

DÁIL ÉIREANN

**AN COMHCHOISTE UM EALAÍONA, OIÐHREACHT, GNÓTHAÍ RÉIGIÚNACHA,
TUAITHE AGUS GAELTACHTA**

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON ARTS, HERITAGE, REGIONAL, RURAL AND GAEL-
TACHT AFFAIRS**

Dé Céadaoin, 7 Nollaig 2016

Wednesday, 7 December 2016

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins,	Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Danny Healy-Rae,	Senator Fintan Warfield.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	

DEPUTY PEADAR TÓIBÍN IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 9.35 a.m.

Sustaining Viable Rural Communities: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: The purpose of today's meeting is to continue our discussion of how we can sustain viable rural communities. This is a large project for the committee, which ultimately will see us engaging with 49 witness groups from across the State. We greatly appreciate the input of all delegates who come before the committee. Our witnesses today are Mr. Justin Moran, head of advocacy and communications at Age Action Ireland; Ms Patricia Bourke, head of training and professional standards, and Ms Linda Thorpe, both representing Mental Health Ireland; and Mr. John-Mark McCafferty, head of social justice, and Mr. Kieran Stafford, both from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I advise the witnesses that their opening statements and any documents they have submitted to the committee will be published on our website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

We have deliberated on all the different elements that are required for sustaining rural communities. We are now considering stream 5, which is concerned with caring for the elderly and disadvantaged in rural areas. I invite Mr. Moran to make his opening statement.

Mr. Justin Moran: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend the meeting. According to the 2011 census, almost 230,000 people over the age of 65 are living in what the Central Statistics Office classifies as rural areas and small towns. Age Action Ireland members and older people in rural areas who use our services tell us about the impact of cuts to public services in their communities. Many of the issues they highlight fall under five themes, namely, transport, communications, health care, income and security. I will focus on these five areas in turn in my presentation.

Rural public transport is vital for older people to access work, education, leisure, medical and social services. In many places, there is no direct transport to hospitals serving rural areas, leaving older people to pay for taxis to attend appointments. For people living in Baltinglass, County Wicklow, for example, there is no direct link with the local hospital in Naas and the cost of a taxi is €30 each way. Where rural transport is available, the service is based on the needs of those commuting to work, which leaves older people with long waits for a return bus. In some cases, the service operates only once or twice a week. The purpose of the rural transport programme is to provide a quality community-based public transport system in rural areas. We are not convinced the funding and commitment are there to meet that objective. Recent reports

that Iarnród Éireann routes are under threat and doubts about the sustainability of the Bus Éireann Expressway service have compounded those concerns. As more than one older person has observed to us, the travel pass is not worth much if there are no buses or trains on which to use it. I urge the committee to examine progress in delivering actions set out in the national positive aging strategy more than three years ago to provide elderly-friendly rural transport and better public transport links to health facilities.

The lack of public transport means many older people in rural areas rely on their cars and face rapidly rising motor insurance costs. We ask members to consider the recommendation by their colleagues in the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, following their hearings on the motor insurance industry, that the Minister conduct an analysis of the impact of substantial insurance premia increases on rural communities.

The second issue is communications. More than 200 post offices have been closed by An Post since 2007, with serious consequences for many rural communities. In the west Galway village of Cleggan, for instance, the local post office closed in September 2015, leaving Cleggan's 260 residents having to travel 3 km to Claddaghduff for postal services. As a local resident explained, pensioners and people with disabilities are struggling to collect their benefits. The closure of post offices, in tandem with determined efforts by the banking sector to close or restrict branches while pushing customers online, has eroded older people's control over their finances. In turn, this has made them more reliant on family members to conduct their business, making them vulnerable to financial abuse, which is the second most commonly reported form of elder abuse. We support the call by the Irish Postmasters' Union to this committee for a five-year plan to develop the post office network and the services it provides.

Digital literacy is now a necessity for accessing information, managing one's finances and maintaining contact with family and friends. On an annual basis, Age Action Ireland provides one-to-one computer training to some 3,500 older people across the country. Accessing digital information is a particular challenge for older people as half of those aged 60 to 74 - more than 260,000 people - have never used the Internet. Among those aged 75 and over, the figure is negligible at only 3%. For those living in rural communities the challenge is greater again as a lack of comprehensive quality broadband creates further barriers to getting online. We have had people do our training courses who are unable to use their home computers because they do not have access to quality broadband. Older people in rural areas can experience isolation and loneliness, particularly as younger generations move away. A quality rural broadband service would enable them to remain connected.

The third area of concern is health care. Access to health care is of critical importance to older people, who are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses and are the most frequent users of GP services. The *Irish Independent* reported earlier this year that almost 5,000 people in rural areas do not have access to a permanent GP. A 2015 report by the Irish College of General Practitioners noted:

A rural-urban divide which mirrors the existing private-public divide is emerging. Seven per cent of rural patients live within walking distance of their GP compared to 89 per cent of urban dwellers.

This touches on some of the rural transport issues to which I referred. Older people in rural areas find it particularly challenging to access home care supports because home help staff are not paid for transit time between calls. This can make it difficult to obtain home help services, especially where the practitioner must travel a long way to provide a half an hour of care

to different clients.

The fourth challenge that arises relates to income. Older people in rural areas have smaller incomes and greater expenses compared with their urban counterparts. In its 2013 survey on income and living conditions, the CSO found that older people in rural areas consistently had a higher at risk of poverty rate than those living in urban areas, by as much as ten percentage points. Research undertaken by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice shows that older people living in rural areas also face higher costs, with much of the difference in expenditure relating to the need to run a car because of the lack of an adequate public transport network. The CSO confirms that older people living in rural areas have much lower incomes than those living in urban areas, as well as higher costs. In addition, they are more dependent on social transfers and less likely to have occupational pensions.

Finally, security issues continue to be one of the top issues of concern for older people who contact our information service. Committee members will be aware of the recent report in the *Irish Daily Mail* on the CSO figures which show that assaults on victims over the age of 65 have more than doubled since 2006. The closure of 100 Garda stations in 2013, the majority of which were in rural areas, has added to feelings of isolation among older people, many of whom took reassurance from the physical presence of a local station. While the likelihood of someone being a victim of crime is often overstated, the fear of crime is a real and damaging phenomenon to the mental health of many older people.

I thank committee members for their time.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Moran. I invite Ms Bourke of Mental Health Ireland to address the committee.

Ms Patricia Bourke: I thank the Chairman for the invitation to engage in this discussion. Mental Health Ireland is a national voluntary organisation, established in 1966 as the Mental Health Association of Ireland. Mental Health Ireland promotes positive mental health and well-being to individuals and communities through our network of 92 affiliated mental health associations and a team of area development officers who work on a regional basis throughout the country. We deliver awareness-raising initiatives and targeted education services such as the Mind your Mental Health programme. We are committed to providing peer support and recovery initiatives. Áras Folláin peer support centre in Nenagh and Get Together Inishowen are just two examples of grassroots recovery initiatives that are very much in line with A Vision for Change. Mental Health Ireland is engaged in many cross-sectoral partnerships, which is in keeping with our emphasis on a flexibility of approach rather than a one-size-fits-all model. We work with the National Concert Hall, for example, on the Music in Mind programme. Another example is the Woodlands for Health project, on which we work in partnership with Coillte, the Health Service Executive and Wicklow mental health services.

To echo what Mr. Moran said, Ireland is changing rapidly, with huge advances in technology, medicine and communications in recent years. People are struggling to keep up with the speed of modern living and the increasing complexity of family situations. Ethnic minority groups face particular challenges. As we all are aware, the country is facing a housing and homelessness crisis. All of these issues have an impact on people's health. On a global level, country boundaries are becoming virtual and communication via social media is instant. People are expected to be able to multi-task as the norm. The health of individuals, communities and society as a whole is determined by the overall determinants of health, which include physical, social, emotional, mental, sexual and spiritual health, in addition to such factors as childhood experience, financial stability, a sense of security, suitability and security of tenure, and levels

of social inclusion and belonging.

With regard to older age, people's experience of ageing tends to be health-dependent. While advances in medicine have resulted in life expectancy in Ireland rising by 19.45 years to 84.5 years, advancing age brings, for many, an increased likelihood of diminished health, loss of independence or fear of same and limited mobility. Many older people suffer from bereavement, social isolation and exclusion, and a loss of purpose and usefulness. The World Health Organization noted in 2013 that older people are at significant risk of depression. In addition, many older people are struggling with changed roles. Due to family constraints, large numbers find themselves assuming child care responsibilities in later life. While it is wonderful that life expectancy has increased, we as a society have a responsibility to safeguard the dignity of older people and ensure they have a good quality of life and a sense of purpose, meaning, usefulness and belonging. We need to examine the value we place on our ageing population and their life experience. For too many retired people, life is a case of killing time. We must develop intergenerational initiatives that foster learning, understanding and a greater integration between youth and older age. We need to provide ongoing support to enable people to live well and with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes. That is very much in keeping with goals 2 and 3 of the Department of Health's 2013 national positive aging strategy.

