is the law of the land, through those regulations, that an insurance company can exclude a certain service or a certain provider. The Deputy is asking me tonight if I would review those regulations in respect of the specified provider and should that be looked at in the context of level 2 hospitals.

The information relating to the services covered by any policy is contained in the policy document provided to the consumer when purchasing such a policy. Insurers can, of course, have many reasons that they do not cover certain services or providers. One of them can be that not all hospitals can or should provide the full range of health services available in the State. I take it that is not the point Deputy Naughten is making.

Notwithstanding the exclusion clause allowed under the minimum benefit regulations, there are policies available on the market that explicitly provide coverage in many model 2 hospitals across the country. To be clear, it is the view of my Department and me that there is no need to legislate for insurers to cover model 2 hospitals because some insurers already provide this coverage. Consumers obviously have a choice when they go to purchase an insurance policy to purchase one that meets their healthcare needs. The current insurance regime allows insurers to provide policies at a range of prices and different rates as well.

However, in response to Deputy Naughten's request, I will ask my Department, in working with the Health Insurance Authority, to review those regulations, specifically, the exclusion clause relating to service providers, and I will report back to this House on that matter.

I appreciate the fact that Deputy Naughten stated that he did not wish to divide the House on this. Were I to accept this amendment, my fear, based on legal advice, is that we could accidentally and entirely unintentionally interfere with the risk equalisation scheme. I acknowledge that is not Deputy Naughten's intention. The amendment would interfere with the scheme and policies that do not include this type of cover as envisaged by the amendment would have to be excluded from calculations and projections that the Health Insurance Authority, HIA, carries out, therefore invalidating the other recommendations the Bill makes. I ask the Deputy to consider not pressing his amendment on Report Stage. I will work with my Department and the Health Insurance Authority to undertake that review of the regulations, specifically insofar as it pertains to the idea of excluding specific public service providers and I will report back to the House.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister has me put on the back foot in that he has accepted the suggestion I put to him recently on the fees for minor injury units and urgent care centres. I welcome that most positive development, which shows the direction we should be taking in terms of accessing healthcare. I was in this House when the whole issue of community rating was crumbling around us and we were obliged to bring forward legislation to protect that principle. I never thought we would be in a situation where community rating would not apply to people from Roscommon, Tipperary, west Cork, Monaghan or Clare because one insurer, Irish Life, has decided it does not want to cover the level 2 hospitals. It is wrong that this is allowed. There is absolutely no justification for it. Now that the Minister has made the decision on the injury units, which I welcome, we are saying that public policy is to encourage people to attend the injury units. However, we also are telling those who have private health insurance with this insurer that we do not want them to go to the urgent care centre. If they go to such centres and the doctors want to keep them overnight, their policy will not cover that. It is wrong. It is bizarre that an insurer like Irish Life would sell policies to people living in County Roscommon

while not covering their own local hospital. I was caught the same as everyone else. A stop needs to be put to this and it must be nipped in the bud straight away. The regulations need to be changed.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I support Deputy Naughten. I also am concerned that a particular insurance company would sell these policies. People are presenting at a hospital and they are not being covered. We have the same situation in South Tipperary General Hospital as that in Roscommon. It may be unintended but there are all kinds of issues around insurance. Surveys have shown that only 22% of people ever change their insurance provider and only 20% of people with health insurance said that they regularly shop around. There is a lucrative market out there. It should be a case of buyer beware but they are not getting fair play and they are not getting proper upfront information. It is a worse situation when they are on a policy, end up in hospital and find they have no cover. Something needs to be done to change that because it is not fair on people. They are unsuspecting. They think they have a policy and they trust the insurer but they cannot trust them.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Naughten for the constructive way in which he has engaged on this matter. We do listen in this House when good suggestions come forward such as that on the minor injury units. We will have that statutory instrument formalised in the coming days. It is currently with the drafters. I hope to be in a position to sign it by next week. On the reviewing of the regulations, I have already made my position clear. We will take on board the suggestion the Deputy is making on the current level 2 hospitals that are excluded. We will review the regulations in conjunction with the HIA and will revert to the House.

Deputy Denis Naughten: In light of the Minister's response and in light of his response on the minor injuries units, I will accept his proposal. I do not know who will be sitting in the Minister's seat this time next year.

Deputy Simon Harris: It might be Deputy Naughten.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I do not know who will be sitting in my seat this time next year. If the people of Roscommon-Galway decide to send me back in here, I will be putting this amendment down again if the issue is not addressed. I will not be as generous on that occasion. While things in this House change and Ministers and Deputies change, if I am lucky enough to be here this time next year, I will be putting this forward unless the change is brought about. It is wrong and unfair. It is undermining the principle of community rating and stated health policy, which is about bringing more work into the local hospitals and ensuring that as many patients as possible use those injury units, rather than ending up in accident and emergency departments for hours and hours.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Bill received for final consideration and passed.

OECD Report on SME and Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland: Statements

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Before I start, it would be useful to set the scene by explaining the rationale behind the OECD re-

view and the Government's focus on improving SME productivity in our whole-of-government plan, Future Jobs Ireland. As we know, the financial crisis tested our people and businesses, sometimes to the limit of their endurance. However, our country has made great strides since the dark days of the recession. Through resilience, talent and determination, we overcame enormous challenges. Unemployment has fallen from 16% to 4.8% and there are more people working in Ireland today than ever before. Exports by Enterprise Ireland companies increased by 6% last year to €23.8 billion. According to the IMD business school, we are the seventh most competitive economy in the world and the second most competitive in the euro area. Today, the UN has ranked us the third best country in the world for quality of life.

Nevertheless, with global challenges facing us, there is no room for complacency. Every generation needs to shake up its enterprise and jobs model, otherwise it falls backwards. Through Future Jobs Ireland, the Government wants to nurture entrepreneurship and support our businesses and workers to prepare now for tomorrow's world. Some 70% of our workers are employed by an SME, which highlights the crucial importance of Ireland's indigenous businesses to stability and growth in every region. That is why I commissioned the OECD to undertake a detailed review into Ireland's SME and entrepreneurship policies in March 2018. That review, which I published on 31 October last, is about looking to the future from a position of strength and deciding what we can do better. The OECD review has provided a very useful contribution to the policy direction of my Department in the vital areas of SMEs and entrepreneurship. We have always supported Irish businesses and we have excellent agencies like Enterprise Ireland and the local enterprise offices, which work hand in glove with thousands of indigenous small firms to help them scale and grow.

7 o'clock

Our strengths include the whole-of-government approach we take to SME policy and how actively we involve stakeholders in decision-making. We now need to bring all of those supports, policies and programmes together and drive forward one comprehensive unified framework for Irish businesses.

The OECD's recommendations will not sit on a shelf. Instead they will form the building blocks of an ambitious new national SME and entrepreneurship strategy, which I intend to bring forward in the coming months. That strategy will set out key targets and performance indicators across a range of areas such as targeting a 50% increase in the number of SMEs exporting, achieving a step-up in financial skills and knowledge among our SMEs, ramping up supports so that Irish businesses can embrace the digital revolution, simplifying the process for accessing the R&D tax credit so that more SMEs can benefit, and supporting our small firms in the transition to a low-carbon economy. It goes without saying that SMEs are fundamental to regional development. That is why we will also broaden the remit of the local enterprise offices, LEOs, to ensure that no ambitious Irish companies are left behind because they find themselves falling between their LEO and Enterprise Ireland. It is also why I launched nine new regional enterprise plans earlier this year and it is why I have announced €60 million so far under the regional enterprise development fund to foster a collaborative approach in each region. Indeed, the OECD has specifically identified the example of the go-cluster initiative of the German Federal Government which focuses on the development of local clusters. The Boyne Valley Food Hub, which received support through the regional enterprise development fund last year, is a great example of the strong local networks that we want to develop. That kind of regional dimension is vital to our enhancing the capability of SMEs across Ireland.

I hope to support more projects like that under the next round of the fund which I hope to announce in the coming weeks. Typically in Ireland our foreign-owned firms are highly productive while our indigenous SMEs lag behind. The Government wants to close that gap and strike a better balance. I absolutely value the crucial role that foreign direct investment, FDI, plays in Ireland's economic success and how indigenous companies can leverage that investment. For every ten jobs that are created in FDI firms, there are eight spin-off jobs in other companies here. For that reason, the question should never be about FDI or indigenous, but rather how we can maximise the benefits for both. There are many great examples of partnerships between domestic companies and foreign multinationals to everybody's benefit. This is something I want to see more of into the future and it is why I have made SME involvement a prerequisite when applying for the Government's €500 million disruptive technologies innovation fund. I am acutely aware that our indigenous Irish companies are the engine of our economy and I want to ensure we are doing everything in our power to support them. In the past, smaller firms have sometimes felt overlooked by governments and I want to change that narrative. Abraham Lincoln said "the most reliable way to predict the future is to create it". Our new SME and entrepreneurship strategy will focus on creating the future we want by ensuring that Irish SMEs are given the red carpet treatment they deserve.

Again I thank the Business Committee for the opportunity to speak on the OECD review and roadmap. They are excellent documents which include best practice examples from countries facing similar challenges to Ireland's, whether Malaysia's masterplan for SMEs and entrepreneurship or Germany's go-cluster initiative, which increases collaboration between mittelstand companies and research institutions. I look forward to hearing the views of all Deputies on what they feel is working well and what we can do better as my Department and the Government works to develop a robust and enduring framework for Irish SMEs.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to contribute and thank my colleague, Deputy Michael Moynihan, who pushed it at the Business Committee to ensure the OECD report would be debated here. I welcome the Minister's statement that she is going to start listening to SMEs. She acknowledged that she felt they have not been listened to and said she will extend the red carpet to them. It is worthy that after nine years the Government realises how important this sector is to the economy. Over 250,000 SMEs in the country account for 99% of all business enterprises in Ireland, employing in excess of 1 million people. They are the backbone of this economy but unfortunately over recent years they have not felt that their concerns have been listened to or addressed.

This report confirms that Ireland is less innovative, productive and export-oriented than foreign-owned counterparts. Alarminglly the OECD states that Ireland lacks a unified SME and entrepreneur policy document, and that despite there being 1 million employed by SMEs we do not have a business strategy at Government level. Without that strategy it is hardly surprising that Ireland has fallen to its lowest ranking, 24th of 190 economies in a 12-year history of the World Bank's rating for ease of doing business. Among our competitor countries the UK ranked eighth, Denmark fourth and Sweden tenth. Ireland lags behind top performing economies: in enforcing contracts it is 91st; registering property, 60th; and getting credit, 48th. One of the biggest challenges facing not just SMEs but businesses and the community sector are the spiralling insurance premia. My party leader raised this on Leaders Questions today. We have no concrete data collected on public liability insurance but the anecdotal evidence presented to me and my colleagues in all political parties is that premia are increasing by between 100% and 300%. In reply to a parliamentary question on the completion of the action plan the Min-

ister said that of the ten actions none has been completed. They are all “in progress”, “in train” and “yet to be completed”. That shows the *laissez faire* attitude of this Government to dealing with the high cost of insurance. In 2017, Ireland’s energy costs ranked among the top ten most expensive countries in the EU. Despite their quantitative dominance and employment creation record SMEs are struggling in many respects and delivering very poor productivity according to wide research.

This report is not reinventing the wheel. SMEs want to know when the key recommendations of this report will be implemented and whether they will be implemented in a timely manner. Critical to this is the first action, the need for a unified strategy across Departments. When can we expect that strategy to be published? I understood it was to be published before the end of this year. In her contribution the Minister said it would be published within months.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I did not say that. The Deputy was not listening.

Deputy Robert Troy: We can go back to the Official Report of the Dáil. The Minister said “months”. This Government may not have months to publish this. It is coming belatedly, after nine years in government and failure to produce a comprehensive strategy. Many pre-budget submissions by ISME and SFA have called for reform of our research and development regime. The OECD report points out that between 2011 and 2015 the research and development tax credit to large firms increased by 300% but only by 14% for SMEs. I hope that whoever is in government when the next budget is being prepared will make comprehensive changes to the research and development tax credit so that it is less cumbersome for SMEs to avail of it. The action taken to introduce a pre-approval procedure is very welcome and is something that will be of benefit to SMEs.

Skills shortages are identified in financial management, IT capabilities, marketing and professional development. I am sure the Minister has read the report prepared by Mr. Jim Power on behalf of ISME which deals with the issue of introducing QQI accredited courses for people working in the SME sector. In order to incentivise people to go down that route, we must introduce tax incentives or tax credits, similar to what is available to people in the agriculture sector when they complete a green certificate. We must ensure that people working in the SME sector have the required skill sets and the only way to do that is to provide courses for them to complete.

On the issue of the LEOs, the Minister spoke about what she is doing from a regional perspective but the OECD report is clear that the current LEO model is not fit for purpose. That is not to say that the LEOs do not do great work for many small businesses but as the OECD points out, many SMEs are falling between the two stools of the LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. It identifies a gap for established firms with between ten and 249 employees that are not export driven and that gap must be addressed by the Department. I hope the Minister gets an opportunity to correct the record of the House and clarifies exactly when she will publish her strategy.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I should state at the outset that I own a small business and have a good understanding of how small businesses operate in this country. I welcome the fact that the Minister will roll out the red carpet for SMEs. It is hard to believe that over 1 million people are employed in the SME sector in Ireland. We must see full tax equalisation for the self-employed, with PAYE credits. We must also ensure that our capital gains tax rate is competitive. Our employment and investment incentive scheme, EIIS, regime must be capable of competing with the UK equivalent. We need a State-backed enterprise bank for small businesses, many of

which are finding it very difficult to secure credit from high street banks. An enterprise stabilisation fund must be made available to the worst-affected and most exposed firms in the context of a hard Brexit. I know that a fund of €300 million is in place but just over 15% of SMEs have applied to it, which indicates that it is not working. More support must be provided to SMEs to enable them to benefit from that fund.

The biggest problem facing SMEs today is the cost of insurance. This was raised in the Dáil earlier today by my party leader, Deputy Micheál Martin, and it has been mentioned in this debate. I understand that the Perjury and Related Offences Bill 2018 has been through the Seanad and is due to be introduced in the Dáil. While that legislation is probably years too late, at least it is coming. The quicker that Bill is brought into this House, debated and passed, the better. Currently there is nothing to deter people from making false insurance claims. We all know that there are genuine claims being made but there are also a lot of fraudulent claims being processed. Claimants can just walk away and those paying insurance premiums have to bear the cost. It is time for the Government and this House to stand up for small business owners, community groups, hall owners and so on who are struggling to survive in rural Ireland. We must stand up for once and for all and do whatever we can as quickly as we can to ensure that this nonsense stops.

Deputy Imelda Munster: This OECD report outlines serious deficits in this Government's policies *vis-à-vis* the SME sector. It draws attention to the fact that our over-reliance on foreign direct investment, FDI, has led to disparities in regional development. Our tax system is also over-reliant on a small number of multinational corporations, with 45% of the total corporation tax take in 2018 coming from just ten companies. Foreign-owned multinationals paid 77% of the €10.4 billion corporation tax intake last year. This has left our economy heavily exposed to changes in global markets and in the international political climate.

SMEs are a critical pillar of the Irish economy. The OECD report points to a 2016 estimate of approximately 250,000 active enterprises in Ireland, virtually all of which are SMEs. These firms account for 56% of manufacturing employment and 74% of services employment in Ireland but currently both wages and productivity are lower for domestic SMEs. Clearly we need to redress the balance because the current set up is unsustainable.