We work with a number of disadvantaged groups around the country, including those representing new communities, Travellers, people in direct provision, minority groups, people on lower incomes, carers, the homeless, people with disabilities, the unemployed and people suffering due to addiction and mental illness problems. It is important to emphasise the importance of having a sense of hope, purpose, meaning and belonging, particularly for vulnerable people. In the case of direct provision, people are spending years in the system, unsure of their status and future and without permission to work or engage in pursuits that offer meaningful use of their time. These are profound factors that impact on people's health, including their mental health. There is an absence of even simple things such as a means to cook meals for the family. Together with the loss of cultural connections and the depletion of social and family roles, the impact on people in direct provision cannot be underestimated.

I acknowledge the vast range of services and networks in operation to assist vulnerable people, many of which we work with through various community initiatives. No single agency has all the answers but there is a need for greater joined-up thinking and consistency in regard to the types of services available nationally. The level of service should not be location-dependent. We need a whole-of-population approach to health and recovery and a designated funding stream to support the development and resourcing of peer initiatives in line with A Vision for Change. We need greater understanding of the interconnectedness of the range of health determinants and their implications for service provision. We need to look at a clear pathways approach from prevention and early intervention through to specialist services, that is people getting into services and also coming back out of them. People tend to get stuck in services that are not necessarily suited for their needs. We need a flexible and creative approach that recognises that one size does not fit all. There is also a need to ensure that the amount of time that people, both individuals and families, spend in homelessness and direct provision is kept to an absolute minimum.

I thank the Chairman and members for their attention and time.

Chairman: Míle buíochas as sin. Bhí sé sin an suimiúil ar fad. I ask the representatives from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to make a presentation.

Mr. Kieran Stafford: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul welcomes the opportunity to address the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on the issue of supporting older people and people experiencing disadvantage in rural Ireland. As all members know, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul exists to fight poverty and all forms of social exclusion. Established in 1844, we are the largest voluntary, charitable organisation in Ireland with over 11,000 volunteer members operating on an all-Ireland basis, working in both urban and rural areas, and assisting both younger and older people and helping families and individuals alike.

On the ground, our focus is on a practical approach to dealing with poverty, alleviating its effects on households through working primarily in person-to-person contact by a unique system of visitation to people's homes. It is through this privileged position of visiting people, hearing their stories and helping where appropriate that our members earn the credibility that the society enjoys. It is this unique position that enables us to work for social justice in a respected and effective manner, advocating for the creation of a more just, caring nation. In addition to providing direct assistance to those in need, we provide a wide range of services caring for people who are homeless, providing social housing, and operating other social support activities. Alongside our home visitation work, the society seeks to empower people to access education, training, adequate incomes and quality, affordable public services.

I will now hand over to my colleague, Mr. John-Mark McCafferty.

Mr. John-Mark McCafferty: In our presentation this morning we will outline our work with, and observations or concerns with regard to, the two groups in rural areas outlined by the clerk: older people and people experiencing disadvantage. We acknowledge that there is some overlap between these two groups, but note that many older people do not necessarily experience disadvantage, and that many people experiencing disadvantage are not older people. For both older people and lower income households generally in rural areas, transport to health or hospital appointments is important and therefore the cost and availability of rural transport services are key in our experience, as is the need for more energy efficient housing. Higher living costs associated with rural life, as evidenced by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, such as car transport is a big cost concern for many households in rural areas is also a shared concern. Mr. Justin Moran also mentioned other items, which include the cost of food and clothing relative to the cost of these in urban areas, energy, household goods and social inclusion aspects. A meticulous study has been done by our Vincentian colleagues in the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, which we draw from on a regular basis.

Some of the other themes emerging in our work with older people in rural areas are as follows: seniors alert pendant alarm systems, formerly known as community supports for older people, work well. We administer many of those schemes in local communities. Being able to grow older at home through the receipt of adequate services and supports, for example, meals on wheels, home help and the provision of more independent advocates for older people is welcome. We are very aware of the experience of lone parents, especially in cases where they have additional caring responsibilities, and the higher incidence of poverty among lone parents and children. There is also the impact of increased rents on rural housing markets adjacent to large towns and cities. Our members are concerned about access to education, training and employment, including adequate third level grant rates. Our members are concerned that more students appear to be falling into the lower adjacent grant rate as the distance criteria change.

Some of the policy solutions to the above issues relate to investment in quality, comprehensive public services which are free or affordable at the point of delivery. These require signifi-

cant and sustained Exchequer resources, which require robust and dependable revenue streams. In our 2017 pre-budget submission, we have called for enhanced delivery of social housing, the provision of early childhood care and education and sustained and increased energy retrofitting of homes. Adequate incomes, both in work and out of work, are also vital for low income groups. Lastly, better physical planning and more integrated communities and services are required to achieve sustainable and resilient rural communities.

I thank the Chairman and members for inviting the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to offer its on-the-ground experience.

Chairman: Go raibh mile maith agat. I will ask members to take five minutes each to ask questions, and if the witnesses jot down the questions that are relevant to them they will have an opportunity at the end to respond to all the questions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When the witnesses refer to older people, do they mean people who are aged 60 years and older; 65 years and older; 66 years and older; 70 years and older; 80 years and older and 90 years and older? It is very important to know the age group we are talking about because sometimes there is an impression that all people over 60 years and older are *cróili*, non-active or whatever. That is not my experience of rural Ireland.

Coming from an urban background and with all my family living in urban areas, I moved to a rural area. I have the choice now but I would rather get old in a rural rather than an urban area. It is very important that we do not fall into the trap of painting some of the problems that apply across older people as being uniquely rural problems. I would find better social integration because people tend to remain in the area where they always lived so that one's neighbours tend to be the same neighbours as one had 20 or 30 years ago. I would be interested to hear the witnesses comment on that. My experience is that in certain circumstances there is even more loneliness in urban areas. I am always concerned when questions on loneliness are put to older people living in urban or rural areas. By definition a person who has lost a partner, be they a widow or widower is lonely. No matter how good their life is they are lonely because the most important person in their life has gone or family members are living abroad. I believe that rural areas are a good place to live but one faces many challenges that could be dealt with. To what extent is the migration of younger people, particularly those in the 20 to 50 age group out of rural areas because of lack of job opportunity creating unnecessary isolation? Is that taking the normal social supports of inter-generational groups? Sport is one of the great recreations in rural areas. I heard this morning that places such as Achill Island find it hard to put a football team together. That is not just for the players, that would have been the great social outlet for people, where they meet, greet and have fun together.

I know what the witnesses mean when they talk about grandparents. I keep coming across the challenge that if one does not have a critical mass of people, it is not economic to keep child care facilities open. Should there be a base level of support for paid child care for every community? There can be fluctuations in population numbers and given this, should there be, as had been previously, a minimum amount of money given to professional community child care providers so that they can keep the doors open? If the doors of the community child care close, the people have lost out completely.

It seems there is a common theme to all the presentations, be it access to third level grants and so on, it revolves around transport. The provision of transport can be a frequent service in and out of the nearest town or city. The model of service we have in the country is a single bus in the morning and a single return bus in the evening - a service that is seen as good enough.

The new railway service to Newbridge provides seven trains in the morning and seven return trains in the evening that go under the Phoenix Park even though another ten or 15 trains go into Heuston station. That is the correct way to provide a service. Would it bring about a significance difference to have frequent services into the county towns and so on? Will the witnesses comment on the subsidy per head of population to Dublin Bus and although the subsidy applies in an area of concentrated population, the subsidy from the Exchequer per head of people living in Dublin is five times the subsidy per head of population to Bus Éireann. That is bizarre.

My final question in this round relates to the policy of pushing the family formation segment of society into towns and whether this is creating unnecessary social isolation in rural areas because the traditional pattern there was to live beside one's parents and grandparents and that provided mutual social support and gave the older people access to cars. People experience difficulties in being granted planning permission for a house near their parents, particularly if they do not live on a farm, which applies more and more as people no longer live on the farm. They must acquire a site with planning permission. Has the policy of local authorities not building one-off rural houses caused difficulties? It has been a double whammy, causing the gentrification of the countryside by pushing people who need social housing into towns and rural isolation by taking away the family supports that were given by inter-generational connection and which the present State policy seems to be destroying. The State is saying that those from rural areas must go into town if they need a local authority house, and cannot stay in their own area. That town could be 25 km away or more from their family home whereas in the old days, the local authority got a site for €100 and built a house which they rented to the family. A socially integrated society creates a support mechanism where the older people are helping the younger people and as they age, the younger people help them. I think that is the natural way of society, but we seem to be hell bent on destroying that lifestyle. How much is that affecting the demand for the services?

In line with what the Society of St. Vincent de Paul states, issues arising from poverty facing families are acute, particularly as most rural people live in houses they own and there are no grants for those under the age of 60 to 65 and in some local authority areas up to 70 years, for repairing houses, which is often the biggest cost people face in bringing houses up to standard.

Chairman: I have a number of questions. The studies seem to show that the fabric of rural Ireland is changing radically. The representatives from Teagasc a number of weeks ago indicated that most young couples want to live in a space where they can achieve dual incomes, because they need that level of income to pay their costs. Therefore they are lining up around major urban areas and that takes the young middle generation out of the equation in rural areas and it means that children are being born into limited spaces around Meath, Dublin, Wicklow and Louth. That is a radical change. Higher costs and lower incomes were raised. Are there statistics on the differences in costs of a person living in a rural area and the income of that person, so that one could see what the gap is and that we could work it out. It is not solely financial costs, but there are health costs of living in rural areas as well. Would there be statistics in regard to the incidence of mental health issues in rural as opposed to urban areas? Would there be statistics on longevity or life expectancy of a person living in a rural area as opposed to an urban area?

Broadband is an important issue because it leads to the ability to make an income and connectivity. One of the issues that has come into focus is human connectivity, which is really important. In a way we are losing that human connectivity with the onset of the digital age to a certain extent. All the witnesses have indicated the State interactions that lead to positive

human connectivity, for example the post office and so on. There is a world of other activities, that Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned, including the GAA football clubs, but I can think also of bingo, church and so on. Has work been done on how the State can support the other human connectivity nodes that exist in society that ameliorate against mental health issues and help against isolation and loneliness as well?

There is a critical issue in respect of the home help service. The staff available to provide home help who live within a short driving distance from homes in rural areas is far lower, so the option are lower and the services they provide are far lower. Are the primary health care teams who provide services for rural areas at full complement? Are they operating at 50% capacity, as I know that is of particular concern with regard to mental health issues because it is the State's objective to provide these services to individuals in their own communities in their own homes? Are we meeting those objectives with respect to the primary care teams?

I now call Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank each of the witnesses for the presentations this morning. I come from a rural peninsula, Cork south west, with one of the highest populations of elderly coupled with County Donegal. The vast peninsula stretches to Mizen Head.

We tend to think of elderly as people from age 66 onwards, but there is a large number in the 55 to 66 age bracket, who are falling between two stools and nobody is there for them. They may not be in gainful employment and they might be in a situation where they do not have a welfare payment or find it difficult to qualify for a welfare payment and this category face mental health stresses and need a great deal of assistance. This assistance is not there, and I see from my experience in the constituency they are finding it very difficult to survive, pay the electricity bill, put food on the table and do the very basics. We are living in an uncaring society. The human being is like the animal now, tagged with a number, and is no longer the individual, Michael, Linda or Patricia. We are now just a number and are treated as such. People on welfare are being harassed under the JobPath scheme. They are being frightened out of their homes and forced to travel into towns and villages to meet with officials who promise to secure them employment. They may not have public transport to get to these places and are spending most of the day on the road. They are being dealt with via a company brought in from the UK for that purpose and which has to tick the right boxes to ensure it receives payment for its services. The reality, of course, is there are very few jobs in rural areas. Some of these people were very happy to participate in community employment and Tús schemes, for which they received an additional €20 on top of their welfare payment. Such engagement was good for their mental health but they are now being sent home and frightened out of their wits. It is a vicious circle.

The closure of Garda stations has affected communities throughout the country, including in west Cork. Together with the closure of banks and post offices, there has been a particularly negative impact for elderly people. However, the greatest crisis for older people throughout the country is the poor state of the health service. Indeed, there is no point in saying it is in a bad state; the reality is it has collapsed. Some 900 people are seeking home help provision in County Cork. We have a major crisis on our hands in this regard but the Government does not seem to realise it. The best and cheapest place to look after people is in their own homes. I am getting the run-around in the Dáil when I ask about this and told there is plenty of money available for the home help service and no problem with it at all. In fact, the service is in crisis, with 900 people in my county alone unable to access a home help service. All Members are aware of elderly people in their constituencies who are incapacitated but cannot get home help. It is a scandalous situation. The Government is not equipping itself for the future and the rising age

profile of our population. People are effectively being thrown to the wolves while Ministers continue to call our bluff in the Dáil, telling us everything is perfect. The best way to deliver a home help service is by hiring local people, but the HSE has seen fit to establish companies which bring in anyone and everyone. Elderly people who require two or three visits a day find there are different people coming to their home, some of whom they have never met before. It is outrageous. The home help service previously offered an employment boost for local people and ensured elderly persons were cared for by staff they were comfortable to have in their home. Why was the decision made to break a system that was working well?

Many young people in rural communities are struggling to secure employment, which can lead to mental health difficulties. There seems to be no intention of securing a future for islanders. There is no strategy for housing on the islands and people are being forced out of their homes. There is a nasty element to what is going on. The rural social scheme promised to provide 500 extra jobs but now the talk is that nobody aged under 25 will qualify.

There are serious concerns about the seniors alert scheme. I understand an ongoing review of the scheme is being carried out by a UK organisation whose chairman is linked to a company which produces alarm devices. I do not know where the Government came up with this lovely scenario where the person carrying out the review already has his fingers in the pie. It looks like we will go down the road of the UK model, which will see elderly people having to pay €160 or €170 a year where it was previously costing them €70 to €80. We can expect to see a lot of alarms being chucked out of houses. On the plus side, in fairness to the HSE, it is funding local community and voluntary organisations to provide meals on wheels and social centres, which are a lifeline for elderly people affected by rural isolation. They can now go out two nights a week for a meal at the local social centre and have meals brought to their home for the remainder of the week. The HSE should be encouraged to push that initiative because it gives people a social outlet. It might only entail two minutes of interaction with another person but it is vital to them.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I have raised the specific issue of rural isolation within the LGBTQI community on several occasions. It is useful to put it on the radar of organisations, reflecting the fact, in the particular context of today's discussion, that we have the first aging LGBTQI population post-criminalisation. In the past, criminalisation ensured such people were excluded and faced stigma and isolation within the home, in society, in the workplace and in the community. The LGBTQI community has a role in starting a conversation around the issues facing older LGBTQI citizens. Many of their concerns are magnified when compared with those of straight people. A survey undertaken by the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network, entitled Visible Lives, found that only 54% of aging LGBTQI citizens - defined as those between 36 and 55 years of age - felt part of their local community. Some 46% of older LGBTQI people live alone, the survey showed, 43% are single and 53% are concerned about getting older and feeling lonelier as they age. It is important that LGBTQI NGOs show leadership on this, but the issues that arise specifically for LGBTQI people are also relevant to the delegates' interests. The GLEN study reported that 42% of respondents had received a poor quality of service from civic and community services because of their LGBTQI identity. I am interested in hearing the delegates' experiences, if any, in this regard. The most frequently reported places with a poor quality of service were places of worship, hotels and bed and breakfasts, restaurants and shops.

Housing will increasingly become an issue of major concern for older people. Older members of our communities should, as a broad societal objective, be supported to live at home. There probably will be a demand in future for LGBTQI-specific accommodation in both rural

and urban areas. There may be scope to explore the provision of LGBTQI retirement homes or the emphasis might be on ensuring all older age facilities are sensitive to and respectful of LGBTQI needs. For an LGBTQI citizen entering a general older age home there could be difficulties if the environment is not respectful of that person's identity. I am interested in the delegates' views on meeting the housing needs of LGBTQI people specifically and of minority groups in general.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the delegates and congratulate them on the great work they do. I take this opportunity to thank the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which does tremendous work in Killarney. As recently as yesterday, when the local community welfare officer refused to give any financial assistance to a family that was allocated a local authority house and needed to buy blankets to put on the beds, the only place to which this family could turn was the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I am glad the organisation is operating in our neck of the woods because the situation people are facing is very serious. Does the society require additional funding and, if so, would a fund-raising campaign be useful? It grieves me when I see other supposedly charitable organisations able to avail of television advertisements and so on but nobody seems to know what is going on or what they are doing with the money. We never hear of rows about chairmen and such like at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. We can see what it is doing with its funding, which is assisting the people who need that help. We should seek to provide funding for the organisation where we can.

I agree with the points made by colleagues regarding the home help service. I spoke to a man in my constituency who sought a second home help for a quarter of an hour each day for his 95 year old uncle. This elderly man was getting 15 minutes in the morning to help him out of bed and was looking for an extra quarter of an hour in the evening to assist him in getting back into the bed. The nephew, a busy farmer, was told there was no way in the world his uncle would get another farthing for home help. Instead, he was offered accommodation in a nursing home, where he could be left in bed all the time, under the fair deal scheme. I understand that particular scheme is funded by what is called a statutory payment. In the case of my 95 year old constituent, I see no reason that some of the money which would be used to keep him in a nursing home could not instead be used to provide him with more help at home, where he wants to stay. That is what most elderly people want. When they are asked how they like their nursing home, they will say it is fine but they would prefer to be at home. There seems to be a substantial funding allocation under the fair deal scheme. Do the delegates agree it would make sense for some of it be transferred to the home help service? I have raised this issue in the Dáil several times but we need assistance from wherever we can get it to ensure proper funding is provided for the home help service. It is a major concern for people in rural Kerry.

The cost of transport is an issue for many elderly people. We have good community bus links but they do not cater for people who, for example, need to go at different times for doctor and hospital appointments. Do the delegates have any proposals in that regard? One of the Ministers in the last Government had a ridiculous idea about providing cheaper taxis, but that will not work. There should be some provision whereby dedicated transport payments can be given in special cases. People do not have money from their pensions to cover the cost of private transport and many of them cannot walk three or four miles.