A key issue that must be addressed is strengthening the LEOs. This was identified in the OECD report which said that LEOs have an important role to play but that we need to provide additional supports to them, including building local enterprise networks, particularly in remote regions. We must increase the scale and ambition of the LEOs and my colleague, Deputy Quinlivan, and I have devised a plan to do just that. We propose to establish a new Irish enterprise agency which would incorporate the existing LEOs, with a national headquarters, board and executive committee established. We propose to recruit 100 additional staff for the agency's head office which would co-ordinate activities across all 31 regional offices. This new organisation would provide the Government with advice and guidance on what SMEs, retailers and other enterprises need in order to grow their businesses. The agency would ensure that the uptake of State support and assistance is of an equal standard across the State because currently there are significant variations across LEOs. We also propose to introduce 100 mobile business advisors who would travel to businesses to provide on-site advice on business plans, grants, investment strategies and so on. The reality for many small business owners and entrepreneurs is that they cannot afford to take time off to visit LEOs so this would ensure access to services for all businesses.

The OECD report identified key areas that must be addressed including increasing productivity growth, the business start-up rate and business dynamism in the SME sector. It also makes reference to facilitating entrepreneurship among women, young people and migrants; scaling up microenterprises; generating more medium-sized firms; and increasing SME activity in foreign markets. The report identifies the need for a strengthening of SME internationalisation and this is clearly an urgent priority in the context of Brexit. Our direct SME export levels are very low by international standards, with only around 6% of Irish SMEs directly trading across borders. On top of this, a high share of SME exporters trade only with the British market. This is the most exposed sector in the State, namely small exporting businesses for which Britain is their main or only market. We must support these businesses to expand their markets beyond Britain.

The Government's current policy of offering loans to businesses has not been a success. We need to take the reality of SMEs into account when creating solutions for the challenges of Brexit. For many, taking on additional debt in a time of uncertainty is simply not feasible. Many SMEs have reflected this and this is also reflected in the low uptake of loans. We also need to incentivise start-ups. The Minister needs to change her priorities. Instead of lobbying for tax breaks for millionaire CEOs of foreign companies, perhaps she could consider lobbying for incentives and support for small start-ups.

Finally, I refer to the Border region, which I represent. The report notes strong disparities in the regions. Approximately 30% of the State's employees live in Dublin and income per head is substantially higher in Dublin than in the rest of the State. According to the figures presented in the report, disposable income per person in Dublin is 15% above the State average, and the Border region is 13% below this average. The Border region has the lowest rate of disposable income per person - 28% below Dublin. This, again, demonstrates the disparity between Dublin and the rest of the State. Given that the Minister represents a Border constituency, I ask that she might give special attention to business and enterprise along the Border. Amendments I tabled to the business section of the Brexit omnibus Bill have ensured that the Border gets priority in the allocation of business supports. The Government needs to take a similar position to ensure the region will weather the storm of Brexit, and outside of that, grow and thrive to improve the living standards of people living along the Border.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The OECD report highlights how vital SMEs are to our economy, outlining the fact that 92% of enterprises operating here had fewer than ten employees, which shows that microbusinesses are the engine of our economy.

However, one would not know this from the approach of Ministers, who focuses all their attention on cutting big ribbons at multinational headquarters. Multinational investment in this State is important, but it should not come at the expense of neglecting small indigenous businesses that are the engine of the economy.

Sinn Féin has proposed a policy that would begin a process of rebalancing the State's industrial strategy by supporting and growing indigenous businesses. I launched that policy recently with my colleague, Deputy Munster. We propose to reorganise the current LEO structure into a larger centrally-led national agency, with the scale and ambition to help grow indigenous businesses. The purpose of this new jobs agency would be to grow domestic businesses, providing balance to our economy, our workforce and our public finances.

With the prospect of a no-deal Brexit still in the mix, it is vital that we strengthen the domes-

tic economy now in order that it can both withstand the impact of Brexit, but also continue to expand under the new circumstances. A new jobs agency focused on our domestic businesses can help achieve this.

Sinn Féin recognise the importance of FDI, but we also recognise the risks an over-reliance on this sector alone brings. Some 45% of the total corporation tax take in 2018 came from just ten companies, while foreign-owned multinationals paid 77% of the €10.4 billion corporation tax take that year. That is just is not sustainable. While we are still supportive of maintaining FDI and export-led growth as key pillars of our industrial strategy, it is imperative we grow our indigenous and co-operative sectors to provide balance to our economy and to our public finances. A new stronger jobs agency focused on micro and small businesses can lead that change. In addition to providing business support to SME owners, this agency would encourage good pay and working conditions for employees and develop remote working hubs on derelict sites to address the decline of many town centres, giving workers the option of working from their own communities, if they so wish.

LEO staff have done excellent work to date with the resources they have been given, and we believe an opportunity now exists to build on their experience and knowledge by creating a larger, more ambitious State body focused solely on indigenous Irish businesses.

We have also proposed re-establishing the co-operative development unit in the Minister's Department. We encourage her to consider that, as the unit would encourage the growth and development of co-operatives that are currently rare enough in this State. I also encourage her to examine our proposals, which aim to build on the good work of LEOs and increase the level of support to micro and small businesses.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this quite large but important report from the OECD. We need the recommendations to be implemented. I welcome the fact that the Minister intends to publish her plans soon. Could she define what "soon" is? We are all aware that we may not be in the current Dáil for all that much longer and it is important that this be addressed.

By and large, the report points to many strengths in SMEs but also to challenges and issues that need to be addressed. As has been said, they represent a large sector of our economy and employ a large number of people in the workforce. As the Minister said, 70% of our workers are employed by SMEs. This does not always get the attention they deserve. Job announcements in large multinationals receive a great deal of attention whereas the same number of jobs may be provided by in a large number of SMEs in the same area but they are seldom mentioned. It is important to stress the large role they play in our economy, particularly in local economies and in the regions. We need to redress the balance between the small number of large companies, primarily multinationals, and SMEs and provide the opportunities that are recommended in this report for small businesses to scale-up. That is central to many of the recommendations.

They point to a number of issues and one of the key findings is access to finance. This should not be such an obstacle, given the presence of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, for example. The commercial banks have been put on a healthy footing, thanks to the people, at a huge cost. They should be more proactive in providing funding. Many pension funds are investing but they do not always invest in productive economic activity. There needs to be more of an effort to address that. As has been mentioned, the cost of insurance is a significant barrier as well and progress has been far too slow in addressing that issue. We have had

opportunities to debate that but it is a key factor.

Small businesses are particularly worried about taking risks and taking out loans. Wherever it is possible, loans should be guaranteed or it may be preferable to provide grants rather than having the risk of a small company being worried about being able to pay such loans back. If loans are the option, these should be issued on favourable interest rate terms. All of these issues are important to small companies willingness to invest in developing and becoming larger.

An issue that is clearly highlighted, which has been referred to by previous speakers, including the Minister, is the gap between the LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. We will be aware of this in our local areas. We all know people who are trying to get a small company up and running and are trying to get certain support from the LEOs. They then find, as they try to scale up, that they are not big enough for Enterprise Ireland but too big for the LEOs. That is a problem. Some practical measures need to be put in place in that context. Consulting people in the sector is crucial as they know exactly the challenges that are facing them. They can often identify exactly what kind of supports would be suitable to help them to grow.

If a large number of small companies can grow, that would make a major difference in respect of employment opportunities in local economies and generally in respect the economic health of the country. We do not want to be as dependent as we currently are on multinationals for jobs. We have a healthy jobs economy, but it is over-dependent on large multinationals.

Brexit uncertainty is an obvious issue. We have had the opportunity in parliamentary questions and so forth to raise the concerns and uncertainties that still exist about the effect of Brexit. Perhaps there will be more clarity by the end of this week in that regard.

Regarding spin-offs, many of the smaller indigenous companies are set up as a result of people working in multinational companies and seeing an opportunity to start their own business. I see it in my region where a large number of companies have been established in that way. They need support. The ones that start in incubation settings in higher education institutions tend to have good support due to how they start and where they are situated, but those that start outside that setting and in the community are probably more exposed. Perhaps there is a way they can get greater support. The Minister referred to clusters. My area has both a university and an institute of technology which are good at supporting and incubating companies that develop out of the institutions. I am sure that is the case in other parts of the country. However, there are many entrepreneurial individuals in Ireland who set up companies and do not have that type of structure. If possible, they should be linked into the higher education sector that is already doing that type of work.

The Minister mentioned the need for us to move to a low-carbon economy. That is a crucial requirement and it obviously must be on a large scale. There are opportunities in that regard and many of them are locally based because, by definition, one wishes to produce things in the local area rather than having transportation costs and the effect that has on the carbon footprint. We must put more emphasis on supporting businesses operating in that sector, and this is mentioned in the report. There are many such businesses. By and large, they are highly motivated but they need specific supports. They can potentially make an enormous difference to our economy and, indeed, to the air we breathe and the future of our planet. There should be a particular focus on those companies.

I looked at the selected recommendations in the executive summary. They have largely

been covered in all the contributions this evening. They refer to identifying local cluster challenges and bringing together a network of regional enterprise network managers. We also have regional skills organisers in the eight regions. They come through the Department of Education and Skills and link local businesses with higher education institutions. They have an important role to play. There is also a reference to building up apprenticeships. I have often spoken about apprenticeships. There is huge potential in that regard. Again, it is driven primarily by the Department of Education and Skills, but there are now apprenticeships across a variety of sectors in the economy. They provide an opportunity for SMEs to develop their workforce and give opportunities to people in a variety of sectors to develop very good careers as well as stronger businesses.

It is important that these recommendations are implemented and in a way that involves consulting widely with the people directly involved in the businesses. They know more than probably any Member of the House what the challenges are and what would help them to scale up their businesses and be sustainable for the future.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak briefly on the OECD report on SME and entrepreneurship policy in Ireland. I welcome that it has been put before the Dáil. Hopefully, the Minister will move forward quickly and publish her unified strategy document for the future.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are a vital part of our economy and employ over 70% of the workforce of 2.3 million people. That is quite typical of the European Union where approximately two thirds of all workers work for SMEs. Even in the UK, approximately half the workforce is in SMEs. Medium-sized companies have 250 employees or less, small companies have fewer than 50 employees and microenterprises have ten or less. Like many Deputies, I have worked in small and medium-sized enterprises in the past. I was a director of a community enterprise centre and was involved in training local entrepreneurs on the north side of Dublin for more than three decades. Throughout that time there have been many initiatives by organisations such as area partnerships, which in the case of Dublin Bay North include the Northside Partnership, Pobal, SOLAS, the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and local enterprise offices in Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council. They have all played a vital role over the years in supporting the development of small business. What the Minister must do in the new unified strategy is try to address some of the deficiencies in the sector, particularly with Brexit looming over it.

It is welcome that the Minister commissioned this report last year. I looked through the various themes and actions and there are many common-sense initiatives that could be taken. I welcome that the Minister has established the interdepartmental consultative group, which is chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy Breen. The 11 actions under the six themes refer to the work that has already been put in place to develop small and medium-sized enterprise. For example, action 2 calls for an online business diagnostic tool, to be able to benchmark small businesses and improve their access to finance and their skills in recruitment and marketing their products. One of the areas where SMEs are sometimes squeezed out, and other Deputies have referred to this, is with regard to tax credits in the research and development area. Action 3 recommends a simplified pre-approval process. It is skewed towards the large companies at present and this would give smaller companies, partnerships and even small co-operative businesses a chance in this regard.

Action 5 refers to the slow rate of digitisation and the fact that the LEOs could play a strong role in helping small businesses in that area. There is also reference to clusters, which have been successful not only in this country but also in Germany and in some sister jurisdictions in the European Union. Obviously, there must be access to credit. The trading online voucher programme is mentioned, as well as the fact that SMEs need better resources to be able to pursue such implements to develop their businesses. Action 9 refers to access to finance through the microenterprise loan fund and so forth.

Action 10 refers to tax reliefs for non-domiciled new hires by Irish SMEs. That involves the special assignee relief programme, SARP, but there are many concerns at the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, and I indicated them in my budget submission, about how SARP works, how it discriminates, how the programme has expanded and how it has been taken advantage of by some larger companies. I am not sure if it is the right implement for SMEs. Another area highlighted in the report is the levels of productivity. The National Competitiveness Council mentioned this in its productivity statement in 2019. We need measures and supports to boost productivity in SMEs and the National Competitiveness Council has also drawn attention to this. There is more than enough evidence to show that Irish SMEs must be supported better in the future and we have a roadmap in this report to help us to do it. I welcome the report and urge the Government to implement its key recommendations as soon as possible.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the OECD report. It is interesting that in Ireland, the idea of an SME among members of the public is not an enterprise with up to 250 people employed. In the Donegal context, that would be looked on as a very large employer. When we talk about this, we should talk about small enterprises because that is the reality in rural Ireland. In regard to the supports that are available to such companies, we should concentrate on that level because it is those indigenous industries that can grow and develop and perhaps get to the point where they can contribute and compete.

We are caught by the fact we have a very small population so businesses and enterprises cannot grow internally to a stage where they get the critical mass that allows them to export or grow internationally. This happens in other countries, such as Belgium, which has a population of 11.5 million, or the Netherlands, with a population of 18 million or 19 million, but Ireland has a population of just 4.5 million. Small industries here do not get the chance to grow and develop internally and then be able to export abroad and grow. We should focus on very small industries - we should drop the M and just talk about SEs. This would be very important from a policy point of view and is something that could happen.

I carried out a business survey in the last couple of years in County Donegal. There were 105 responses to the survey and 75% were businesses that employed between one and five people. Some 75% of them were online and depopulation and the threat to rural services were of concern for 83% of them, given that is what impacted on them and on their ability to survive and keep going. More worrying, and this is a point that should worry the Minister, is that more than 80% of the businesses were unaware of any Government support for them. That was their response to the survey I put out, which is very worrying for us. Since the recession, almost 50% of businesses have seen their business decline or not improve. We should be targeting our resources to ensure those businesses can grow.

The first of the report's key findings is telling. It states:

...business dynamism and the start-up rate are relatively low, Irish SMEs are not very

active in international markets, and SME productivity growth is stagnant. There are also weaknesses in SME management skills, capital investment levels and technology adoption.

This is vital. It shows the difficulties with Ireland Inc., as we do not have the critical mass of population to allow SMEs to develop and grow due to the domestic environment. This is what we are missing. We need to find a way to replace that and ensure SMEs can develop and grow. We need to drop the M altogether and focus on SEs.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to share time with Deputy Michael Collins.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am happy to speak on this matter. SMEs are a critical part of our overall economy, as the Minister said. While corporation taxes and the high visibility of the multinationals get almost all of the attention, it is our SMEs that generate most of the work in this country. SMEs are particularly important for the labour market in Ireland, no more so than in the Minister's county of Monaghan. They generate more than 70% of all jobs in the non-financial business economy and this is approximately four percentage points more than the EU average, which is a good thing.

That said, it is clear, and has been clear for some time, that Irish SMEs still face significant challenges, especially around bureaucracy, red tape and high costs, in particular the cost of insurance, which the Government has failed abysmally to deal with in any way. The OECD report accepts that while Ireland is a successful generator of SMEs and the sector is innovative, business dynamism and the start-up rate are relatively low. Irish SMEs are also not very active in international markets and SME productivity growth is reported as stagnant.

Two of the greatest challenges for SMEs in the last number of years have been the commercial rates system and the rejection level for bank finance applications from SMEs. The rates are crippling and people get nothing for them. They pay the rates but the whole appeals system is bureaucratic. With regard to the rejection level for bank finance applications, the banks are dúnta, they are closed. They are not operating for small businesses or for anyone else, except big business. This is after we bailed them out, which is ridiculous. It is rejection after rejection. They are not open for business, whether it is for business loans, for householders or for people trying to buy homes. It annoys me that they have these big campaigns, with 300 people in a hotel, talking about all the money they are going to roll out. They are dúnta, they are shut for business, they are not working. However, the Government is blind to that, like the last Government and the one before that. The Central Bank, in its report on this matter earlier this year, highlighted the rejection rate as being about 15%. The experience of many SMEs, however, is that the rejection rate is well above this.

As for the current commercial rates system, we know that in the last two years alone, local authorities collected more than €4 billion in rates. What do small business people get back for that? Zilch. There was a time when they would get services, such as refuse services and the salting of the roads, but they get nothing now. The county councils have literally abandoned the people. Just like it banished big Phil the destroyer, the Government has banished all the local town councils. It has taken away democracy from the people and given nothing back. They get nothing for the rates, and the Minister knows that better than I do. They have to pay them, whereas bigger businesses can put up a sign to say a business is for rent or for sale, and they get back a massive rebate. Tipperary County Council acknowledged this and tried to change it at

its most recent budget meeting.

Small businesses like those in Tipperary town have literally been facing ruin because they cannot get exemptions or decreases in rates, even when there is a collapse in business due to the activity of the local authority with roadworks. They spent the last year digging up the streets in Tipperary town. Would the council contact or notify people, or listen to them? No. It is pure arrogance. They can get these rates like a punitive tax and people get nothing in return. Despite the fact businesses are closing down or staying open by the skin of their teeth, there is no support for them. SMEs need support. They must be listened to and respected for what they do. They are the key provider of employment in towns and villages in rural Ireland, and they include many small farms, which are also SMEs. They need less Government interference and the adoption of measures that can make a difference in the real world but they are bogged down with endless red tape or complicated application processes for grant support.

We have all of these roll-outs. The Minister, Deputy Ring, is great at announcing money for this, that and the other, but getting it is another thing. Live horse and you will get grass, it is said, but the money is going back unspent. Self-employed people are getting tired of the bureaucracy, of Revenue, of the sheriff and of punitive charges. They are fed up with the banks because the banks are not functioning for them. We all paid our taxes to bail out the banks and our grandchildren will be paying for that but we get nothing back from the banks and they are not even listening.

Ministers are heedless of the situation for small businesses but they will know when they go to the election because the people are waiting for them. Some of them are waiting with pitchforks and any other weapons they have to make sure the Government will not come near them. Ministers do not understand, do not listen and are not interested in the people, good, bad or indifferent. The Minister can shake her head all she likes but that is the fact of the matter. They are asleep at the wheel. Businesses are under savage pressure and there is mental illness and everything else because of the pressure of trying to compete, pay PRSI, pay this new charge, that new charge or this new course. If it is not hazard analysis and critical control point, HACCP, it is something else coming down on top of them - not HIQA, which operates in the hospitals, although it will not look at the trolley crisis. It is bureaucracy. There are legions of people going around with briefcases. They cannot help the businesses. There is the National Employment Rights Authority, NERA, as well as everything else. These bodies are there to close down and punish businesses. They never come in and ask whether they can help them, whether there is any way an open day could be held or whether they could give a little advice on the problems the businesses have. These bodies tell the businesses what is wrong and when to get it fixed. If they do not get it fixed, they face heavy and punitive fines. These struggling people are the backbone of our business, our industry. Of course I welcome the multinational businesses coming here but the small business people do not get the huge enticements to come here yet they stay here. They have been here for the long run but they are growing very tired now. You can bring the horse to water but you cannot make him drink. If the Minister does not wake up and do something, many of these businesses will disappear.

Deputy Michael Collins: I do not know how I will follow that. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. As we know, SMEs are a critical part of the Irish economy. The OECD report tells us, “There were approximately 250,000 active enterprises in Ireland in 2016.” It states that SMEs make up as much as 56% of manufacturing employment and 74% of services employment in Ireland. Unfortunately, however, Ireland’s direct SME export levels are very low by international standards, with only 6% of Irish SMEs directly trading across borders and

with a high share of SME exporters trading only with the UK market. However, SMEs may contribute to exports indirectly by providing multinational firms with components and services. This is of particular concern to these companies with Brexit fast approaching. Many companies have invested heavily to support exporting over recent years. These companies need reassurances that the State will stand by them and provide assistance in the event of a hard Brexit.

The report's executive summary outlines in its key findings, "Ireland offers a favourable regulatory environment, low taxation, extensive R&D support and good physical infrastructure." I am not sure about the last one. In rural Ireland we are constantly fighting for investment in our roads, public transport and broadband. I have continuously pleaded with the Government since I was elected a Deputy for investment in our roads in west Cork. It is a fine thing I talked to Shep, the dog at home, because no one here listens. The report seems to contradict itself in chapter 3, calling Ireland's physical transport infrastructure sub-par.

The report also states:

access to finance remains problematic and incentives could be strengthened for investment in SMEs and entrepreneurship. Skills shortages are also rising, implying a need to monitor the success of recent apprenticeship and skills development policies.

I brought up this issue of skills shortages in November of last year and nothing has changed since. There is no doubt but that we have a lack of young people taking up apprenticeships. The 2018 Construction Industry Federation, CIF, report entitled the Trades & Apprenticeships Skills Survey identifies a lack of skilled tradespeople and apprenticeships as small firms struggle to take on apprentices. In the report the CIF states this is a clear warning sign to the Government and that the shortage is so severe that there exists the potential for long-term problems. If the Government wants to see more people taking up trades, it will have to better support young people. The report goes on to state, "Many firms in the past employed apprentices, however currently do not due to firm downsizing, lack of government incentives and onerous legislative obligations." All this has caused a shortage of qualified construction tradespeople across the construction trades and apprenticeships. This is a big concern that needs to be addressed. Contractors feel that the legislative and Government requirements surrounding apprenticeships are burdensome and put them under pressure. The Government needs to tackle this crisis now, not wait for things to escalate further. We have many thousands of talented tradespeople and professionals who emigrated during the recession. The Government should be doing all it can to make moving back to Ireland more appealing. However, with rising rents and shambolic health services, this would seem an uphill battle. Without Government action on this, we cannot expect the trend to change.

The OECD report outlines that the higher education system plays an important role in providing skills that are relevant to the labour market. The report also outlines, however, that the Irish economy would benefit from wider participation in lifelong learning programmes. I would like to see more incentives for people who have left the education system to return to it or take up a trade. I would like to see those who are in full-time employment and who want to continue upskilling given more opportunities to take part in short-term courses. When holding down a full-time job and supporting a family, many people cannot commit to courses that run for years. There should also be more incentives for companies to send their employees on upskilling courses in the form of tax relief for the employer, incentivising companies to invest continually in their employees, in turn benefiting both.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the opportunity to make a short contribution on this important report. My colleagues, Deputies Troy and Scanlon, dealt with some of the details of the report earlier. I wish to refer specifically to the needs of the Border region. Through parliamentary questions and other debates in this House, we have discussed the particular challenges facing small and medium-sized enterprises in the Border region due to Brexit. As we know, such enterprises are the backbone of our economy and our region, on both the southern and the northern side of the Border. I know that some supports have been put in place but I again appeal to the Minister to ensure that additional supports are put in place to assist our companies through the transition that will happen post Brexit. That uncertainty, unfortunately, has not gone away. Brexit has been out of our daily vocabulary for some time because of the British general election, but we must deal with the reality that there will be adverse impacts of Brexit and, unfortunately, no benefits for our region.

In the past I have advocated, as have other public representatives and Members of this House, an all-Ireland industrial policy and business policy. It is a shame we have not established additional all-Ireland implementation bodies. In 1998, with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, six all-Ireland bodies were established. The premise at the time was always that additional bodies would be established in the area of trade promotion and health education. Sadly, we have not developed on that maximising of the potential of the Good Friday Agreement. In the areas the Minister, the Acting Chairman, Deputy Breathnach, and I represent, we know very well that many of our companies are cross-Border, all-Ireland bodies. They should be assisted by agencies that have an all-Ireland remit. There is a great case to be made at this time, due to Brexit, that we have all-Ireland industrial, business and trade promotion policies. This can only do good for business in the North and in the South and all-Ireland businesses. I would love to see this issue moved on.

Again, our economy, be it in Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Armagh, Tyrone or that general area, is very heavily dependent on small and medium-sized enterprises. Thankfully, with the assistance given in the past by the county enterprise boards and more recently by local enterprise boards, some of our small and medium-sized enterprises have become international corporations still based in our region. I note that at one point in the report the OECD states that the local enterprise offices are not fit for purpose. I have a great rapport, as I know the Minister does, with our local offices in Cavan and Monaghan. They have had great personnel working in them over the years. I sincerely hope, whatever additional systems or restructurings are put in place, that those personnel are given the resources to ensure they can continue to assist employment, generate jobs and grow the economy in our region.

With those few words, I appeal to the Minister to give further consideration to the points I have outlined in the past as well as this evening.

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank all the Deputies who spoke, particularly those who had very constructive contributions. To respond to Deputy Brendan Smith, I fully understand, as he does, the difficulties Border businesses face in the context of Brexit. We have been working very hard in the Border region to provide all the supports and information we can. We have had a number of meetings in the Border counties specifically to inform businesses in the region of the challenges Brexit presents. Deputy Smith mentioned an all-Ireland trade policy. He and I both hope the Northern Ireland Executive will get up and running as quickly as possible. When it does, I do not see any reason why we should not look at trade on an all-island basis. He is absolutely right: jobs created in Armagh and Fermanagh benefit people in Cavan and Monaghan and, *vice versa*, jobs

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in Dundalk, such as the ones we announced in WuXi only a couple of weeks ago, another 200 jobs on top of 400, will benefit people in Northern Ireland. There is an all-island approach to this and it is something we can pursue when the Northern Ireland Executive is back again.

I have been listening to SMEs since I took up this job. I regularly meet them. I engage with all the representative bodies regularly. I also chair the retail consultation forum and have held Brexit meetings with businesses right across the country.

8 o'clock

Deputy Troy specialises in cheap political shots as opposed to solutions. Any right-minded person will agree that SMEs are in a better place now than they were in 2010, when many were forced to close. The issue of access to credit was raised. We have the future growth loan scheme and it is flying out the door. Some €101 million was sanctioned and it was only lodged in April. A third of it is gone already. That is a good source of finance for people who want to look at the future growth loan scheme as a possible option to obtain finance. We also have the credit guarantee scheme and Microfinance Ireland, which provides finance.

The current model of LEOs is working very well. I have already said that I want to expand the role and remit of the LEOs. Last year, I increased their budget by a further €5 million, or in excess of 20%. I want to continue to support the LEOs. They do a really good job. One of the issues that the OECD raised was that we should expand the remit of the LEOs and I absolutely agree.

I am also working closely with Enterprise Ireland to encourage more women entrepreneurs, which I think is important. I am well aware of the issues affecting the Border region. Only yesterday, I turned the sod on a new IDA Ireland advanced technology building in Monaghan. That is part of the IDA Ireland property programme. There are also factories for Sligo and Dundalk. Foreign direct investment is very important too. It helps to create jobs in the local economy. For example, 2,000 people will be employed by WuXi during the construction stage in Dundalk. A lot of people and local providers will be involved, which is very important in the surrounding counties. It is not about foreign direct investment versus indigenous business but how we can maximise the benefits of both. Last Friday, I published a comprehensive report on remote working that was compiled by my Department. That is a matter of funding digital hubs and co-working facilities under the regional enterprise development fund. There is a particularly good one in Cavan and it is working extremely well.

Deputies Jan O'Sullivan and Broughan raised the issue of clustering, which is very important. It develops the links between institutes of technology and SMEs. Last Friday, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, and I launched a fund of €4.8 million. It is called the regional clustering fund and it is to encourage SMEs to engage with the local institutes of technology and to help them to work closely together to benefit SME strategy. I intend to publish the new strategy on SMEs and entrepreneurship by the end of January or in early February.

Rent Freeze (Fair Rent) Bill 2019: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

As everybody in this Chamber knows, rents are completely out of control. A quick look on *daft.ie* today confirms this. In Cork city, the cost of renting a standard two-bedroom home is €16,000 per year. In Lucan, which is in my constituency, the cost is an astonishing €24,000. Across the electoral boundary, in Castleknock in the Taoiseach's constituency, the cost of renting an average family home with two bedrooms is €25,000 a year. In parts of the constituency of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, rents can be as high as €34,000 annually. That is absolutely insane. How is any working person or a couple on a modest or average income meant to afford this? Average rents in Dublin are now €1,700 per month. Across the State, the average is €1,400. In many cases, one would need a household income of between €80,000 and €100,000 to be able to afford these kinds of prices. The impact of astronomical rents can be seen everywhere. Renters live under huge financial pressure. First-time buyers are forced to move back home with their parents in order to save for a deposit. Local economies are starved of spending as workers pay 40% to 50% of their disposable income on rent. Small and medium-sized employers struggle with rising wage claims that, in the main, are being driven, by high housing costs. The crisis in the rental sector is hurting people and damaging our economy.

It was not meant to be this way. When he was Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, the Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, launched his strategy for the private rental sector in December 2016. He promised to “moderate the rate of rent increase” and stated that after three years “new supply will have come on stream and pressures will have eased.” He and his successor have failed because Fine Gael has left it to the private sector to increase rental supply. Fine Gael has failed to deliver a single cost rental home in three years. It is relying on the private rental sector to meet social housing need, increasing demand and rents for all. Crucially, rent pressure zones are not working. Fine Gael said rent pressure zones would limit rent increases to 4% a year for three years. Since January 2017, rents in Dublin have increased by 23% and by 24% across the State. That is double what the Government promised. No doubt the Minister will claim that there is finally some evidence that rent inflation moderation is happening. Even if that is true - and it is not clear yet - it is far too late. This policy has failed. Any future rent increases for hard-pressed renters are completely unacceptable. It is time to give renters a break.

The Bill before us, co-sponsored by my new constituency colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, does just that. It seeks to put a month's rent back in every renters' pocket through a refundable tax credit and to stop rents from further increasing. Fine Gael has given tax breaks to just about everybody else in the housing system. First-time buyers got the help to buy scheme, landlords got increases in mortgage interest relief and vulture funds get even more generous tax breaks. What about renters? Do they not deserve the same support? A refundable tax credit, as we outlined, would put up to €1,500 back into the pocket of every renter. It would cost the Exchequer €260 million a year but, in our view, would be money well spent. Meanwhile rents, would be frozen for three years at their current level for existing tenants and at the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, rent index level for that size and location of property for all new tenancies.

This is an emergency measure. It is intended to ease the pressure on renters and to give the Government some time to address the issue of supply. The private sector cannot and will not deliver affordable rental accommodation, especially in large cities. That can only be done with public housing on public land. In 2014, the Fine Gael Government promised to invest in affordable cost rental accommodation. In 2016, Rebuilding Ireland made the same commitment. Only this year, the first pilot cost rental scheme went on site. Just 50 units will be delivered

next year. That is 50 affordable rental units throughout the course of Rebuilding Ireland. In its alternative budgets for 2019 and 2020, Sinn Féin proposed a major investment in council-led affordable rental accommodation. We committed €395 million to deliver more than 1,700 cost rental units in a single year. This is in addition to a commitment to deliver more than 4,000 affordable purchase homes in the same period. That scale of ambition is required. Anything less will condemn renters to a decade of unaffordable rents.

The Government will claim that the Bill is actually bad for renters because it will deter investment and choke off supply. That is absolute nonsense. Given Fine Gael's generous tax breaks for institutional investors, combined with record high rental yields, investing in rental accommodation is a pretty sure bet, even with a rent freeze in place. That claim is just cover for Fine Gael doing what it always does, which is looking after the big investors and landlords while letting working men and women fend for themselves.