Mental health is a major issue and I acknowledge the work the delegates are doing in this area. Are they aware that we have a wonderful new facility in Killarney to cater for 40 patients, which, 18 months after it was completed, remains unopened? What is the Government thinking of when it does something like that? There was a rush to complete the Killarney facility but ap-

parently no rush at all to have it up and running. Are the delegates aware of the strategies being employed by the HSE and how adverse they are proving for long-enduring patients?

Chairman: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I will give the witnesses an idea of what A Vision for Change has meant for people in Killarney and surrounding areas. Twenty-seven people availed of the HSE's Lantern Lodge facility where they got a meal and could use the washing facilities. Under the new model, they are assigned to Leawood House on the Countess Road, where they will not get a meal, will not have access to showers, but will, we are told, be able to access more therapeutic services. The new facility is open two weeks and already the numbers accessing the service have reduced. My concern is that people will soon stop going there at all. Apparently the HSE policy is that starving people and denying them showering facilities will help their mental health. That ridiculous policy must be challenged.

The de-congregation model is equally ridiculous. I ask the delegates to press the point that this model does not fit all. In Killarney, the HSE tried to shut down the St. Mary of the Angels facility, which houses 77 people who are not sufficiently mentally well to look after themselves. As we all know, this world is not ideal and not everyone is born perfect. The HSE, or whoever the wizards are who design these models, must be challenged. The right help is not being given to the people who need it.

Chairman: I ask the Deputy to finish up as he has been given nine minutes. We need to allow the witnesses time to respond.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am not sure how the Chairman's clock is working.

Chairman: It works the same for everybody.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to ask the same question that was asked by two other members. Why are people being directed into towns and villages and away from the rural areas where they were reared? If an elderly person's house falls into disrepair, a rural cottage will not be built for him or her. Only three were built in Kerry in the past eight years. Where a fellow wants to stay with his few cattle where he was born and reared, it seems to be the policy not to allow that. Not even a demountable home will be provided.

Chairman: We must move on, Deputy Healy-Rae. I invite Mr. Moran to respond to the points made by members.

Mr. Justin Moran: I will try to address all the points that were put to me. Members might highlight any I miss. On Deputy Ó Cuív's initial question, Age Action Ireland has always taken the term "older person" as referring to people aged 55 and over, partly to deal with the issue Deputy Collins mentioned, namely, that some people at the age of 55 need supports, including employment supports, which often are not there. The more usual definition of an older person is anybody aged over 66, which is currently the age of eligibility for the State pension. However, I have found in my time in Age Action Ireland that what constitutes old age is very fluid. We have members in their late 80s, for instance, who would be offended to be described as older people. On the other hand, we have people in their 50s with health problems for whom the description is apt. There is a legal definition of childhood but the same does not apply for old age. It is very much an individual experience.

The Deputy made the point that it is important not to see people living in rural areas and

urban areas as different races or species. I agree that both, as older people, face the same issues. We would argue that the lack of supports and some of the policy decisions make it tougher in rural areas. Loneliness, for example, is an issue for older people, whether one lives where I am living at present, in Drumcondra, or where my family is from, in Caltra, but it is a bigger issue in some communities where one does not have the kind of social cohesion referred to in a rural community, where one does not have access to rural transport or to health care which are particular issues that affect rural parts of Ireland.

I agree that the migration of younger people and families to larger towns, either in search of housing or employment, is a serious issue because what one sees then is a cascade effect. As people move away from the villages, the demand for the post office drops, the demand for the bank branch drops and the demand for the bus drops, and slowly over a period of time one reaches a stage where An Post says that the post office is unsustainable or there are not enough people-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My view of society may be old-fashioned in that I still think of that old-fashioned concept of family, defined in whatever way one wants, as I purposely think it right not to define but we will know what it means just as we know what the sky means but we might not define it. If one has an inter-generational group around, then the natural outcome is for parents to be in contact with children so that one has this vertical support between generations, not only for services but generally.

Mr. Justin Moran: I agree with Deputy Ó Cuív. The point I was making, and perhaps not articulating particularly effectively, was that because the younger people in families are being forced into the towns for employment and housing, the supports on an inter-generational basis to which the Deputy refers are eroding a little. One of Age Action's most successful programmes is our care and repair programme where volunteers go into the homes of older people and carry out small DIY jobs, such as installing a light bulb or unblocking a sink. These are jobs that ten or 15 years ago those people would have got their sons, daughters or brothers to come in and do, but they are not there anymore as they have emigrated or are living 15, 20 or 30 miles down the road. That is an example of where we have tried to step in to fill a gap that has been created because of that lack of inter-generational solidarity that would have been there in the past.

In terms of the public transport and rural transport issue, I stated it was a pervasive comment during all of the presentations. Mention was made of the Newbridge Bus Éireann route. That is a good example of one of the bus routes that can be a challenge for people. It departs at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., as was mentioned. We have learned from speaking to older people who might have to go to a hospital appointment - some of our members in Galway did research on the outpatient service there - that they might be able to get the morning bus in, they get taken care of and then they wait around for hours because the bus service is designed for those commuting to work for which it is effective. That is why it would be helpful if the committee, as part of the finished outcome of its deliberations, looked at whether the rural transport programme is fit for purpose and whether it is delivering the commitments in the national positive ageing strategy around rural transport already mentioned.

I will take a couple of points from Deputy Tóibín. I would highly recommend the research Mr. McCafferty also mentioned by the Vincentian's on the minimal essential standard of living when we are talking about cost issues. For example, the table provided in our submission shows the income and expenses for those in urban and rural communities as defined by the CSO and how that matches with the minimum essential standard. One of the big drivers of cost - I

accept I sound like a broken record going back to talk about transport - is car costs. In parts of Ireland, that can make up to 82% of the difference between expenditures for an older person living in an urban community and one living in a rural community because he or she needs the car to get to work, to get to his or her family, and to get to his or her medical appointments.

My colleagues in Mental Health Ireland are better able to answer on the primary health teams, but in our experience, they would not be at full complement. Certainly, there are difficulties in recruiting home helps that are particularly important.

Regarding community infrastructure, Geo, bingo, community nodes, one of the suggestions that we have had for a while is some way of carrying out a survey in communities of the infrastructure being under-utilised. One of the classic examples we use is where one may have buses that are used in the school bus run and once the school bus run is over, they are put away for several hours. They are not used, say, at lunchtime, to bring people from one village to the next or to bring people in to the shops. I wonder whether there is something that could be done, maybe not even at a national level but at a local authority level, to identify where there is capacity in existing community infrastructure that could be better redeployed to help, not only older people but those who might have disabilities or special needs or other forms of disadvantage.

I will briefly address Senator Warfield's point on older people and LGBT. It is something that we would have done some work on with older people in nursing homes, in particular, who have challenges there. It is something we would like to do more on. There are examples in Europe of different sheltered housing options where different groups and cultures, not necessarily LGBT, can be accommodated. That is something that is worth looking at. In Ireland we have an approach where one stays at home and then one moves into a nursing home, and it is a fairly black-and-white process. We need to be able to look at other options that are more accommodating to people and to different interests.

I will finish on home help services on which I could talk for most of the rest of the day. I agree completely with Deputy Michael Collins that the home help services in this country have collapsed and any suggestion to the contrary is simply not true. We are providing less funding for home help services today than we were in 2011. We are providing home help services to fewer people and the people who are getting it are getting shorter hours. We have many problems where home helps are in there for 15 minutes to get somebody up in the morning but one cannot build a relationship with one's client over 15 minutes and one certainly cannot do it if there is somebody different the next day and somebody different again on the Friday.

We carried out a piece of research, published in June of this year. We spoke to social workers who are telling us that if the proper home help supports were there, they estimated that as many as 50% of their clients who were in or about to go in to a fair deal nursing home could be at home. If the supports were there, they could be able to be in their community with their family where Government policy says they should be and where every political party and Deputy and Senator tells us when we meet them that they want them to be. The challenge is both about the lack of funding and, to pick up a point that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae made, around the lack of a statutory basis for the fair deal scheme. If one fulfils the medical criteria to go into a nursing home, the State will provide funding to enable one to go into a nursing home.

There are problems with the fair deal scheme but at least there is a structure. There is nothing like that with home help. There is no statutory underpinning for it. The sector is not regulated. One of the issues Age Action and every organisation in the ageing sector and many working in the disability community as well would have been arguing for is a statutory right

to home help services in this country. Until we start the discussion about how we deliver that, we will have meetings about funding, an extra half-hour here and an extra 15 minutes there. It is not designed for the need of the older person. It is designed to tick a box or keep the plates spinning. Whilst we welcome the additional funding of €10 million that was announced in budget 2017, that will not cope with increased demographic demand for home help services. The HSE's figure is that 10% or 65,000 people of those over the age of 65 will require home help services. We are providing home help services to 55,000 people. There is a substantial amount of unmet need. Many of those who are getting it are not getting sufficient hours and they may not have weekend cover. We are coming up to Christmas when there could be many days without getting any kind of home help services and families or other carers will be obliged to step in. Home help and rural transports are probably two of the acute issues for older people living in rural communities.