I understand that some of the other Opposition parties have concerns about the Bill. I give a commitment to every Deputy in those parties that Sinn Féin will work constructively with everyone involved to iron out any potential difficulties and improve this Bill, if necessary. With the right approach, there is no reason this legislation could not pass before the end of the year. Let us roll up our sleeves, work together and give renters the early Christmas present they rightly deserve, namely, a refundable tax credit that will put a month's rent back in their pockets, an emergency rent freeze for three years and real investment in affordable cost rental accommodation. The latter will ensure that workers and families can access the secure and affordable accommodation they so desperately need and rightly deserve.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Rents in the State are too high and are continuing to rise. It is time to freeze rents and put money back into the pockets of families and workers. Fine Gael has had eight years to tackle the housing crisis and it has simply not delivered. Some 4,000 children are homeless. More and more people are being moved onto the housing assistance payment, HAP, and rent and house prices continue to soar. In my constituency, rents stand at almost €2,000 a month, which is an increase of 5% in just one year. Rebuilding Ireland has failed and a real housing policy is needed. This is beyond a shambles.

We need to do something to halt rent rises and reduce costs for tenants. We are discussing putting a halt to the cycle of record-breaking rents quarter after quarter. There are solutions to the housing and rental crises families are facing. This Bill would introduce a State-wide rent freeze and a refundable tax credit to all renters, equivalent to one month's rent. This Government has given tax breaks to developers and landlords, and it is now time to give renters that same break. Being in government is about making choices and taking a stand. Sinn Féin stands with families, workers and those trying to put a roof over their children's heads. We choose to do what is right and end the cycle of exploitation that is the housing crisis in Ireland.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Renting in this economy and society is extremely hard, even if one has a decent job and a secure income. It can mean paying a quarter, a third, or even more of one's income to secure half-decent accommodation. It may mean giving up for a long time, perhaps forever, the possibility of ever owning one's own home. The possibility of a permanent home is removed as such people do not qualify for social housing. If the situation is difficult for those on decent incomes with secure work, it is practically impossible for those on lower income or who suffer the slightest misfortune. Deputies on all sides regularly have constituents come to their clinics in respect of this issue. Some of the hardest cases to deal with are people who have received an eviction notice, who may or may not be on a housing list, and

who are desperately trying to figure out where they will go. Those on HAP or lower incomes go through their options, look at the lists on *daft.ie*, ring around and try absolutely everything, but nothing is within their ability to pay.

People are paying far beyond what they can realistically afford for housing. I dealt with a woman last week who was constantly falling into arrears with electricity and gas in order to pay the rent. She would try to meet those bills, but she knew it was ultimately unsustainable. I met a couple a few months ago who had gone into almost €1,000 of arrears just because unpaid bills and arrears mounted up on a place they could, in theory, afford. They found themselves in a desperate situation. They received support from others to clear those arrears and they are managing as best they can, but they are making serious sacrifices to do so. Serious sacrifices are being made by families and workers in every part of this country. The rental situation is utterly unsustainable. In Cork, the average rent is €1,372, which is the highest it has ever been, and it still rising by 5.5%.

The Government will vote against this Bill, but its efforts will be defeated because Fianna Fáil is backing it. I welcome that support, but I am mystified at Fianna Fáil's late conversion. When Sinn Féin first proposed a rent freeze, the national average rent was €960 a month. It is now €1,403. I do not know when the threshold was reached. At what point did rent become too expensive? At what point did the number of homeless people and homeless children get too high? I welcome Fianna Fáil's support of this Bill, but we would be far better off if we had gotten to this point some time ago.

Deputy David Cullinane: I said last week that people outside this House are sick and tired of politicians debating the housing crisis. We have put forward many solutions to it. The rental crisis is a product of this Government not building the homes people need for the last eight years. Many families want to own their own homes but do not have that option, first, because the Government is not building any affordable homes and, second, because the high rents many young couples are paying deprive them of the opportunity to save money to do so. The Government is robbing many young families of their futures and their dreams of buying their own homes.

The Government has sat on its hands in respect of this issue for eight years, as has Fianna Fáil. When we pointed out to the Government that this would get worse unless direct action was taken by the State, it refused to do anything and told us that the market would sort itself out, because this was a market problem. It was nothing of the sort. It was a crisis created by the Government because it did not build social and affordable homes. Everybody, including those with social housing needs, was then forced into the private rented sector, which created the perfect storm of this crisis in rent. The Minister knows a rent freeze is needed. He knows it will give those young people a break.

Some families and couples no longer rent homes, especially in Dublin. I have said this to the Minister before. They are renting rooms in houses. Three, four, or five couples and families rent rooms in one home because that is the only opportunity they have. People are paying over €1,200 a month for a room in a house. In some cases they are renting beds and sharing rooms with other people because of the rental crisis.

The Government closes its eyes to this situation and rejects any proposals from the Opposition. Fianna Fáil has had a late conversion to this, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire noted. It previously ridiculed our past proposals regarding a rent freeze. It has now changed its spots and says it

supports the proposal before the House, as it does with every issue, because of the by-election results and because we are getting closer to a general election. In reality, those in Fianna Fáil, like the Government, sat on their hands. This is an opportunity for the Minister to do something right, although I do not think he will. We have gone beyond talking about no confidence in him or the Government. What is the point? They have never listened. As long as the people of this State keep voting for this Minister, his party or even Fianna Fáil, there will be no solution to the housing and rental crises. Only with a Sinn Féin Government will there be any real change.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Every single day of every single week in almost every constituency clinic the length and breadth of this country, there is one issue that one can guarantee will be to the fore. That issue is the housing crisis, and the fallout from it, and it is being raised by people who have been on the housing list for over a decade, those who have been put to the pin of their collars paying extortionate rents and individuals who have been served with notices to quit. I do not know if the Minister has ever sat across a table from someone who has been served with a notice to quit because one can see straight away that blind panic has set in. This panic stems from the very real fear of becoming homeless because there is nowhere to rent and there is certainly nowhere they can afford to rent. People are also paying huge rents for standard accommodation. When they complain to their landlords, be it about damp throughout the house and their children developing coughs and asthma or about the heating not working in the depths of winter, some will just turn around and say “Oh, I was thinking of selling it anyway”. I have heard this numerous times. Why are they saying that? It is to put the fear of God into people in order to get them to stop complaining. It is a case of put up or shut up. That is what they are saying and that is happening on a regular basis.

The average monthly rent in Louth is €1,236. In Meath, it is €1,334. Rents have increased by 3.6% in the past year in both counties. Rents in Louth and Meath have more than doubled since their lowest point. Rents have increased by over 100% in both Louth and Meath. If that does not indicate a crisis, I do not know what does.

At what point will the Minister call a halt to this? How much misery do people have to endure before he will take responsibility and deal with the situation? A rent freeze would help to alleviate the financial misery people are in. It would work and can work. All it takes is the political will and the ideology. How much more does the Minister want people to suffer before he does something?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Despite what the Minister says, I am not certain that he truly understands the impact of his policies in real life and on real people. I am not certain that he has ever had to deal with a person facing uncertainty when he or she has been given a notice to quit. People will tell one that it is a landlords' market and that they are the vulnerable ones and do not want to speak up. They do not want to raise concerns about damp making their children cough and the living conditions in which they are forced to exist because they are in fear of their landlords. What the Minister has tonight is an opportunity to send a message to those people that he is not solely on the side of landlords and that he is on the side of renters and recognises that there is an emergency, that renters need a break and the need for this Government to take its foot off their neck and stand with them.

I commend Teachta Ó Broin on bringing forward this legislation because, as he has said, it is emergency legislation designed to deal with an emergency. However, I do not believe that the Minister understands that there is an emergency. I do not believe that this has got through to him. I do not think that he has seen the actual impact of the rental crisis. People are forced

to bring their children up in substandard accommodation. No parent wants to do that but parents everywhere are being forced to live in damp and unsuitable accommodation for the simple reason that they know it is a landlords' market and that the Government will always be on the side of landlords ahead of renters.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward this Bill. Rents are too high at the moment. They are impossibly high for many people. I am the housing Minister and I am responsible. I deal with this crisis every day. I deal with it not just in the context of Private Members' business or when I am taking my constituency clinics, but every day. It is my responsibility. The Government is not supporting this Bill because we do not believe it is a solution. In fact, we believe it is the opposite of a solution.

The Opposition will state that this is because we are pro-landlord or only on the side of landlords. That is nonsense. In June, we passed new legislation for tenants that was all about renters' rights. It was all pro-tenant. It was supported by Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil because it was for tenants so they should not forget their own hypocrisy in this debate. Why is it okay to be anti-landlord? Why is it okay to speak against landlords because they are part of providing housing in this country, as they have been for years, and they are a very important part of it? We must find a balance in everything we do. We must protect tenants but we must also ensure that there are landlords operating in this country. As a result of the crash we had so recently, we know that many people became accidental landlords and that they continue to be landlords. Deputy Ó Broin says that being a landlord is a sure bet. Why do we keep seeing landlords leaving the market if it is a sure bet? Others in opposition will say that we are ideologically opposed to rent freezes. That is rubbish. We are not ideologically opposed to any solution we believe will work, but where is the evidence that this will not cause more harm? Where is the evidence that it will not mean a loss of supply in the rental sector?

A Deputy: All over Europe.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Where is the evidence that it will not harm tenants?

We can expect this populism from Sinn Féin and the left because they supported the rent pressure zones and the rent reforms that are less than six months old and went out and spoke against them immediately. They say one thing and do another. Deputy Ó Broin quotes rents from his own constituency. Was he welcoming the 1,000 homes that got planning permission that his party was against only a year ago?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is not true. The Minister is misleading the House. Our party was not opposed to-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Deputy Ó Snodaigh, who is sitting right behind Deputy Ó Broin, has opposed the building of hundreds of apartments in his constituency.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Cathaoirleach, he is misleading the House.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: He says that there are too many. No Deputy, there are not enough.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We are supporting hundreds more. The Minister is misrepresenting what was in the newspapers.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: He says one thing and does another.

A Deputy: There are Fine Gael Ministers and councillors blocking more than-----

(Interruptions).

A Deputy: Across the city Fine Gael is opposing affordable housing and the Minister well knows it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Hypocrisy.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The biggest hypocrite here is yourself.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Sinn Féin must recognise its own hypocrisy in this debate. That hypocrisy makes it okay for Sinn Féin to block housing developments throughout the country. Of course, we can expect populism from Sinn Féin. I am not quite sure what to expect from Fianna Fáil because it seems to be for and against this Bill at the same time.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We know what to expect from Fine Gael.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I do not quite understand what that means. Is it the Sinn Féin tail wagging the Fianna Fáil dog again? I am not sure but it is actually quite reckless because it is supporting a Bill without there being any evidence in favour of it. It is supporting a Bill without any evidence that it will help and when all the evidence is stacked against it and that it is a bad idea.

We heard speculation about a rent freeze in 2015. What happened? Rents skyrocketed. It coincided with a 50% increase in children going into emergency accommodation.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Thanks to Deputy Noonan and his delay. Thanks to Fine Gael Ministers blocking that Bill.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It went up by 1% in the past 12 months and 50% during that period. Sinn Féin does not like what it is hearing. Its Deputies can heckle me all they want. They had their choice to speak without interruption so I would appreciate the same courtesy in our Parliament.

What we have seen without even opening up this Bill is that it is unconstitutional. One has to wonder whether anyone read it. For some bizarre reason, HAP tenants would still get rent increases when nobody else would so those who are most vulnerable in the context of this crisis would suffer rent increases.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Amend the Bill.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Any simple constitutional reading of this Bill would tell one that it does not pass the proportional treatment test but one wonders if Fianna Fáil even read it before it gave its support to it. Where is the evidence that it would work? Where is the evidence that it is constitutional? Where is the evidence that the Government would be able to pay the €260 million that would be required for this tax credit. Again, we are back to-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: In our alternative budget if the Minister bothered to read it. Two years in a row we published-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am being interrupted again and that is the problem because Sinn Féin does not like what it is hearing. It voted against every single budget we brought forward that reformed this economy and put us in a position whereby we can invest in public services again. Now we are meant to believe that the alternative budgets it brings forward are credible. That is a nonsense. We are back again to tax credits, hollowing out the tax base and putting our economy at risk within ten years of the previous crisis when the lack of a proper taxation system and fiscal controls brought our country to its knees.

I know that rent freezes sound good to most people because the idea is that their rent will not increase. However, we know that rent freezes also freeze movement within the rental sector. People do not move out of their homes. Look at what has happened in New York over decades, where movement within the rental sector was completely frozen. Movement for new renters into the rental sector here will also freeze up because there is nowhere for new renters to go because people are not leaving the homes they are renting. It freezes investment in supply and property upkeep. It is nothing but negative when it comes to what tenants actually need. Members need not take my word for it. Rent freezes have been introduced in Berlin and the experts there warned that freezing rents did not offer a solution for those looking to rent, that the level of new supply would fall, that existing homes would not be modernised and that it would not contribute to climate protection because people would not retrofit their homes. What has happened? There has been a 40% reduction in building permissions in Berlin, year on year, to September of this year. There has been \$1.1 billion of investment frozen and a risk of a loss of 5,000 properties in the rental sector. The Federal Government in Germany has also stated that the measure is unconstitutional. That is evidence that rent freezes are a bad idea.

What do our experts say? The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, has stated that this measure would send compliant landlords out of the market and we would lose supply. The RTB also stated that it would drive other landlords underground which is bad for tenants who would have no protection in those circumstances. It stated the measure would unfairly hit landlords who have been charging below market rents for years. The Bill would be unworkable for the RTB because its whole premise rests on the annual rent register, which comes from legislation that I introduced earlier this year and which Sinn Féin supported. The rent register will not be full and in place until next year. That would mean a lacuna during which rents would again skyrocket, hurting tenants further.

We are still facing legacy issues from the economic crash and landlords are still leaving the sector. Being a landlord is not a sure bet, contrary to what Deputy Ó Broin has said. Rents are still increasing but the rent controls we introduced in 2017 has two purposes, namely, to protect tenants and prevent the undermining of supply. What has happened? In the past 12 months, roughly 20,000 new homes have been built, the highest number in a decade. Apartment completions increased by 42% on the previous 12 months. The third quarter of this year will see an 81% increase in apartments compared with the same period last year. Of course, that figure needs to increase further. I point out to Deputy Ó Snodaigh that we need more apartments in places where people want to live.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We need affordable apartments.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Minister will give way, I will explain my position.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We must move away from the idea that people who own homes do not want to see any disruption to the area in which they live. They do not want extra traffic or

footfall but still want good jobs for their children and affordable homes. If people keep objecting to new homes and politicians adopt the same position, we will not see the delivery we need.

Rents are still too high but the new rent controls that we have put in place have worked to a degree, and independent evidence published over the summer reflected that. That evidence showed a dampening of rent inflation of between 2% and 3% as a result of rent controls.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Rents have increased by 24% in three years.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: *Daft.ie*, in its latest rental report, stated that the long run of high rents that we have sustained for too many years seems to be at an end. Rents are still rising at roughly 7% but new supply is pushing this number down. The so-called cuckoo funds that were not covered under rent controls are now covered, thanks to reforms I brought in six months ago which were also supported by this House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Sinn Féin asked the Minister to do that in 2016.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: There is a discrepancy between existing and new tenancies but we have addressed that with an annual rent register that will come into force next year and through new powers and inspectors for the RTB. Cases are already under way. We changed the qualifying criteria for rent pressure zones and more than 65% of rental properties in the State now come under rent control. We have extended rent controls for two more years.

We now have cost rental on site. The first project will deliver rents at €1,200 for a two-bedroom apartment. It is a pathfinder project. We want cost rental to account for at least 20% of the rental market but that cannot be achieved overnight. Given the finances involved, we need to get this right the first time because if it fails, it will not be repeated on other sites.

We have incentives like the help-to-buy scheme and the Rebuilding Ireland home loan precisely to help people out of the rent traps that they are in. We recognise that rents are too high, unsustainably so. Rent controls are working to drive down rent inflation without affecting supply. Fundamentally, all of this comes back to making sure that new homes are being built to buy and to rent. We are helping those who want to buy out of the rent trap, recognising that rents are too high. That is what we are doing now and that is why we cannot support this Bill. Rent freezes sound good to someone who is renting but all of the evidence tells us that a freeze will damage supply, as is happening in Berlin right now after this measure was tried there. We also know the Bill is unconstitutional, as Fianna Fáil would have seen immediately if its members had bothered to read it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Has the Minister taken advice from the Attorney General on it?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is reckless of Fianna Fáil to take a position of supporting the Bill in the morning, not supporting it in the afternoon and supporting it again in the evening.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Before I call on the next group of speakers, I ask Deputies to respect the rules of the debate and allow Members to contribute without interruption.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We will do our best.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We all know that an entire generation now risks being permanently locked into a rental trap. Two parts of that trap have been set over the past several years

by the policy of Fine Gael Governments. On one side, we have the unprecedented rent levels that have soared by 81% since 2011, while on the other side we have the unaffordable house prices that are beyond the reach of most workers with ordinary incomes who are competing directly with the cuckoo funds the Minister mentioned and the State, which is snapping up properties that could be available for first-time buyers. Ensnared in this trap are the 900,000 people caught in the rip-off rental market across this country. For Fine Gael, the shift to rental is a positive outcome of a move towards a continental rental model. It is Fine Gael policy to move people into private rental accommodation. For Sinn Féin, it is a chance to reject home ownership.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Is this the standard of debate in the House?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Between those two extremes are the vast majority of renters who want to own their home but are caught in up the financial mire of renting. Survey after survey has shown that tenants want out. They want to break free of the rent trap and get a place they can truly call their own. We need to consider the long-term consequences of this trap and the financial impact it entails. The cost and consequences of the rent trap being set by Fine Gael, based on its obsession with the new continental model, will be disastrous. Likewise, the wish list economics of Sinn Féin, which has its own fixation on locking people into a social rental model, would have dire long-term repercussions. In contrast, Fianna Fáil believes in home ownership. It is good for individuals, families, communities and the country at large. We believe that tenants stuck in a rip-off rental market should be given the opportunity to break free of the rent trap and purchase their own home. That is why we are supporting the Bill on Second Stage, as a measure to help break free of this suffocating rent trap.

There are several reasons that we are better off with home ownership. Financially, housing soaks up much of the disposable income of workers and is a key asset in building up wealth. Owning one's own home is cheaper than renting and allows a store of value to build up wealth. This wealth can be transferred on to the next generation to give that generation a better start in life. With rent levels soaring by 81%, as I noted, the financial case against long-term renting in the private rental market is proven. Paying off a mortgage is a foresaving mechanism, particularly after the first few years when interest repayments are replaced by equity. Each repayment is an investment in the future, as well as a charge on accessing that accommodation. By contrast, renting is a monthly cost, essentially a charge for using a service with no return on the money spent at the end. With buying consistently cheaper than renting, owners have the benefit of saving and investing more.

The recent emphasis by the State on private rental also ignores the ticking time bomb that goes off when a generation of renters reaches old age. The shifts we are witnessing now will mean that, in a few decades, private renters no longer earning wages on entering retirement will be reliant on heavy State subsidies to afford high rents in a competitive market where they are pitted against younger workers.

Beyond these clear financial benefits, there are also real social benefits to promoting home ownership. Giving individuals and families a clear stake in an area and a sense of place that they can transfer to their children is a stabilising force in society. Greater community participation and increased general well-being are consistently captured as the results of home ownership in academic research. The instability of renting is no substitute for that. Home ownership is the most secure form of tenure. That is why we need affordable housing for working people.

These factors are all part of a broader reason that Ireland historically promoted owning the roof over one's head. It is the reason that, in survey after survey, young people still overwhelmingly aspire to buying their own place. That is why Fianna Fáil wants to help renters break free of the rent trap.

As I said, Fianna Fáil will support this Bill on Second Stage. Allowing this legislation to proceed to pre-legislative scrutiny will give an opportunity to tease out its ramifications. For example, as the Minister stated, the constitutionality of the Bill may be disputed. Its impact on supply and the fact that it covers the entire country, not just the existing rent pressure zones, also need examination. Furthermore, it will give us an opportunity to discuss in detail the rent tax credit cost and its impact on the rental market. We need to strike a balance between restraining the extortionate rents tenants are paying and keeping ordinary landlords in the system and not penalising those who have not hiked up their rents in recent years.

I will focus briefly on the impact on small landlords. There are 150,000 landlords in Ireland, 80% of whom have either one or two rental units. They do not enjoy preferential tax treatment in contrast with the real estate investment trusts, REITs, and cuckoo funds this Government has cultivated. Fine Gael has focused on attracting REITs and Irish real estate funds, IREFs. Institutional landlords which are the norm in countries like Germany have begun to rapidly expand into Ireland but will not fill the gap left by the traditional landlord. REITs are heavily concentrated on the high income accommodation sector of the market, leaving large cohorts behind.

Haemorrhaging properties from a severely pressurised market further drives up prices, freezing out low income workers and vulnerable households which, in turn, is generating our abysmal homelessness crisis. Despite this, the Government has done nothing other than accelerate mortgage interest relief under pressure from my party to address this embattled sector. Instead, it has pressed its thumbs on the scale in favour of institutional investors.

The Minister may remember the publication in 2017 of the report of the working group on the tax treatment of landlords. That remains unfinished business. At pre-legislative and Committee Stage of this Bill, Fianna Fáil will ensure that the report's proposals on alleviating the burden on small landlords are addressed. The proposed rent freeze should not be a further spur to losing badly needed homes from that sector. A rent freeze alone will not address the multiple facets of the rent crisis, which goes much deeper than that. A new national rent deposit scheme will help address the disputes around deposits. A local authority rent accommodation quality certificate will help to improve standards. Rolling out cost rental to scale after years of missed deadlines is a badly needed step. Broader steps to tackle construction costs, reduce land prices and get bricks and mortar in the ground to boost supply are vital. Ultimately, however, we need to give renters an opportunity to realise their dreams and ambitions to own their own place. The Fine Gael vision of a private rental sector is both economically and socially unsustainable. The Sinn Féin model of total social rental is equally damaging. We should not be afraid to actively support people to own their own home.

The Bill should not be viewed in isolation. Fianna Fáil support for it is a recognition of the pressure and strain the rent trap is placing on the shoulders of tenants across Ireland. We will work on Committee Stage to further refine the Bill and ensure the playing field is levelled out for small landlords. Most important, we will ensure this Bill forms part of a suite of measures to help renters smash out of the jaws of the rent trap and buy a place of their own. Fianna Fáil's Planning and Development (Amendment) (First-Time Buyers) Bill 2019 passed Second Stage last week. Our affordable housing scheme, supports for renters to save for their deposit and

shared ownership models must all form part of a campaign to arrest the decline in home ownership and break the rent trap once and for all.

Deputy Pat Casey: Tonight's debate provides us with the opportunity to discuss solutions to the housing crisis in the rental sector rather than continue to play politics with the national emergency caused by the failure of current Government policies in respect of the rental sector.

Rents are at an all-time high and many families cannot afford their rent because of the rack-renting taking place in certain parts of the country. We have the perfect storm whereby rental units are leaving the market and being placed in the sales market, thus reducing the supply of homes for rent and putting extra pressure on families, particularly in the Dublin area and the wider commuter belt, including County Wicklow where I live.

The market based approach to the rental sector taken by Fine Gael in government is simply not good enough. Fine Gael had to be dragged kicking and screaming to introduce the rental pressure zones some years ago. I pointed out at the time that the best way of introducing the pressure zones would have been to introduce a national rent pressure zone and then remove areas that did not need to have such measures. Instead, the scheme has been reluctantly expanded, which has caused total confusion in the rental sector in County Wicklow regarding which areas are included in and excluded from the rent pressure zones, and the reasons for doing so. The lack of a coherent policy response by the Government to the rental sector has created deep uncertainty for tenants and landlords.

Fianna Fáil has introduced a number of Bills to address the rental crisis. Our recent Overcrowded Housing Bill provides for a new statutory definition of overcrowded housing to replace the outdated 1966 definition and the limited penalties currently used. The aim of the Bill is to provide clarity to ensure that landlords cannot exploit the current rental crisis to impose unsafe and substandard living accommodation. It sets the basic minimum, not the preferred option. The Fianna Fáil Bill would strengthen the legislative framework for tackling overcrowding and it should be reinforced by additional resources to local authorities to roll out comprehensive inspections.

Rents are at an all-time high. In the short-term letting sector entire homes and apartments are being rented to tourists while children and families are being accommodated in hotels, including my hotel in Glendalough, which is 50 km from Dublin city centre. Fianna Fáil introduced a Bill to control the unprecedented expansion of the short-term letting sector and the impact it is having on the rental market. Tonight, in Dublin alone, more than 4,600 homes and apartments are available on just one of the short-term letting platforms, the majority of which should be available to long-term tenants and not tourists. As a party, Fianna Fáil has always supported families in their aspiration to own a home of their own. We know that these families are failing to save for their future. The excuse that people prefer to rent is often used to explain reduced ownership levels. However, that ignores the growing difficulties that young families are experiencing in saving for a deposit in a rip-off rental market while faced with greater credit constraints. We introduced the Planning and Development (Amendment) (First-Time Buyers) Bill to give these families a chance.

A moral and ethical imperative must apply when it comes to the rental sector in housing. Spreadsheet focus and profit margin expansion must be limited by the common good. As we all know, the constitutional provision enshrining private property rights subjects those rights to the common good. The common good is being negatively affected by the rent profiteering in cer-

tain parts of the country, especially the greater Dublin area. This cannot be allowed to continue in the face of the housing and homelessness emergency. Responsible government mandates radical action in emergency circumstances to protect citizens from the risks and consequences of homelessness.

Fianna Fáil, as a solution based party, is willing to allow this Bill pass this Stage in order to introduce changes that make it workable. Fianna Fáil is making it clear tonight that there are no sacred cows in our determination to tackle the housing crisis. Fianna Fáil will introduce all measures needed to provide homes for all Irish people.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Tackling the issue of rent prices is far from a new phenomenon. Going back to the early part of the 20th century, we can see that efforts were made to tackle rent prices in worsening economic times. Following the end of the First World War, temporary rent control measures were introduced to tackle spiralling rents caused by a lack of supply of housing.

Some commentators try to help the Government by stating that the Opposition does not produce workable solutions. However, it is a bit like a football manager and his approach to how the game is played. At its core, this is a simple game and those who do not over-complicate it achieve most success. The basic principles of the housing problem and the solutions to it have not changed since *The Irish Times*, a century ago, reported on the rent control measures after the First World War. It referred to a lack of supply, spiralling rents and an increase in homelessness. Is that not a familiar theme?

One of the most depressing realities we all face in our constituency offices every week are the people who come into us who, having been approved for the housing assistance payment scheme, cannot find a property to rent because of the dearth of houses and apartments. In the case of those who are lucky enough to secure a home or an apartment, the prices we are seeing in our offices are depressing. Today, checking estate agents in Navan, my home town, I found that renting a four-bedroom semi-attached home in an estate would set one back €1,700 a month. That is €600 to €700 above what most people in the town would be paying in a mortgage for the same property. That is €20,400 per year just to keep a roof over one's head. In the course of this debate there is no harm in reiterating those statistics and putting them on the record because it reinforces the reason for such debates and initiatives. It also goes to the core of the ideology in respect of housing not only from Government but also driven by statutory bodies such as the Housing Agency during the past decade. That ideology has in effect brought us to this point, at which people cannot access properties to rent even if they can afford the astronomical prices being sought.

The statistics that the Minister and other Ministers will quote tonight will refer to the impact of this Bill or the impact of Rebuilding Ireland. Yet, if the reality was different from what we experience each week, there would be no need for debates such as the debate we are having tonight. This is not coming out of fresh air. That is the brutal reality.

In the wake of last week's motion of no confidence, there was an acceptance, even among staunch Fine Gael backbenchers, that the issue has not been grappled with. Perhaps tonight and, more importantly, when we go beyond the set piece of Second Stage and the Bill goes to Committee Stage, the opportunity to thrash out what can work should receive a fair hearing.

Let us consider the issue of rent pressure zones. Many of us raised the fact that additional

towns needed to come under the auspices of the scheme because of spiralling rents. We were accused of being merchants of doom for saying so, but we were reflecting the reality faced by renters in our constituencies. The town of Navan had seen these pressures, and belatedly this was acknowledged when, in March of this year, the town was added to the list along with Limerick city. Earlier, I quoted an example of a house in Navan on the rental market for €1,700 per month. It is obvious that the problem is manifestly real. Added to the problem of skyrocketing rents is the fact that there will be no hope of reversing the trend. This is affecting the desire of young couples and people to realise the dream of owning their own home because of the money they are pumping into rent. The decreasing levels of home ownership will continue in this country.

The process of implementing ideas in respect of the housing crisis is a two-way street. When we came to the House some weeks ago with proposals for first-time buyers, it was depressing to hear the manner in which the Minister was not only dismissive but aggressively dismissive and negative towards the means by which first-time buyers could be given preference.

Like the debate tonight about a freeze on rents, the fact that we will get the support of the House to move to Committee Stage is positive because at least it shows there is a willingness among the majority of parliamentarians to look at this problem in a broader way rather than through the narrow prism in which it is being viewed at the moment.

Deputy Denis Naughten: One of the biggest problems I have come across is the lack of any security in rental agreements. When a family gets notice to leave, the crisis really hits because no alternative homes are available. That is why these families end up in some circumstances in homeless accommodation. We need to rethink the way we do things when it comes to our housing crisis. That is why I support the progression of this Bill to Committee Stage. We need to rethink security of tenure of homes as well. All we have to do is look at what happens in agriculture. When the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government started in secondary school, the vast majority of farm leases in the country were of 11 months in duration. Today, long-term land leasing of between five and 15 years plus makes up over half of all farm leases. This is because our tax system incentivises long-term leasing. This needs to happen in the housing rental market and should focus on small land owners rather than international companies. If, like farm land, half of all rented homes were under leases of a minimum of five years, then it would leave far fewer families under the threat of homelessness.

The problem of affordable housing is complex and no single measure can promise a comprehensive solution. There are certain risks with some proposals and there could be unintended consequences, but we must take those risks in the interests of all our families. I encourage the Minister to look at the long-term leases in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and replicate the model in the housing sector to provide security of tenure to families.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: First, I wish to state that the Labour Party will be supporting the Bill on Second Stage. There is one particular issue to which we will propose an amendment on Committee Stage, but I will come to that later. It is clear from the numbers present that the Bill will pass on Second Stage. I too welcome the late conversion of Fianna Fáil. It will mean that the Bill will pass, and that is positive. However, it would have been more effective if that particular view had been expressed at an earlier stage in the life of this Dáil, because we might have been able actually to do something practical.

Quite honestly, we are coming close to the end of this Dáil and the practicalities of getting

the legislation all the way through both Houses of the Oireachtas are fairly difficult. Since there is a clear majority in favour, maybe that muscle can be used to move the Bill forward on Committee Stage. Perhaps we can have pre-legislative scrutiny quickly and not have a delay in taking the Bill on Committee Stage. We may be able to get it back to the House for Report Stage and then through the Seanad. Clearly, the Opposition numbers are greater in both Houses than the Government numbers. I am putting that challenge out tonight to be worked on.