Chairman: Gabhaim buíochas le Mr. Moran as sin. Will Mental Health Ireland answer the questions posed to it?

Ms Linda Thorpe: I thank the committee for the invitation to be here today.

As regards the questions that were posed by the members, from a mental health perspective there is quite a lot of good going on - I want to recognise that for starters - but, I suppose, to coin a phrase, there is a lot still to be done.

I agree with Deputy Ó Cuív that the intergenerational structure is important. The Government must be mindful of the fact that younger people and not so young people are moving away from their families of origin and it is creating a vacuum with people left in silos to be minded by neighbours, friends and people coming back. There is a lack of dignity being shown to and respect for older people. It might not be only an age issue. Some people are old at 50 and some are not old at 90. It is a matter of restoring due respect for older people for their wisdom and that they have worked and contributed to the country that young people now are enjoying the benefits of. They have paid their taxes. They have made the country what it is. Such recognition is sadly lacking. Maybe it is something the committee could look at.

As regards child care issues that Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned, I know plenty of families that are caring for their grandchildren. This indicates that people who care for their grandchildren, particularly those from a lower economic group, suffer greater instance of depression, and it has a knock-on effect in mental health services.

Going back to what Mr. Moran was saying about transport, not only older people but those with disadvantage, particularly with mental health issues, find it difficult, particularly in rural areas, to access services such as appointments and clinics. This has a knock-on effect where maybe they do not attend clinics, their mental health suffers and they go back into departments of psychiatry and there is an extra expense on the Government. It is a domino effect. It keeps increasing Government expenditure at another end.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae spoke about A Vision for Change, which is now ten years old. It dates from 2006. It is for review this year. While it is nearly the Bible of how mental health services move forward within urban and rural communities, and a lot of good work has been done, it needs to be reviewed with regard to how crisis intervention teams are established, how people have access to those teams, where they are well established and where they are not, and it needs to be looked at in a global way.

As regards Kerry, I refer to Kerry Mental Health Association. Ms Bourke outlined that we work through 92 mental health associations. We have a vibrant one in Kerry. It has a huge housing facility that is seen as a model of best practice. There is quite a lot going on in the Kerry area. I note Deputy Danny Healy-Rae brought up some of the services that are not working well there, but that is one of them that is working well.

I am sure Ms Bourke has more to add to this. There are facilities within the State. For instance, Inishowen has a facility under the auspices of Mental Health Ireland that works well. There is Áras Folláin and Gateway, here, in Dublin, supporting people with long-term and enduring mental health problems, some of whom are elderly but, certainly, who are disadvantaged. We need to support that. For very little funding people can be well supported.

Other services include the green prescription or social prescribing, which was piloted in the north west where a lot of elderly people went to their GP three or four times a week and they were taking up space. In an initiative between the HSE, the GPs and either the partnership or FÁS at the time, they employed somebody to lead walking groups and social interaction groups. That has proved beneficial, also for very little funding. It is a model that might be looked at.

The senior social initiative of the GAA works well, as do men's sheds and women's sheds. There is also a suicide crisis assessment nurse, SCAN, where people will present to their GP with suicidal ideation and they will, within 24 hours, have a nurse to come out and assess them to see what level of care, if any, they need at that moment in time. It is proving that people of whatever age, and certainly the disadvantaged, are not being admitted to departments of psychiatry and they can access care in the community. There is also a self-harm intervention programme, SHIP. It was piloted in the south east where people who are self-harming have an intervention programme and they have access to six weeks' counselling, which is good.

As regards primary care, the centres are not well established in a lot of areas. In the south east, we have pockets that are well established, but it needs to be looked at and rolled out so that people can go to the one-stop shop.

Befriending for the elderly and in mental health services is beneficial as well where people have a one to one. With the elderly, such as my own father, who is 85 and, thank God, has a home help for a couple of hours a week, it is about the connection. It is the fact that a human being goes in and that he sees somebody. His home help has been going in since my late mother died and I could not say how beneficial it is, if only for the social connection. For mental health, to be connected to somebody and to see somebody, through families, through members of the communities and through home helps, is the most important aspect.

I would recommend putting funding into transport and home help and growing services that exist locally. Deputy Michael Collins made the point about the local. If the home help changes every day, there is no rapport and people do not have trust. People need to have that trust, particularly if they are vulnerable. That is where we need to be at.

Chairman: Does Ms Bourke want to add anything?

Ms Patricia Bourke: Looking globally to put it together, we need to adopt a whole of health model. We tend to adopt a medical model where we look at someone with an ailment such as diabetes and often do not look at the holistic aspects of his or her health. I agree we need good Government policies. We have a lot of good Government policies but there is a need to look at local needs. There are good pockets of best practice out there but they are not consistent across

the country. There is a need to look at what is working well to see can that be expanded out to other places. Rather than reinventing the wheel, we need to be doing that.

In regard to peer support, a lot of the peer support initiatives are funded on a project-by-project basis which in the long term is not the best. It needs to have a funding stream. Not only is it empowering those who are suffering with mental health difficulties, but it is becoming a whole of community approach. We need to be embracing a whole of population approach. We tend to focus on the elderly, the youth, etc. What we are talking about here is the whole of community. There is quite a lot of research. We are talking about families struggling because either older people are disconnected from them or are, as shown in The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, TILDA, from Trinity College, with failing health, having to provide the child care because couples or single parents cannot afford the child care costs. There is a need to look at the child care costs and whether families can be supported to become families again. Whether it is LGBT families or whatever, families have changed and we have got to open our thinking.

I take on board the point about stigma. Ireland is not fully out of the stigma category, even with the huge amount of work on mental health with the Little Things campaign and our own Five Ways to Well-being, which is based on the NEF report. Members all will have seen the media coverage of the recent statistics on the Little Things campaign. In 2015, 81% of people still saw stigma when it comes to mental health - they will still have a problem with that - 35% found it difficult to talk to someone even at this stage and 55% stated that they would not want people to know if they themselves experienced a mental health problem. That relates to mental health where it is talked about a lot. I can totally empathise. We have not yet fully opened our minds in Ireland and we need to move towards that.

The intergenerational piece needs to be looked at. We have to accept it is not a case of one size fits all. I have worked in different sectors and I have come across young 90 year olds and old 50 year olds. It is not a case that one size fits all.

On the transport issue, I agree that we need to be looking elsewhere outside of Ireland as well. In London, for instance, they call it Dial-a-Ride. They telephone when they want to go to an appointment and they have a set-up with a local taxi service. Maybe we need to be looking at other ways of looking at local resources. While I do not have all the answers, there have to be other ways of doing it.

Going back to the peer support networks, historically, community development used to fund a lot of that. There needs to be clear funding around that. Whether through the local authority, the community, the Department of Social Protection, DSP, or wherever, it needs to be looked at.

On the care teams, this is about lack of consistency. Some HSE areas are up to full complement; others are not. The HSE is trying to source staff. I recognise that the HSE is encountering difficulties in trying to source staff. It is not from a lack of trying. However, that is not easy for those on the ground who do not have the services.

Chairman: I thank Ms Bourke for that. I ask the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to respond to the questions that have been posed to it.

Mr. Kieran Stafford: I am a volunteer with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I come from Tipperary and I have a lot of on-the-ground experience. I live in an urban area but I operate in both urban and rural areas. I have a national role in my capacity as national vice-president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

In response to the questions from Deputy Ó Cuív, my experience is that people living in the country would tend to be happier than those living in the town. However, if one looks at one of the themes of our annual appeal this year, that one event can quite often tip an individual or a family into poverty, that is felt more harshly by those living in rural areas than those living in urban areas. Take the example of an elderly couple where the husband dies, and the husband would have driven the car as the lady does not drive. Immediately, the income is cut, the costs are the same but the challenges in terms of transport and associated matters are more difficult. I can speak from my personal experience of visiting people in such situations. One lady whose husband had died was unable to turn the tap off in her kitchen within months of living alone, so she had to call the gardaí to the house to turn it off. This actually happened. These are the challenges that face people who would have had an inter-dependency with a partner with whom they had lived.

Regarding migration, I worked on a conference in Tinahely in Wicklow. I was instrumental in setting it up. It is a small village but it has a huge rural catchment area. It was set up by elderly people who wished to do something in their community. They discovered that the need in their community was not the financial need that members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul so often address, so they moved their efforts to establishing a community centre, bringing people to it and engaging in various activities. One of the most sought after activities was to become skilled with IT. Again, this is a migration matter because people's families had moved away and they could not do simple things such as use Skype and send e-mails. That was hugely successful. On that subject, the society has invested in a large youth development scheme. We work with children in secondary schools who set up conferences on a similar basis to the senior conferences we use to help people in the community. A large part of the work they do is working with senior citizens to help them with IT and e-mails to connect with relations, as well as showing them how to use Facebook and showing them how useful it can be to connect to relations who live around the world. In addition, many of the projects they embarked on would be historical projects, where they map out a person's life, where they lived and the differences in the types of challenges they faced when they were young. The young people are very surprised when they see that the challenges were hard, but often they find that the modern challenges young people face are harder when they compare their lives to the lives of the older people they talk about and interview.