As Deputy O'Brien said, there is a raft of Opposition Bills with nothing happening. What is the point really? We constantly debate the issue of housing here in this Chamber, but if we cannot actually do anything about it for the people who are stuck in rented accommodation that they cannot afford, then what is the point? The idea that people would pay in excess of €20,000 per year is absolute madness when we think of what average incomes are and the kind of incomes that people are trying to pay those rents from. We should make a concerted effort actually to achieve something within the lifetime of this Dáil rather than have all these worthy Bills going nowhere. Some of these Bills have come from me or my party as well as other parties. I called this place a do-nothing Dáil once and I see more and more evidence of that.

Many people present will remember when, three years ago, we sat in the Chamber late at night to bring through legislation that the Government considered to be important. There were some positive measures in it. It was the legislation that brought in rent pressure zones. We debated a complicated formula that was actually wrong and we had to put it right. We were here until midnight. There is no reason we cannot do business if we want to. One of the amendments we proposed at the time - it was proposed by other parties too - linked rent increases to the rate of inflation. If that had happened then rather than rent pressure zones, we would not have the kind of increases that we are looking at now. Such increases are putting us in the position of requiring a temporary rent freeze.

I wish to comment on the Berlin proposal. I had a look at it on my telephone. The proposal has not been implemented yet. There are warnings about how it might affect the housing market, but the legislation is not yet in place. There are protests about it and so on. We need to give it a chance to see how it works. The linking of rent increases to the rate of inflation is in place in several countries and is effective. I believe that is the best idea, if we get it in time.

Clearly, we have reached a point where rents are simply unaffordable for people. According to the most recent Daft report, in my city of Limerick the average rent is €1,219. I meet people all the time - we all do in our work as public representatives - who simply cannot afford the kind of rents they are being asked for. Before I came to Dublin yesterday, I met a group of elderly people in a retirement village. They are now being faced with rent increases that are simply impossible for them. They went into the retirement village believing that they were going into secure accommodation with rents that would not go up beyond a certain point, but they are now faced with significant rent increases.

Clearly, we need supply. No one disagrees with that. I want to comment briefly on that as well because we have seen affordable rental proposals being made while little is happening. I know there are intentions for several areas in the Dublin area in particular. Sites have been identified as suitable in my constituency and in other cities but we have seen no progress. We have not seen affordable purchase moving in a speedy fashion either.

9 o'clock

The vacant sites levy is meant to encourage the provision of land for the development of housing, but there is no great evidence that that land has been forthcoming either. Increasingly, the private sector is choosing to build on the public land that has been made available to it, something we debated on many occasions should not be the case.

I submitted a proposed Bill, which has not yet come back from the Ceann Comhairle's office, on something that my party included in a previous Private Members' Bill, namely, implementation of the Kenny report of the early 1970s. This would discourage people who own land that is appropriate for development from sitting on it and hoarding it until they can make a significant profit. This would be done by limiting the amount of profit to the current value plus 25%. I hope I will be able to introduce that Bill in the House in the near future. That brings me back to the point of us in opposition making proposals that do not move any further and are left, and us not being effective.

I support this Bill in principle. I would like to see a concerted effort to get it through. My party's concern, on which I would propose an amendment, relates to when the Bill is near implementation, and that is that people outside of rent pressure zones should be protected from their landlords increasing their rent significantly in anticipation of a freeze. That is always a fear with legislation and we would need to have measures to prevent that from happening. There may well be other proposals amending the legislation.

In principle, the concept is one that my party supports and is one we have proposed as well. We should move this on to Committee Stage but then we should move it further. Otherwise, we will have a new Dáil coming in with a pile of wonderful suggestions and Private Members' Bills that have not been enacted. We will have not been able to do anything significant to protect those who are stuck in private rented accommodation, cannot afford a mortgage, and are outside of the social housing income limits. Even if they are within those limits, they are probably still on waiting lists anyway. We need to do something to protect the people who are renting in Ireland.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Rachaimid ar aghaidh go dtí Solidarity-People Before Profit. Deputy Barry is sharing time with Deputies Paul Murphy and Gino Kenny.

Deputy Mick Barry: This is not just a debate about rent. It is a debate about class warfare. Since Fine Gael came to power, rents have increased at a rate more than twice the rate of wage increases. In the capital, rents are up 75% since Fine Gael came to power but the minimum wage is up only 30% in the same period.

The well-paid worker has been put to the pin of his or her collar. The medium-paid worker has been put onto a rack. The key worker, such as the nurse and the teacher, has been forced out of the cities in search of cheaper rents. The young worker has been forced to stay at home with mam and dad. The low-paid worker has been priced out of the market entirely and, in quite a few cases, forced into homelessness. The landlords grow richer. Working people grow poorer.

I mentioned on my Facebook page today that I would be speaking in this debate tonight. The most common comment was that the motion does not go far enough, that this should have been done five years ago, and that a rent freeze now would still leave them locked out of the market. Do not get me wrong, I will be supporting this motion. A rent freeze would be a step forward. If it can be done in Berlin, it can be done here too.

Everybody knows what is likely to happen next. The motion will be passed, tonight or on Thursday. It will be sent to Third Stage, to the Select Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government where, if it does not languish for months and months, it is likely to be blocked by one of the Government's money messages.

Thousands of people marched on 5 December to protest homelessness. It was a demonstration of real raw anger, a collective *j'accuse* against this landlords' Dáil. The marchers are correct to have no faith in the Thirty-second Dáil. They march again on 11 January. That needs to be a huge demonstration so that what was done to the political establishment in this country on water charges can be done again now on the issues of homelessness, rents and the entire housing crisis that the Government has created.

Deputy Gino Kenny: People Before Profit will be supporting this Bill. The Minister of State, Deputy English, will agree that the rent spiral is out of control, and when something is out of control, it needs to be stopped. We are at 20% more than peak rents in 2008. We all know what happened in 2008. Even by comparison with 2011 when it was trough rents, rents are 40% more now. Rents are completely unsustainable at present.

I had a look on *daft.ie* at three houses in Clondalkin and the statistics are incredible. At present, a three-bedroom house in Clondalkin is €2,400 a month, a two-bedroom unit is €1,500, and a one-bedroom unit is €1,400. These are extraordinary figures. Doing the maths, two people on the average industrial wage would have to forgo half their income on rent alone, which is incredibly expensive and almost completely unsustainable. The recommended spend on rent or mortgage is one third of income. A person on or just above the minimum wage can forget about rent in Clondalkin or anywhere else.

I want to mention the housing assistance payment, HAP. Not only are landlords discriminating against tenants on HAP, they are looking for homeless HAP. They drive up rents so much that they get more than €2,000 because people are desperate and the Government is giving this money out to landlords.

A report earlier this year showed that one in ten people in Ireland is spending over 60% of his or her income on rent. This is completely unsustainable. All this is having a corrosive effect on society. Not only are three generations living in houses but also 10,000 find themselves in homeless accommodation because of the perfect storm of the policy of no public housing and rents going through the roof.

I agree with the Minister that not all landlords are bad. There are some accidental landlords who, for certain reasons, have a house to rent etc. There are some decent people out there. However, the over-reliance on the private market, super landlords and other landlords has distorted everything and has created a situation where it is completely unsustainable.

Government policy, regardless of whether or not the Minister of State, Deputy English, likes it, because he has been in government for the past nine years, has created this crisis. The Government has created a crisis where rents are completely unsustainable. There are three ways that will be tackled: a rent freeze, rent control, and the Government being shown the door.

Deputy Paul Murphy: One in four of Deputies who will vote on this measure on Thursday is a landlord. Almost one in three members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael who will vote on Thursday is a landlord. When Deputy Micheál Martin was asked at the weekend about the double jobbing of one in three Deputies in this House, he stated, "Parliament has to represent

the diversity of people.” What the Deputy forgot was that while one in four Deputies is a landlord, one in 25 people in general is a landlord. This is not a question of diversity. It is a question of class representation by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They should be absenting themselves from the vote. More importantly, it is a question of politics. It is not about Members’ personal interests necessarily. It is about the fact that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael represent the big landlords and the big developers. That is why we have the housing crisis that we have and we need to kick them out.

I have a question for the Minister of State, Deputy English. I asked the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, outside when he was leaving and I got an inconclusive answer. Will the Minister of State meet a committee of people from those who organised the protest on 5 December? They have selected a committee of people and they want to present their demands. They were asked about what they think needs to happen to resolve the housing crisis. They want to present them to the Minister. Will the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, agree to meet them?

I support the Bill and agree that a rent freeze is not enough given that rents are already unaffordable for great numbers of working class people. What we need in reality are rent controls linked to income. Nobody should be spending more than 20% of their income on rent or accommodation costs. We need a massive public home building project driven by a State construction company. For all those landlords who are talking about the difficulties and so on when, in general, profits are up, there should be an option simply to sell to the State and for the State to provide housing. We should be demanding the nationalisation of the corporate landlords as is being demanded loudly in Berlin at the moment. To make those things happen, we need a movement. On 11 January and 28 March we must make this a huge issue for the general election next year.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am sharing time with Deputy Connolly. The latest report on average rents in the private rental sector from *daft.ie* records a new high of €1,400 a month nationally. This is the fourth year in a row that a new high has been recorded by *daft.ie*. Average rents nationally are up 5% over the past year and this is a fall from a 12% rise a year earlier. It is a reflection of the limited effect of rent cap zones, which I believe makes the case for a stronger, more effective measure which the Bill advocates in the form of a three-year national rent freeze. Even keeping rents at their existing level means people still face unaffordable rents in the private rental sector. The average rent in Dublin is now a staggering €2,044 a month. In Dublin 8, part of my constituency, rents are even higher. Since 2010, average rents in Dublin 8 have risen by 125%.

At the same time as we have a new record high in rents, we have a new record high in terms of the 10,514 people living in emergency accommodation. The housing charity Threshold has said this figure would be doubled were it not for the fact that it has assisted a further 11,500 people to keep their homes. The report for the year showed an average of 320 calls a day for assistance from tenants in the private rental sector. It also showed that 75% of notices of termination did not arise from wrongdoing by tenants. The main reason was that the property was being sold, often a bogus claim by landlords. Almost 50% of notices to quit were found to be invalid by the Residential Tenancies Board. There are exceptions but the housing crisis is increasingly giving rise to a new rapacious class of rack-renting landlords. We have a new phenomenon of mass evictions due to the entry of vulture and cuckoo funds into the market. The Minister said earlier that there were no new landlords coming on board. I just checked again on my phone. The report states that there were 170,282 registered with the RTB in 2015; that rose

to 175,250 in 2016 and 176,251 in 2017. I could not get the figures for 2018 but it did mention that they would rise again. There is a solution which has been raised repeatedly by me and other Deputies in this Dáil. That solution is to use existing State-owned land at the low interest rates available through the European Investment Bank for a massive programme to build public housing for rent at affordable rents with proper security of tenure. As long as the Minister and this Government set their faces against such a programme, the crisis will continue. No amount of spinning the figures can disguise that fact. I will be voting for the Bill.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am not really sure how many times I can step up and speak on housing. I do this tonight in the context of tomorrow's meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, when we have a number of groups coming in to talk about access to justice. One of them is the Mercy Law Resource Centre which stated:

We make this submission at a time of desperate crisis in homelessness. As of October 2019 there were 10,514 people homeless in Ireland. This is the highest number since the Department started recording these figures. Of those recorded in the official statistics as homeless, 1,733 were families and 3,826 were children.

A couple of days ago I asked what figure is the one at which the Government will realise its policies are not working. I wonder how many more times any of us on this side of the House can stand up, but we have a duty to do so. It is a privilege to be here. We are on a good salary and we have a duty to highlight that the Government's policies are directly causing the housing crisis. The Government has to realise that at some stage. If the figures for homelessness do not capture its attention, perhaps Galway city will. We have lots of public land, we have land zoned residential, yet we have a major housing crisis. The Government declared it a rent pressure zone, yet we have people who are on a waiting list for a house since 2004 or 2005. Yesterday in my office I looked at a situation where somebody has been 14 years on a waiting list and never once been offered a house, which in itself raises serious questions about housing policy. Now that person and the family have been in emergency accommodation for over six months. Perhaps that might draw the attention of the Minister of State. Perhaps the fact that we have 183,312 empty properties throughout the country would draw his attention. As regards the schemes the Government has introduced, the repair and leasing scheme since 2017 has led to 102 homes coming on-stream. The vacant housing reuse strategy 2018-2021 is notable for its lack of urgency and its lack of a plan. There are absolutely no numbers coming back under that strategy. A report into vacant properties in rural areas, which I welcomed, and a pilot project selected six towns, significantly none of them in Galway city or county. There is absolutely no urgency in publishing that report. There is no cost-benefit analysis of the Government's policies in terms of the HAP and RAS long-term initiatives, or on the cost of them as opposed to direct building on public land.

I am glad the Minister of State is nodding. It is very good that he is nodding. The previous Minister, Deputy Coveney, also agreed with me when I spoke. I get a little confused. He agreed with me when I said that development in Galway is developer-led, that there is an absence of an overall plan and that the common good does not come into the picture at all. He nodded and agreed. It is in the Official Report. I am not sure where the difficulty lies if the Minister of State is agreeing with me. It is not social housing, but public housing on public land which will give the message to the market that the Government is serious about the provision of homes. A home is not a commodity to be traded. It is the most basic requirement for people to live, to have warmth and to enable them to participate in a democracy.

I would expect the senior Minister to come in here tonight and, instead of trading insults and standing up as if it was a debate in Trinity College or one of the other universities, to come in with a written speech and outline what progress has been made on the five pillars in respect of the provision of social housing. The Taoiseach misled the Dáil today regarding the number of social houses. Public housing or social housing does not mean HAP to me. The Minister of State said HAP was a temporary measure, which is a complete misinterpretation of the legislation brought in by the previous Fine Gael and Labour Party Government. It was brought in as a long-term solution to the housing crisis and the provision of housing. It is an integral part of the problem. The first of the five pillars was to address homelessness and there is failure on that. The next was to accelerate social housing and there is failure on that because social housing for the Government is HAP. The next was to build more homes and the Government has made some progress on that. The next was to improve the rental sector and there is absolutely no progress on that. It is impossible. In Galway, the Simon Community has written report after report on the Locked Out of the Market studies. Another pillar was to utilise existing housing and there is utter failure on that. There are over 183,000 units empty in the country. At the very least, the senior Minister should have gone through this and said, "This is where we are, this is where we are going, bear with us." Instead of that, he came in and traded insults. We have pleaded with the Government to call a housing emergency. Galway City Council and its councillors, who are not known for being radical, called for an emergency in April this year. At what stage will the Government use its ears to listen and stop giving glib responses?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I do not have long to speak so I will touch on only one element of this debate, one that is often forgotten here, namely, that the free market is the space in which much of this problem will be resolved. I hear this from Fine Gael and from the media. This assertion presupposes that there is a free market in the sector, which is rubbish. There is massive distortion in the housing market, as there is in the insurance market and in the beef market. Fine Gael is the architect of much of the distortion and dysfunction that has been created. One of the main ways in which Fine Gael has created dysfunction is by rolling out the red carpet to the international vulture funds. I sat in front of Deputy Noonan four years ago and asked him about trying to get more supply into the market. He stated that houses were not expensive enough. The red carpet was rolled out to the international vulture funds at that time in order to increase the price of houses and improve the balance sheets of the banks. This was achieved by an extremely generous taxation policy and light-touch regulation of the vulture funds and international investors. It is not just me saying this. The UN condemned Ireland for allowing multinational vulture funds buy up vast swathes of properties and charge sky-high rents in respect of them. Cash-rich funds are buying up entire apartment blocks and housing estates and that, in part, is leading to high rents. Until the Government deals with the dysfunction to which I refer, it will have continue to experience major difficulties.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to apologise on behalf of our colleague and good friend, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, who is absent through no fault of his own.