The transport issue arises all the time. People struggle when they receive appointments at short notice through the post. We are often called upon to provide financial assistance for people who must ask a neighbour to drive them to an appointment or bring them into town. Sometimes it can be a considerable cost. The personal contact we provide when we visit people, whether it is in rural or urban areas, is essential. We get an exact picture because people tell us what they are feeling and what their situation is. We regard that as a privilege and it is something we use for our social justice advocacy as well.

On the seniors alert scheme, we have evidence of people being unable to renew their monitoring facility due to lack of income. We have had to intervene in some of those cases.

I could speak all day on experiences of inadequate home help. In one situation an individual with no legs who was confined to a wheelchair had grossly inadequate home help. This individual had to clean out his fireplace onto his lap, wheel himself to the door and scatter the ashes outside the door.

I thank Deputy Danny Healy-Rae for his compliments to my colleagues in Kerry. I will pass them on to them.

In addition, we have experience of dealing with people in the LGBT community. We helped with funding towards providing a community centre for the LGBT community in Galway. I met with the individuals who were prominent in setting that up and I listened to their stories. A number of the people I spoke to came from rural areas and had migrated to the town because they had struggled in those rural areas. That said, there are still difficulties for that community in urban areas, especially where they congregate to meet, interact and support each other.

Mr. John-Mark McCafferty: I will speak on some of the other questions raised. We worked with Deputy Ó Cuív over the years in his various Departments. On rural public transport, I agree with my colleagues that there are different ways to deal with this. It requires particular consideration by the various players, both statutory and voluntary. The Irish Cancer Society has transport services. We fund people to assist them to get to hospital and health appointments. The local social welfare representatives, formerly the community welfare officers, CWOs, help, but that is discretionary so it depends on the discretion. We must think innovatively. The dial-a-ride approach might be a way to go. The existing rural transport schemes and how they interface with the broader network of buses and trains should be considered.

In terms of poverty faced by families, generally our experience is that the vast majority of our financial assistance is to working age families, whereas our visitation and social connection work is very much with older people and people living alone. Not all people who feel isolated are older people, although many are. Many lone parents feel incredibly isolated. That is an experience we learned from in two pieces of research we carried out in recent years. One was on older people. In some ways many older people have huge resilience and many assets, but social isolation is a big issue. Then there is the isolation and mental health challenges facing lone parents in both urban and rural areas. I mentioned some of the headline areas of expenditure for families in rural areas. The car, related insurance and energy are more expensive than in urban areas, and to some extent food, clothing and household expenditure is also important.

That brings me to where that information was derived from and the question the Chairman asked. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice has a comprehensive set of figures for almost every household type one can conceive of. In fact, the partnership has an online calculator where one can compare expenditure types for a given household in an urban or rural area with the income that it might have. If one has a particular income, such as social welfare, child benefit or various payments coming into the household, one can enter it into the calculator and see to what extent one is in surplus or deficit. I direct the committee to that online resource. It is very useful and it has been funded by the Department of Social Protection.

With regard to the wider response to isolation and loneliness, it is not purely a statutory response. In fact, the more deeply qualitative measures are probably in the one-to-one interactions we have in the community and in the efforts we provide. It is important to note that since 2009 there have been huge cuts to community development and related services and they have not been replaced or rejuvenated since the upturn. Part of the reason for that is that there is no voice, because many of those community centres or community services are gone so there is nobody to speak up for them. That is a huge loss. It is hard to quantify that loss because they are simply not there anymore and we do not have a representative groundswell of opinion that will push for it. However, initiatives like bingo and events that take place at a parish level and in community centres work well. We have several resource centres and those involved do great work on intergenerational projects. I have in mind a project in Galway. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul visitation is a way to combat loneliness and isolation. The men's shed movement is another example. It is somewhat like the situation of rural transport. I reckon one

element of the work of the committee should involve looking at isolation and loneliness and community connections. There are numerous community connections and considerable levels of voluntary activity in Ireland compared with other countries. Perhaps the challenge is more about co-ordinating the various statutory and voluntary players and mapping what is in place and who the various players are.

I wish to underline the issue of home help. It is absolutely crucial. Much of the time people are left with the choice of getting the house cleaned or getting a meal made, but they cannot have both. Home help services have suffered as a result of the cuts. The services have not been fully reinstated. It appears this is one of those situations where it is a question of resources and the provision of resources to fund the service. They need to be funded.

We would be concerned if there were to be certain changes, for example, increased costs regarding the seniors alert scheme. If the cost created a barrier to accessing the seniors alert scheme, it would be a major concern for us. It is a question of well-being and the sense of security that older people gain from the seniors alert scheme. I trust that addresses the question from Deputy Collins.

Deputy Healy-Rae mentioned a campaign that might be needed to assist us. It is called the annual appeal. It is currently in the media, where we can find the cheapest outlets for promoting it. We raise our funds at Christmas. We are heavily dependent on public generosity from mid-November through to Christmas. That generosity is critical for us to carry out visitation work, in other words, for our volunteer members to visit people in their homes, assist with certain areas of expenditure as well as being a listening ear and acting as a social contact. People prefer to be at home. Therefore, any local and social supports that can facilitate people ageing in their homes are preferable.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We are all aware of the work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. My experience is that it has become far more difficult and bureaucratic to get the necessary assistance from community welfare officers. In the old days, people could go in, make a case and they could give those people cash. Now, people fill out forms and do a means test. The officers cogitate about it and then come back, even for a simple request like going to a hospital appointment that is 60 miles away. The person may have to get a taxi because there is no other way in or out and he cannot take the public bus.

Am I right in thinking that one of the major draws on the funds of the organisation at the moment is the fact that it is undertaking work that was being done by community welfare officers ten years ago? This work is now taken as routine. It has become a matter now of going to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul because the community welfare officer service has been centralised and taken out of rural areas. We used to have local community welfare officers. They knew the people and knew the quirks. The work does not fit into neat boxes of criteria and so on. I have noticed that some people can live comfortably on meagre resources and some people never have a dime in their pockets. That is simply human nature.

Mr. McCafferty might clarify a second point. My memory is that the Department with responsibility for community affairs used to give the society €1 million at Christmas and used to give Protestant Aid a smaller sum – it might have got more per head. Does the society still get that money? Has the amount increased? This was a *síntiús* given at Christmas time by the Department. In particular, if the organisation is carrying a burden that the State used to carry, the State should carry it again now. In other words, the State has become so systematic that it pushes on to the organisation the work it had been doing. Therefore, it should give the organisa-

tion the money to do it. I am keen to hear a comment on that point because it is a major issue in my area.

Chairman: There are two questions to be answered there.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is one question wrapped in two parts.

Mr. Kieran Stafford: Certainly we have experience of people being refused help from community welfare officers for a variety of reasons and we have had to step in. We have the unusual situation whereby there is definite evidence of where CWOs send people to us having refused to help them. I have seen it myself. We operate several second-hand furniture stores around the country. There is evidence of people being sent to buy second-hand furniture from us because of inadequate money given to get a house, rather than that person being able to go into a new store and buy new furniture.

It is not consistent. There are some very good CWOs in particular areas who will go to the ends of the earth for people. Then there are others who will not do that. Again, there is inequality for people living in rural areas. The clinics may be once a fortnight or once a week in these areas, whereas in the towns they may be two or three times a week. Obviously, it depends on the numbers of people approaching.

We still get the grant but it has reduced from when we first began to get it. It came from the Department when Deputy Ó Cuív was the Minister. We use it to do the type of work we believe the Government should be doing.

Chairman: How much has it been reduced by?

Mr. Kieran Stafford: I think the figure is €1.3 million at the moment. It used to be €1.75 million. Those figures may not be exactly right, but off the top of my head, they are in and around that mark. The entire reporting system around this has become rather bureaucratic and difficult.

Chairman: Another group is due to come in. Our consideration of this topic has concluded. Thank you very much for assisting us in the consideration of this topic and for the extraordinary work the Society of St. Vincent de Paul does in the community. We wish you luck over the Christmas with that work. The evidence you have provided will find its way into our report. We hope to have it published by January. We hope it will be considered by the Department and that the recommendations you have put to us will become part of the recommendations of the Department as well. Míle buíochas as teacht isteach anseo inniu. Fair play.

We will suspend for several minutes to allow our next set of witnesses to come in. We will have groups from the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, the Irish National Teachers Organisation and the National Parents Council Primary. Please note that the National Parents Council Post Primary was also invited to attend but was unable to do so.

Sitting suspended at 11.10 a.m. and resumed at 11.15 a.m.