I take this opportunity to declare that I am not a landlord and never have been. Unlike some of the previous speakers, especially the members of Solidarity-People Before Profit, I do not demonise every landlord. Are we going to drive all landlords out of existence? If we are, then what will we do? We have to be reasonable and fair. Rent freezes were meant to be introduced in Berlin - one was brought in many years ago in New York - and other places. However, the rent freeze for Berlin has not yet been implemented. A rent freeze is a simplistic solution. We need real solutions but we also need to be rid of this Fine Gael-Independent Alliance Govern-

ment because it has an ideological hang-up about building local authority houses and about looking after people from the cradle to the grave. It does not want to look after anyone. That is the fundamental problem.

An Teachta Tóibín is 100% right. The Government will welcome in the vulture funds. The banks are making people homeless. It is a case of to hell with ordinary accidental landlords who might happen to have been left a house. The Government has no interest in these people, it wants to protect the corporate landlords and big business. It has never been interested in the ordinary people. I can tell the Minister of State that. There is no senior Minister here tonight and no Government Deputies. The benches are empty. The Government lost two votes in the Seanad tonight because it had no one there to oppose the votes. The life has gone out of this Government. The sooner it lies down, the better. It has no interest in the ordinary people but they have a lot of interest in it and, as they showed in the recent by-elections, they are waiting for it. They are waiting in the long grass. It might be the middle of January and the grass will be low, but they will find the Government with the peann luaidhe in the ballot box and it will be banished. We have had nine years of this Government and it has done nothing only line fat cats' pockets and give way to corporate greed and vulture funds and everything else. That is what it is good at. That is what it always did but it will get its answer and then it will be to hell or to Connacht with it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of this Bill. It has been confirmed that a majority of those who are becoming homeless are from the private rental sector. There were 10,514 people homeless across Ireland by the end of September. This figure included adults and children. More than one third of those in emergency accommodation are children. A huge proportion of my constituents, from Bantry, Baltimore, Skibbereen, Clonakilty, Roscarberry, Bandon and Kinsale, to name only a few areas, are unable to get on the property ladder and have to resort to paying enormous rents. The increase in rents is driving people out of rented accommodation and potential first-time buyers are struggling to pay such high rents. This is making it impossible for a large number of people to save for deposits and leaving them feeling trapped in their homes and only living to work. The latter is giving rise to a crisis in people's mental health.

This Government has spoken many times of its plans to build more houses in a bid to ease pressure in the market, which, hopefully, would lead to a fall in rents. This has not happened. As we see with many things from the Government, it is all hope and no real action. The latest *daft.ie* statistics show a 10% increase in the number of homes available for rent, compared with this time last year. Rents, however, have continued to climb. If better controls were put in place in respect of things like security deposits, rent increases and termination procedures, it would go a long way towards giving the tenant the protection that is needed. It would also give landlords clearer rules and create a more protected environment for them in the context of renting out their properties. In order to reduce the impact of the housing crisis, this Government needs to consider encouraging more property owners to become landlords by providing protections and making the option more appealing. I have heard horror stories of landlords not being paid rent for months on end. I have stood many times here in this very spot and advocated for the vacant spaces above commercial units to be refurbished in order to provide much-needed residential dwellings across west Cork. One need only drive through any village or town to see vacant above-shop units. I have encouraged this Government to consider offering refurbishment grants in respect of these vacant properties.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for giving me the opportunity to talk again

about rent and housing. It is surely a problem in Kerry and especially in Killarney, where rents have gone from €700 and €800 a month to €1,200 and €1,500. People just cannot afford to pay such amounts. The real problem is that we do not have enough houses. It has to be remembered and acknowledged by the Minister of State that in many cases the Government is taking 50% because the landlords are taxed 50% when they go over a certain threshold. The Government should do something about that because landlords are exiting the sector and selling off their houses to private interests. They are getting out because with all that is involved they cannot comply. As dear as the rents are, they cannot make ends meet with the tax that they have to pay.

The HAP scheme is a disaster. It is purely a means of getting people off the housing list. More supply is the answer. Another problem is that local authorities are taking much too long to turn around the vacant houses. The tenant purchase scheme that was to assist us in doing that is no longer an option for many tenants because 80% who apply to buy out their houses are not qualifying. We have asked the Government often enough to do something about that but it has done nothing about it.

Another desperate thing that the Government is doing is taking people with three or four children off the housing list when their income exceeds €33,500.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Family income supplement payments are leading to people being thrown off the housing list.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is surely wrong and the Government must acknowledge it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Government has to acknowledge that.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I very much welcome this Bill. It feels as though there is a renewed momentum to change the narrative on housing, at least among the real Opposition. For too long, the suggestions from this side of the House in respect of measures to help resolve the housing emergency, or even to draw attention to the fact that there is one, have been ignored. The Social Democrats called for a rent freeze over a year ago and Fianna Fáil refused to support us. Had that party not sat on its hands, we would have had fewer rent increases over the past 12 months. The same is true of many things in the confidence and supply situation. It has taken the focus away from the critical issues. Not only has that distorted the Government, it has distorted the Opposition as well.

We are all aware that the private rental market is the single biggest avenue into homelessness. This morning the Taoiseach said that homelessness was stabilising at a very high level in Dublin. It is far from stabilising outside Dublin. The Minister of State should know that. People are facing spiralling rents and little or no security of tenure in a market where the balance of power lies predominantly with the landlord. People are afraid to report the need for even minor repairs because they do not want to remind their landlords of their existence. They just want to pay the money into the bank every month.

This Government's housing policy is predominantly dependent on transferring huge sums

of public money directly to private landlords, with an estimated €500 million due to be transferred in 2020 alone. This is the 32nd quarter in a row in which rents have risen. The average rent is now more than double what it was in the Celtic tiger era. Thousands of renters are paying over 70% of their income in rent which is utterly unsustainable. The argument made by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government against a rent freeze is that it would be too expensive or could have unintended consequences. We know what the intended consequences of not having a rent freeze are because we can see them clearly. They are catastrophic for people who find themselves homeless, in emergency accommodation or trying to self-accommodate, which often means sleeping on someone's couch.

The Social Democrats support this Bill but we are likely to seek to amend it on Committee Stage, particularly the tax provision section. We remain to be convinced that an incentive-based scheme is the best way to ensure fair treatment for all in the rental sector. As with the help-to-buy scheme, it could have a distorting impact on the sector and may well disadvantage some people.

I will conclude by saying for the fourth time in the past couple of weeks that what is happening with HAP, which was already problematic, is utterly chaotic. The length of time that people have to wait to go through the HAP administrative system means that it is almost impossible for them to secure accommodation in certain parts of the country. This must be addressed and I will keep on saying it until it is addressed. It seems that no matter what we say in this House, the Minister remains absolutely convinced that what he is doing is right. He really needs to start to listen but that is something that has not been evident up to now.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of this Bill and to confirm that I will be voting in favour of it. The provisions of this Bill are quite similar to those in legislation - the Housing Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Bill - I sponsored over 12 months ago. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil voted against that legislation. I welcome the road-to-Damascus conversion of Fianna Fáil on this occasion but I think the latter may be more to do with the forthcoming general election than anything else.

As already stated, the Bill that I sponsored more than a year ago contained very similar provisions to those contained in the Bill before the House. It included the prohibition of rent increases, a reduction in rents, the prohibition of eviction from buy-to-let properties that are sold and a statutory declaration of a housing emergency. A recent Threshold report found that the rental market in Ireland is insecure, unaffordable and of poor quality. There is no security of tenure, no real rent control and rental properties are generally of poor quality. The sale of buy-to-let properties with vacant possession is a very serious problem, which is leading directly to homelessness in many cases. There is no rent control whatsoever on new tenancies.

Rents have skyrocketed in recent years and are now out of control. Everybody knows this except the Government, whose members have their heads stuck in the sand. They seem to believe that we are getting places with the rent pressure zones but the fact is that many people in Dublin are paying over €2,000 per month in rent. That equates to €24,000 per year, which is astronomical. Even in the rent pressure zones, rents are approximately twice what they should be. Many low-income families are falling between two stools in that they do not qualify for local authority housing or for a mortgage. In Tipperary, for example, a family of two adults and two children earning €27,501 will not get on the local authority housing list and have absolutely no possibility of getting a mortgage. On that kind of income, the maximum mortgage allowable, even if one was available, would be €96,250 but the average price of a house in Tipperary

is €183,688. Of course, those applying for mortgages must have a 10% deposit, which is practically impossible. Many families are now paying 40% or more of their income in rent. Even HAP tenants are paying €200 per month in rental top-ups. The situation is hugely difficult for ordinary families and it must be tackled. The measures in this Bill will go some way towards tackling it. While more needs to be done, I will certainly support the Bill.

Deputy Mark Ward: I spoke last week in support of the motion of no confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and nothing I have heard this week has made me change my mind. The Government's housing policy is a failure. It has failed the 4,000 children who will wake up on Christmas morning in emergency accommodation. More and more families are entering homelessness due to spiralling rents in this country. They simply cannot afford rent increases on top of increases in the cost of childcare, insurance, education and normal everyday life. There was a time in this country when families worked to live but now many families just work to survive and any extra cost can push them over the edge. Rents are out of control and continue to rise. The annual 4% rent increase permitted in rent pressure zones is something that families have come to dread. Let us take the example of a family with three children on a very modest income who are just over the threshold for social housing and therefore not eligible for any assistance. This family cannot afford to save for a mortgage because of rental costs. In 2016, the family's rent was €1,400 per month, which they could just about afford. The 4% increase kicked in from January 2017, when their rent increased to €1,456 per month. In 2018, it increased to €1,514, in 2019 it went up to €1,574 and in January 2020, their rent will be €1,637 per month. In a few short years, this financially crippled family has seen its rent increase from €1,400 per month to €1,637. The annual rent increase has not only pushed working families into poverty; it has pushed many into homelessness.

This Sinn Féin Bill, if passed, would ensure that renters are protected from the worry of future rent hikes. It would also give workers and families a break by putting up to €1,500 back into their pockets. Renters deserve better and all Deputies in this House, including the Minister - but I will not hold my breath - have a chance to give them a much needed break.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: For many in the rental sector, this is a very worrying time. Spiralling rents and decreasing numbers of rental properties are making them feel very vulnerable and not in control of their lives. Many who are in good, secure employment are facing the prospect of homelessness. Sinn Féin has been advocating a rent freeze for years. I called for such a freeze on a number of occasions when I was the Sinn Féin housing spokesperson during the last Fine Gael Government's term. Since then the situation has not improved but has deteriorated significantly. This Government's response to the crisis has been to allow rents to spiral out of control and to enact legislation that allows landlords to increase rents by up to 4% every two years. The implementation of the Government's rent pressure zones has been on what can only be considered a sporadic and *ad hoc* basis. We are at a stage now where for many people it would be cheaper to have a mortgage than to rent. The ability to get a mortgage for families on the average industrial wage is very difficult, if not impossible, and is unachievable for those families living on the minimum wage. Most lenders will ask for up to 10% of the property value as a deposit which is out of the reach of most families.

Contrary to what the Taoiseach may think, their parents' pockets do not go that deep. We welcome Fianna Fáil's recent conversion to rent freezes, having previously opposed all attempts at their imposition. An election must be coming up soon. According to the RTB, in the first quarter of 2019, the standard average rent for Dublin stood at €1,662, up from €1,532 in the same quarter the previous year. This is a clear indicator of how fast rents are rising and of

the failed rent pressure zone policy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Rents have skyrocketed in the last few years. In the last year alone, Laois renters experienced a 7% increase in their rent, bringing their average monthly payment to €980. In Offaly, renters saw a 5.5% increase, bringing their rents to an average of €915 per month. Compared with 2017, renters in Laois are now handing over an additional €2,808 per year to landlords, while in Offaly tenants are handing over a whopping €3,700 per year to landlords. This is a huge increase with some workers paying up to half their wages in rent. These are workers who are just scraping by and going without essentials, like proper clothes and heating. Enough is enough. The rental market is out of control and the only people who cannot see it are those in the Government. Rack renting landlords must be reined in.

This Government has been too reliant on the private market for social housing, using measures such as HAP and leasing. These are reducing the supply of housing available for renting in the private sector and, in turn, driving up rents. We have brought forward yet another piece of legislation to give workers and renters a break. Our Bill would enforce a three-year rent freeze across the State, and through a rental tax rebate Laois renters would get €980 back and would be €980 better off, while Offaly renters would be €915 better off.

Alongside this measure, Sinn Féin would double the output of social and affordable housing in 2020. We would kick start the affordable housing purchase scheme to allow workers and their families who cannot get a mortgage from banks to buy a house - contrary to what Fianna Fáil was trying to say earlier on - and escape the rental market. We would also develop a cost to rental programme through local authorities and approved housing bodies. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, said earlier that the Government cannot give renters a modest tax break and that it would cause chaos. This Government has no problem giving tax breaks to landlords.

Sinn Féin has the solutions to the housing crisis and we are calling on all parties across the House to support and implement them.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It is crystal clear that Rebuilding Ireland has failed. Regardless of how many times the statistics are recycled or quoted by the Minister of State or the Minister, the evidence is overwhelming. The record number of people in homelessness is proof of this failure. The record, all-time high rents are more evidence. The squalid conditions that many renters are forced to live in shows this. The thousands of adult children and young families forced to live in their parents' home is further proof. The dogs in the street know that Rebuilding Ireland has failed. The only places that one will hear otherwise are in the ivory towers of Government Buildings. We often hear the Taoiseach say that he cannot just build houses overnight. He clearly does not realise that Fine Gael has been in government for almost nine years. No one expects thousands of homes to be built overnight but what we did expect was the realistic ambition to build tens of thousands of houses over the last decade and the Government simply has not delivered that.

The Minister of State always talks about the issue of supply, but he and the Minister have failed to tackle one of the biggest blockages in this area, namely, void houses not being brought back into use. In the previous vote of no confidence in the Minister in September 2018, I raised the issue of 70 such houses in Limerick city. Today there are 151. The Minister of State cannot tell me that his system is working. These houses take a lot less money and time to put back into service and public use. It should have been a priority to ensure that they were back into use and that there are no empty voids left lingering for years while thousands wait on the housing list.

Again, this has not been done by his Government.

I commend my party colleague for bringing this common-sense Bill forward which will really help renters. I hope that in the general election next year people will turn to a Sinn Féin Government that will take the much-needed, radical decisions that are needed to help workers, renters and their families. I am glad to see that the impending general election has awoken Fianna Fáil from its three-year hibernation and that it is ready to support our Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and am grateful for the opportunity to say a number of words on this Bill.

Before I do, I wish to comment on the voids question that has been mentioned. It is not true to say, as Deputy Quinlivan has done, that we have not tackled voids, which even his own party's spokesperson will recognise. It does not mean that we are not sometimes annoyed that some local authorities are a little slow in turning them around. The Deputy referred to Limerick in 2018 and afterwards. When we checked it at that time, Limerick was allocated the resources it needed to bring those voids back into operation, both in rural and urban areas. The voids programme in general has brought 10,000 houses back into use over the last number of years.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It is double that rate.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Damien English: I am answering the Deputy's question and I presume he will raise this information again. He raised it here a couple of years ago. We checked it out. Money was allocated and Limerick did not spend as quickly as it should have done. It eventually did so. I will check again regarding the houses the Deputy has just mentioned. I suspect that these are another round of new houses that have become voids. If they are the same ones that is a different story. I doubt if that is the case. Over 10,000 houses have been brought back into the system over the last couple of years and rightly so, as they should not have been left empty for so long. Thankfully, that is one area that we can agree in which much progress has been made. That does not mean it is perfect but there should be very few long-term voids left in the system now. Every local authority was told in October 2018 to apply for any extra resources they wanted to bring any voids they had back into use. This included Limerick which was written to specifically. The resources were there to fix them. I will take other criticisms, but not that one. If Deputy Quinlivan is saying that there are that many voids, we will check those out again because they may be new ones.