Vice Chairman: The purpose of this session is to discuss with representatives of the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, ASTI, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, and the National Parents Council Primary how we can sustain viable rural communities. From the ASTI I welcome Mr. Kieran Christie, general secretary, Mr. Ed Byrne, president, and Ms Moira Leydon, assistant secretary general. From the INTO I welcome Mr. John Boyle, presi-

dent, and Ms Deirdre O'Connor, assistant general secretary. From the National Parents Council Primary I welcome Ms Áine Lynch, chief executive officer. I thank them for their attendance. Representatives of the National Parents Council Post Primary were also invited to attend but were unable to do so.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I advise the witnesses that their opening statements and any documents they have submitted to the committee will be published on our website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

We will now continue with our consideration of the elements that are required for sustaining rural communities. We have already considered various aspects, including employment, emergency services, local services and quality of life. We will now consider stream 6, which is concerned with location, staffing and pupil-teacher ratios in rural and island schools, including facilities providing transport thereto. I call the representatives of the ASTI to address the committee.

Mr. Kieran Christie: I am the general secretary of the ASTI. I am accompanied by Mr. Ed Byrne, president, and Ms Moira Leydon, assistant general secretary, with responsibility for education and research. Ms Leydon will deliver the bulk of our presentation.

Ms Moira Leydon: Maidin mhaith. Táim buíoch as ucht an cuireadh a thabhairt dúinn. I commend the committee on examining this area because education is very often taken for granted in public policy. It is assumed the sector is doing its job of educating young people, but it is also doing the broader work of creating social cohesion in communities and contributing to local society. In a way, education is sometimes a little overlooked as a policy area so it is valuable to have this opportunity to go into the nuances. With regard to rural-urban issues in education at second level, our position is absolutely unlike that of our primary school colleagues. The INTO representatives will give a very full description of their position. Unlike them, we do not have sharp rural-urban divides or trends evident in terms of educational experience of second level pupils. The dynamics of second level are quite different from the dynamics of the role of the local primary school in a rural community. Most of our second level schools are concentrated in mixed rural or small urban areas. Accordingly, what happens at second level schools in terms of educational outcomes and achievement is very much on a par with what is happening throughout the country.

We have a good research base of what happens in our schools. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has done significant work on tracking the educational experiences of young people over a decade through the monumental longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland. This has been tracking several thousand young people from when they were born. They are currently at 15 years of age. We have a large amount of data on the educational experience

of young people plus all manner of data on their well-being, etc. Having trawled through these data, it is clear there are no marked differences between rural and urban educational experiences. The evidence suggests - anecdotally we would all be familiar with it - that rural second level pupils are somewhat at an advantage in our education system. When one looks at participation rates in third level education, significant numbers come from the western seaboard and other rural areas.

If we want to look at the issues facing rural second level schools, we should not compare them with urban schools. We have to look at the broader issues which are impacting on what our second level schools can do generally in the country, as well as what we need to do with public policy at this stage of our economic recovery to ensure our second level schools are delivering for their communities, whether they are rural or urban.

Over the past six years, the ASTI, with Millward Brown, has produced a longitudinal study of the impact of budgets on second level education. The news is not good.

Mr. Kieran Christie: On differential school funding models, the ESRI stated in 2013 that voluntary secondary schools “receive a significantly lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and general fund-raising”. That needs to be addressed as it is quite difficult for many voluntary secondary schools to attend to basic management and operational needs. Funding should meet developing demographic demands and should be based on student need rather than sector type. Sector type funding is leading to certain differences throughout the country.

Mr. Ed Byrne: The provision of second level schools in rural areas tends to depend on reaching a certain threshold. In other words, it is a numbers game. For instance, I teach in Swords in north County Dublin which, by and large, is an area with a rural characteristic. Many of the students I teach would come from small rural areas in north County Dublin, such as Naul or Ballyboughal.

One issue for rural schools at second level is the reduction of subject choice. This often stems from an inability in the system to share resources. Often at second level in rural areas with great distances between schools, sharing resources, such as a physics or accounting teacher, can be quite difficult. This needs to be looked at if we are going to keep a high-quality system up to leaving certificate level.

We do not have figures on the breakdown of rural DEIS programme schools. At this stage we should be looking at a system of the money following the student in the same way we have spoken about the money following the patient in the health service.

I am concerned about the cost of extracurricular activities. When there are great distances between schools, the costs involved are both financial and time. No football, hurling or basketball team can get from one school to another to engage in extracurricular activities without incurring great cost. In a rural setting, that requires the hiring of private transport. It is not simply a matter of the children going to a match with their bus fare. There is a significant cost which is often thrown back onto parents through voluntary contributions and extra contributions throughout the week. No child should be disadvantaged in their interest in extracurricular activities because of living in a rural area.

Capitation grants were cut and then frozen which has led to major problems within schools. The cut to guidance counselling has had a major effect on students, particularly in rural areas

with regard to one-to-one counselling sessions. While many of these issues are not just confined to rural areas, a great deal of them are exacerbated by distance as well as time. Time is quite significant to a teacher, who might happen to live 60 km from the school in which they teach, if they are providing extracurricular support for football teams, debating or musicals. These are issues which have to be taken into account when we talk about trying to keep thriving rural communities with schools as their centres.

Ms Moira Leydon: From the evidence base, the one significant issue coming through on an urban-rural disparity at second level is the opportunity for students in rural areas to have access to out-of-school, extracurricular activities. Yesterday, the OECD published its programme for international student assessment, PISA, report on Irish education. One of the pertinent questions that came from the floor at this was the lack of opportunity for students outside of cities to have out-of-school science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, activities. This involves students visiting a local factory or institute of technology or being part of a joint school exercise. The capacity of rural schools, by definition parents and young people, to have access to educational enrichment opportunities is significantly different and of a lesser quality than in urban areas. That is a matter which public policy should take into account, especially with the emphasis on STEM subjects. The cost of transport is critical to this dimension.

The second area where one can see emerging rural-urban differences is in the post-school experiences of young people. Young people in rural areas, the evidence strongly suggests, have much fewer opportunities to engage in non-third level learning opportunities. In other words, there are not the same amount of vocational education and training opportunities, there are not the same amount of PLC courses and there is not the access to the apprenticeships, which, of course, are only beginning to take off again particularly in the larger urban areas. Despite the economic recovery, we still have a phenomenon in the country of those not in education, employment or training, NEETs. Some 20% of 25 year olds are in that category, which is frightening, and over 55% of these NEETs are unemployed.

The urban-rural divide is stark. Young people in rural areas do not have the same opportunities of access to vocational education and training after school. This is significant in terms of both policy about social exclusion and sustaining rural communities. Some economists are talking about the so-called “dual labour market”. In rural areas, there are the young people who go on to third level. They have access to the high-tech jobs, to the jobs in the financial services, the pharmaceutical sector, etc. They are moving out of the rural area. Those who are left behind are not skilled enough for these jobs but they are not skilled enough even for the jobs in the locality. There is almost a “rump” - not wishing to use a derogatory term - of young people in their local areas who do not have employment opportunities because they do not have the skills, etc. From the point of view of public policy, that vocational education and training area would be an important area to look at.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms Leydon for her opening statement. I now call the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation to address the committee.

Mr. John Boyle: Ar son Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann, gabhaim céad buíochas leis an gcoiste as an gcuireadh a tugadh dom agus do mo chomhghleacaí, Ms Deirdre O’Connor, chun labhairt anseo inniu. Ms O’Connor and I went to small rural schools, in Donegal and Monaghan, respectively, in the 1970s at a time which was challenging for rural education. We are still very involved in our union, the INTO, in promoting and continuing the proud tradition of the INTO for over 148 years of supporting not only our teachers’ work and conditions, but also our local communities because many of the 3,200 plus schools are at the centre of their

local communities.

We made a detailed submission to the coiste. Ms O'Connor will lead off by taking the coiste through it and I will take the second half. This is a timely engagement. Over the last number of recessionary years there have been huge pressures on our small rural schools, and, indeed, on all our schools. It is a wonderful opportunity, as we come out of recession, to try to support those communities and the teachers who work in them in the next number of years under this new Government.

Ms Deirdre O'Connor: I will look particularly at the issues in relation to staffing in rural schools. I will primarily keep my remarks to small schools because the figures we have provided the committee with show that, predominately, in counties with a rural base there are a larger number of schools and those schools are largely small schools. One can see from our submission that 1,295 of the 3,124 schools in the country have fewer than 100 pupils. We can state fairly definitively that most of those are in rural areas.

The committee will be aware, from the campaigning that INTO has done and also from information available, that Irish primary class sizes are among the largest in the EU, second only to those in the UK, with an average of 25 pupils per class. The EU average is 21 per class.

Of particular concern to INTO were the staffing costs that were implemented in 2012 which were particularly targeted at two, three and four-teacher schools. I set out in the submission paper the increases which came into those schools. For example, prior to 2012, an 84-pupil school had four teachers and a class size of 21. Bearing in mind that teachers in those classes are teaching across a range of age groups, that school would now have three teachers and a class size of 28. There was a slight improvement in 2015, but it was disappointing to INTO that the improvements were not sustained in budget 2017. Our position is that we are calling for an immediate reversal of those cuts prior to 2012 and to revert to the former pupil-teacher ratios.