There are a couple of questions on this Bill which I will address. In the first instance, the Minister clearly outlined our position at the outset of this discussion. This Government is all too aware of the challenges posed by the rental market and the impact on renters. We acknowledge and know that the rents are too high for many people. There is no disputing that. The figures are there and recorded.

Our opposition to this Bill is an evidence-based position derived from evaluating the medium and long-term outcomes from a crude intervention such as this. This is not something that we have not researched. We have checked this out and looked at the evidence and we do not agree with it. I accept that Sinn Féin holds this view and has held it for a long number of years, which I do not dispute. Sinn Féin is genuinely bringing the Bill forward in good faith. I do not believe it will have the right outcome that it thinks it will have, but we will differ on that.

In fairness, the party is bringing out some very well thought-out policies and proposals which I respect. It is wrong in this, however. There is no evidence to back the party on this. Only time will tell which of us is right on this Bill. There is no evidence to show this, and the evidence that we can see shows the opposite outcome, where it has hit supply. There are issues there that need to be looked at. From purely an evidence-based point of view, we do not agree with this Bill but I respect the view that Sinn Féin holds, which I believe is wrong.

Fianna Fáil's view is a dangerous one to hold where it is flip-flopping around when it comes to rent controls, rent freezes and pressures. We have had it before from its party's previous spokesperson and we have it again now. This is not a good way to develop housing policy. I listened to Deputy Darragh O'Brien earlier but he is not here to take the criticism. I do not believe he is supporting the Bill at all. I am not so sure if Deputy Jan O'Sullivan may have been conned and may not have heard all of the interviews. I am not so sure if Deputy Ó Broin has been conned because he knows well that Fianna Fáil is claiming to support this Bill as it is a populist stance that sounds cool, but I wonder if it will vote for it on Committee Stage next week or the week after that. The chances of Sinn Féin bringing the Bill through Committee Stage in the next couple of weeks are very slim because it is quite clear that this is a holding position by Fianna Fáil. It does not really believe in the Bill, which is possibly a positive in one way. However, Fianna Fáil is claiming to be for the Bill because it sounds good.

I listened to many of the Fianna Fáil contributions and I will concentrate on them for a few minutes. I apologise to Deputy Connolly for so doing because I know she wishes me to go through other issues. I listened for a few hours to Fianna Fáil speakers last week and again tonight. There is a trend emerging that it is the party to be left in charge of housing. We have seen that before and we had that, we know where that got us, and it was not a positive outcome. I listened to Fianna Fáil's spokespersons tonight and they were talking about a generation renting. I have no problem admitting that rents are far too high now. They are not going to be so for a generation. These are temporary. We will deal with them. Already we can see the *daft.ie* reports saying that rents have reached their height and are beginning to come back down which is because of supply. We will keep honing in on that. With all of the changes to the rent pressures zones I have no doubt that we will get those rents back down again. It will not be for a generation. Rents are absolutely too high today. That is different to what Fianna Fáil had, the so-called party of homeownership, which I heard in the speeches again tonight and last week. People of my generation and others were left with 30 or 40 year mortgages and massive, highly inflated prices. It is not a couple of years of paying rents that are too high, although it is definitely unfair to anybody when rents are too high. They were 100% mortgages for 30 or 40 years for properties that were not worth that price. The mortgages were unsustainable. The Fianna Fáil way is to stick people with mortgages that they should never have had in the first place for their entire lives, not for a couple of years. It is hard to take this talk, that it is for home ownership, from Fianna Fáil week after week and certainly in the past couple of weeks when it was heightened. I am sorry Deputy Casey has to listen to this again tonight because, in fairness, he does not do that, but the rest of his colleagues do it repeatedly.

However, if Fianna Fáil wishes to make that claim, it should check the figures on home ownership before telling me that my party, the Government or other parties are changing home ownership. We have not changed it. To be clear about the statistics on this, home ownership in Ireland peaked at 79.3% in 1991 and has fallen continually since then. In that time the party that was in government most often was Fianna Fáil. In the last couple of years it has been at 67.6%. The biggest drop in home ownership occurred when Fianna Fáil was in government.

The statistics are available. In fact, there was the highest number of private rental landlords when Fianna Fáil was in charge in 2006. Home ownership changed during those years, and we should be clear about that. Those who were lucky enough to get a house were unlucky enough to be stuck with a mortgage that was unsustainable. That is Fianna Fáil's record when it comes to housing. Fianna Fáil comes into the House week after week and tries to rewrite the statistics on home ownership. The statistics have been recorded and cannot be rewritten because they are factual. Instead of repeating that mantra, it should check the statistics before coming to the House to debate this matter further.

Some Members asked about going back to Rebuilding Ireland. We did that last week and I am happy to do it again next week, but I will stick with what is in this Bill. We all acknowledge that the number of homeless families is far too high. The number is one of the highest ever, and nobody denies it. However, it is likewise with the social housing building programme. In 2020, the number will be the highest in the last 20 years, through boom times and difficult times. It is the highest social housing output through direct build. This does not include the other houses we will acquire through voids, empty houses, leasing and so forth, which are in addition. The direct social housing build will be the highest next year. I have no problem with analysing the facts but I urge Members to look at this from our side as well. We will listen to them, but it should be *vice versa* when we present facts and figures. We are not making them up. They are there and they can be teased and argued about. It is a two-way conversation.

I know the number of homeless families is far too high. Thousands of families left homelessness last year and thousands more will do so next year, and rightly so. We must get people out of emergency accommodation and into permanent housing. I cannot stress that enough. Thankfully, one area in which there is a fair amount of progress is with regard to people who are sleeping rough. Everybody can see that there is major intervention and everybody supports it. It is taxpayers' money through Government supports, NGOs and various agencies. Everybody is pulling their weight and the number of people who are sleeping rough is well down. It is certainly much lower than it was during the so-called boom years. Some progress is being made there. Nobody is denying that a great deal more work is required when it comes to getting homeless families out of emergency accommodation. We must focus on what is happening in the best way we can.

The Bill will possibly only add to the woes of renters by further reducing supply, restricting movement, disproportionately hitting would-be new entrants and driving some tenants into black market situations in which they could be paying rents that are far above those permitted under the RPZs while depriving them of the tenant protection measures and minimum standards that have been enhanced under this Government. I accept that the vital changes that were made and will have an impact were supported by the House. Already the RTB has strengthened its team and is putting more people out in the market and is taking more enforcement cases. It has big plans to take on many cases next year, sending a strong message to the private rental market. That market requires a great deal of intervention and that is why we are doing this. Those measures will strengthen the rent pressure zones and other parts of the rental market.

We will see many developments over the next 12 months in that space. I believe rents will steady. We can see that where the rent pressure zone rules are implemented rents are beginning to steady. There is still more progress to be made and nobody denies that. Berlin is a good example of what happens when one intervenes with rent controls and rent freezes due to rent pressures, even when there is talk about them. Look at what has happened to the supply in Berlin in just a year. Planned activity is down by 40%. That is well before it has happened and

is due to just the conversation. That is why Fianna Fáil's conversation is dangerous. I accept Sinn Féin has this view and everybody knows its view.

The Bill also proposes to treat social housing tenancies differently. I am not sure if it is a mistake in the Bill but it would lead to an extraordinary situation where private tenancies were subject to a rent freeze while housing assistance payment rents or RAS rents could be increased without restriction. Given that the earlier RPZs came into force less than three years ago, their replacement with a straight rent freeze is highly likely to damage market sentiment. Potential investors could opt to direct investment elsewhere, not least due to the fear that the State's approach to rent control has become unpredictable. Even during my days in college one knew that investors, be they local investors, funds from abroad or credit union funds, like to have certainty. There is some rent predictability at present, but a rent freeze can deter investment and has been proven to do that. People claim we are too pro-market, but if one interferes in the market too much it affects other investments when it comes to job creation and so forth, not just housing. It is dangerous to overstep the mark. That is our warning in this regard.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I welcome the Bill. The intention is that €1,500 would be put back into the pockets of renters every year through a tax break, which they badly need. It was ironic to hear the criticism of that earlier, given that the Government has given tax breaks for the past number of years to developers and every other sector in society, except to people who are trying to rent a home and keep things together.

The possibility of a rent freeze excites people throughout the country. Everybody lives in fear of the rent going up. That is the case not only in the metropolitan areas but also in rural Ireland. In the four counties of Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo and Roscommon rents have risen by between 6% and 7% in the last year. That is happening everywhere. In many regional towns one will pay €1,000 to rent a small three-bedroom house. People cannot afford that. Certainly, they cannot pay higher rents in a rural area as they must have transport to get to work and to be able to live their lives. This is having a huge impact on people in every part of the country.

The Minister and the Opposition have acknowledged that rents are too high. Everybody seems to be in agreement on that and everybody except the Government seems to be in agreement that a rent freeze is a good idea. That is the position this evening and it is an ironic situation in the mouth of an election. The Government is telling people in this State who are paying rents they cannot afford that they will have to continue doing so because the market says it must be that way. The reality is that the market created this crisis and looking to the market to solve it will not work. Everybody knows that. Fianna Fáil has come to that logical conclusion late in the day and I invite the Government to come to it now.

A firm hand of regulation must be put in place or else there will be a runaway situation. We have had it for a number of years. It is almost three and a half years since Sinn Féin first proposed a rent freeze. Since then people have been paying rents that have been going through the roof. The Government has stood over that. It is time for it to step up and acknowledge that it has been wrong. It must put up its hand and say, "We need to move on". It should accept this Bill, get it through before the Dáil dissolves and ensure that we give people something back and show them that the Government cares and is listening. All this talk about moving forward and that things are getting better and are not as bad as they were is nonsense. People can see that and I invite the Government to open its eyes and see it as well.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister of State was not present earlier when his col-

league, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, had a go at me and accused me of being hypocritical for standing up for my community in Bluebell by opposing an inappropriate single planning application. I stand over my record of supporting appropriate housing, both social and private, regardless of height, density and so forth. I have met both the Minister and the Minister of State and encouraged them to build on specific key public lands and also to encourage builders in my area to develop them.

It was a distraction. At the end of the day, this is about one issue. If the Minister wants to have a debate about the market and whether housing is a market or a service, we can have that debate. Tonight, at long last, we are having a debate which reflects the emergency that has existed under this Government, the previous Government and the Government before that.

10 o'clock

For three Governments, we have had a housing emergency in this city and elsewhere. The response of the Government is pathetic. In all of those years, rent has continued to go up and it is not just private rent. The rent the Government has been paying in HAP has increased in my area by 25% - so much for the rent pressure zones.

I do not know how many people the Minister of State deals with in his constituency office, day in, day out. In my office, the vast majority of cases I have dealt with in recent years are to do with housing. The worst cases of distress in my office, week in, week out, are families who have no alternative. They cannot get out of the hovels they are expected to pay thousands for because there is no alternative. There is no social housing being built or not enough, there is no private housing being built and there is nothing affordable, whether for rental or purchase. The Government should get its act together, get the houses built and get the rent freeze in place to allow the market to change, if we are going to depend on the market.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I listened very carefully to the Minister and the Minister of State. The question many renters, if they are watching this debate, will be asking is how much longer does the Government want us to wait. The Minister of State will remember when the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Coveney, introduced the rent pressure zones. He made two clear commitments, first, that rents in high rent areas would be constrained to a 4% increase a year over three years and, second, that by the end of that three years, supply would be coming on stream and would start to reduce the pressure. It is in black and white on the Department's website. In that period, rents have increased by 24%, twice what the Government committed to, and supply has not come on stream. The reason is that if we leave the private sector to its own devices, it is not going to invest to an adequate level to provide the kind of affordable housing to rent or buy that people need.

Our proposal has never been to introduce a rent freeze and just leave it there. If we do that, it will not work, and the Minister is right about that. However, given where rents are at, given the astronomically high level of housing costs that families are bearing, if we introduce a temporary rent freeze, give a refundable tax credit to ease the pressure and, alongside that, have a much greater level of Government investment in affordable rental and affordable purchase accommodation, that is what will solve this crisis.

The Minister, Deputy Murphy, clearly and deliberately misrepresented the Sinn Féin position because he sat here and listened to me say all of that, and he then said we were proposing something else. With respect to Deputy Darragh O'Brien, again, he gave a clear misrepresenta-

tion of our position. Deputy O'Brien has sat here, week after week, and listened to me argue for Government-led investment in social and affordable rental and affordable purchase accommodation, which is our party's position and has been for a long time.

What renters will be left with after this debate is a Government which says its policy is going to work at some point in the future, and renters should just bear with it, despite the fact the three years in which it told renters this would work have passed. I listened to Fianna Fáil say, yes, it supports this but it needs to take its time and it needs to be careful and tease through all of the various issues, when we have had three years to do precisely that. Between the jigs and the reels of the politicking in here, renters will face another year of rent increases and another year of unsustainable housing costs. Something has to give. It is not the case that the rent pressure zone data from the RTB or *daft.ie* shows that rents are declining. There may be some evidence that rent increases are levelling off but they are still rising, and they are rising way above what people can afford.

The Minister and the Minister of State are right that I deliberately did not include HAP in this Bill. My view is that HAP should be treated like RAS. There should be no top-ups and the rents should be set by lease between the local authority and the landlord. That is an amendment I would like to make to the housing (miscellaneous provisions) Bill because it would take the pressure off low-income families, which is a separate proposition. However, I would be happy to take amendments from the Opposition during the course of this Bill through committee to address that.

On the question of constitutionality, I do not accept that is the case. We were told, for example, that rent pressure zones would be unconstitutional and there was no challenge and they have proceeded. Every time the constitutionality of constraining property rights has been brought before the courts, such as with Part V of the Planning and Development Act, the courts have said very clearly that where the principles of social justice and the common good are being met by specific Government policies, then property rights can be constrained. My non-legal view is that this would apply in the context of an emergency measure for three years, but I would be quite happy to test it in the courts.

With respect to the Minister's comments about Sinn Féin in Dublin Mid-West opposing residential development, it is not true. He made specific reference to Kilcarberry when, in fact, Deputy Ward and I have spent years campaigning for residential development on that site. We secured enormous support from local residents, often with quite significant resistance. However, what we did oppose is the sale of the land to a private developer because it would deliver no affordable homes, and I stand over that decision. Similarly, we opposed the transfer, not the sale, of key strategic public land in O'Devaney Gardens to a developer because it will deliver no affordable homes. In fact, it was Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors in Dublin Mid-West and South Dublin County Council who opposed a motion by the then Councillor Ward for 3,000 social and affordable houses to be guaranteed in the Clonburris strategic development zone. Thankfully, we had a majority on the council, led by our group, and the opposition of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to affordable homes there was defeated.

With respect to other Opposition Members, I am more than happy to work with the Social Democrats and Labour Party amendments and if they are in the spirit of the Bill, we will support that. With respect to Solidarity-People Before Profit and RISE, they are right that this is a very modest proposal and, in fact, much more needs to be done, but we have to start taking action.

I stand over this proposition, which I believe is a good proposition. It is time to give renters a break, put money back in their pockets and stop rents from increasing. Crucially, at some point the Minister is going to have to deliver more than 50 affordable rental homes, which is all he is going to deliver next year. We need substantial investment in affordable cost rental and affordable purchase to do what the private sector cannot and will not do, which is build homes at affordable prices for workers and families.

Question put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 12 December 2019.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.07 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 December 2019.