On the sustainability of schools, of particular concern are issues around two and one-teacher schools. The appointment of a second teacher to a small school or the loss of a school's second teacher is a critical issue in terms of whether that school will survive or not. INTO has paid a lot of attention to what constitutes a school which would be sustainable in an area because in the context of a small school, there is always discussion about whether we will keep every small school and whether the school is sustainable. In rural areas which have a two or one-teacher school, we should not look only at the numbers. We should look at the other factors which contribute to whether a school is a required school or whether it is sustainable. Those factors would include the remoteness of the school, and whether it serves a particular area which is difficult to access. They would also include the distance from other schools. We are aware that in some instances one might have two or three small rural schools in a particular parish and the question arises as to whether, for example, if all of those children are playing on the same football team and going to the same church for Mass, there is a need to have three schools in that area. The distance from other schools is also a factor that should be taken into account, as is, obviously, ethos and the maintenance of ethos of schools. Then there is also that schools contribution to the fabric of society. In terms of a required school, we should not look only at the numbers and there should be provision for the retention of a second teacher in a school on a basis other than numbers.

One of the other consequences of the staffing reductions in 2012 has been the increase in the number of one-teacher schools. There were eight one-teacher schools in 2008. There are now 24 of them. Where a school is required in an area and it is demonstrated to be a school

that the community needs, working in that school is a particular difficulty for the teacher. It is personally and professionally isolating for that teacher. We would consider that there are also health and safety risks involved in one adult working in a school with a number of children. Our policy is that there should be an additional adult appointed to all such schools in the form of a classroom assistant to assist the teacher and to address the concerns that we have outlined.

I will now hand over to my colleague who will look at some of the other issues in relation to the rural schools.

Mr. John Boyle: A love of mine, of course, coming from the west Donegal Gaeltacht, are Gaeltacht schools. We would ask the joint committee to seek a commitment from the Department of Education and Skills that the favourable retention figures for Gaeltacht schools with five to 11 teachers would continue. There has been a trend in the past number of years where retention figures have come back into the staffing schedule and that has been a great achievement in INTO negotiations. We would be concerned if there was ever any talk about the removal of retention figures because that is the lifeline for the small Gaeltacht school. If a small Gaeltacht school loses one family, it can still retain its last teacher with the retention figure whereas if it was a bald figure on the schedule, one appoints a teacher at a particular point and if one falls one below it one loses the teacher. That has brought some solace to small Gaeltacht schools.

Fáiltíonn Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann roimh an straitéis úr don Ghaeilge. Tá cuid mhór tuarastail agus moltaí curtha chun cinn ach anois an t-am do ghníomh. Iarraim ar an gcoiste brú a chur ar an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna infheistíocht a chur ar fáil d’achan scoil sa Ghaeltacht, na scoileanna beaga Gaeltachta ina measc. Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go mbeidh an coiste agus an Roinn ag cuidiú le COGG. Ní féidir leis an straitéis úr obair i gceart ar son chaomhnú na teanga muna mbíonn na hacmhainní ar fáil don Ghaeilge sna scoileanna Gaeltachta. Nuair atáim ag caint faoi acmhainní, tá mé ag caint ar dtús báire faoi mhúinteoirí. Fáiltím roimh an gcinneadh atá déanta ag an Aire go mbeidh múinteoirí breise ar fáil do na scoileanna beaga sa Ghaeltacht. We believe that to save the language we should be prioritising extra staffing for Gaeltacht schools and schools in the Breac-Gaeltacht. The challenges these schools are facing are different to those faced at the time Ms O’Connor and I attended small rural schools in the 1970s. The make-up of the Gaeltacht communities has changed dramatically. Not all of the children now attending Gaeltacht schools come from a strong language base. We are requesting that special training be provided to teachers in Gaeltacht schools to ensure the tumoideachais - the immersion - works properly. We very much welcome the new policy in relation to immersion but it must be accompanied by training. In addition, there must also be a local stewardship of the strategy. In this regard, we recommend that comhairleoirí be put into the various Gaeltacht regions to assist teachers and schools in ensuring that the new straitéis is working.

We have a number of other concerns in regard to Gaelscolaíocht and scoileanna Gaeltachta. Tá sé thar am go mbeidh céim Baitsiléir Oideachais ar fáil trí Ghaeilge. Now that we have new institutions in Maynooth and Dublin City University it is beyond time there was a strand of teacher education focused on training teachers to teach through the Irish language. Another issue that came to my attention recently from craobh an Daingin is that there is extra funding provided to gaelscoileanna that is not provided to Gaeltacht schools. This anomaly needs to be addressed. Generally speaking, while the strategy around Gaeltacht schools is great, if it is not properly resourced it will not work. Ms O’Connor alluded to some of our other concerns. The INTO has always engaged closely with the Department of Education and Skills and patron bodies in regard to amalgamations. In recent years, due to the various cuts in the small schools sector, the focus is now back on amalgamations. We are of the view that the Department of

Education and Skills needs to take the lead on amalgamations. It is not that there are going to be multiple amalgamations prioritised throughout the country but where they are necessary the Department should take the lead and work closely with the patron bodies and the INTO. For example, an independent school support person could be appointed to each diocese to assist boards of management in relation to school amalgamations, which is quite an emotive issue. Where an amalgamation is necessary - it will not be necessary everywhere - there are a few prerequisites to it being a success. If there is proper investment in an amalgamation it can work well. As a pupil, I was party to an amalgamation in the late 1960s-early 1970s which worked very well until many years later when we got a new school building. There should be a special grant to incentivise amalgamations, including dedicated funding from the schools building unit for refurbishment works because obviously the building into which the three schools are being amalgamated will not be sufficient to cater for them. It is important the three schools are accommodated in one building rather than on shared campus or different sites. Also, all of the teaching posts should be retained until such time as the pupils have settled in, with teachers nearing retirement having access to redeployment if they so wished. The ASTI delegates spoke about school transport. It is a matter that comes to the fore at a time of amalgamation.

I am a príomhoide in South County Dublin and I have served many príomhoidí and members in the Wicklow area. The role of the teaching principal has become extremely difficult in recent times given the lack of middle management support. The big issue over the past few years for the INTO as a union is that the principal teacher has little time to teach and little time to administer. A principal teacher in Newry or just outside Newry is provided with one administrative release day per week. A key demand of the INTO for a number of years through its various conferences has been that this be available to all principals. There was a small increase of one or two days per principal per year provided for in the previous budget but there was no improvement on that in this year's budget, which was very disappointing. The lifting of the moratorium on post responsibility will undoubtedly help many principal teachers but not so many in rural areas because the smaller schools tend to have fewer middle management positions. A principal of a school with 183 pupils is responsible for administration of that school every day of the year but a principal of a school with only a few less pupils might have one or two days release from those duties. That does not make sense.

There is another issue of concern in regard to rural areas which if addressed would help rural schools greatly. Since October 2015 there has been a strategy in place for ICT and digital learning in schools but that strategy has not yet come into effect in any primary school. We are envious of the post primary schools that are getting their 100 megabytes of broadband. The school in which I teach, which is a very large school, needs broadband. Former general secretary of the INTO, Mr. John Carr, once said that on occasion broadband in the west is dependent on the way in which the wind is blowing. It is beyond time that proper ICT infrastructure was put in place not only to assist in children's learning but for the proper administration of schools given the increased demand on school boards of management in terms of their having to claim for substitute teachers, record absences and engage with the primary pupil database. High level broadband is needed for administration purposes and particularly for 21st century learning.

As a union, the INTO is, and has been for a century and a half, committed to rural Gaeltacht and island schools. I recently visited schools on Aranmore Island. I am delighted that the measure for the one-teacher school will improve life hugely for one of the schools on Aranmore Island. We need to ensure that our rural schools and rural communities are resourced and funded so that they can continue to be at the centre of their communities. People in those communities value them greatly. We look forward to further engagement with the committee on this issue.

Ms Áine Lynch: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee today. When the National Parents' Council received the invitation to attend the committee we felt it was important that we represented the children's experiences of rural and island schools and so we carried out a survey of parents over a one-week period, to which we received 832 responses. The questions we asked parents were solely based on the areas being examined by the committee. Some 94% of the responses were from parents of children attending rural schools and 2% were from parents of children attending island schools. We included the results of that survey in the material sent to the committee. In summary, in terms of distance from schools 65% of those who responded said that they travelled between 0 and 5 km to the school attended by their child and 27% travelled 5 km to 10 km. According to 92% of parents their children travelled less than 10 km to their local school. In terms of pupil numbers in each school, 40% of schools said they had less than 100 pupils; 37% have between 100 and 200 pupils and 22% have over 200 pupils. In terms of class numbers, 70% of parents said that there were ten or less children in their child's class; 25% had between ten and 20 children in the class. The majority, 44%, had between 20 and 30 children in the class. Worryingly, 14% said there were over 30 pupils in their child's class. With respect to the number of classes, 79% have eight classes or fewer. The majority seems to be around that size.

In terms of classroom facilities, which was one of the areas the committee wanted to examine, quite pleasingly, 84% of parents reported good classroom facilities. Comments on this aspect covered a number of different areas. Quite a few commented that they had new builds, had got new schools, new classrooms had been built or that planning for those builds had been approved and there were in the process of beginning to be built. It was nice to see that starting to come through.

Some responses indicated that the physical education, PE, hall had been converted into classrooms and that the expansion required to meet needs was not been dealt with in terms of building. A significant number of responses indicated that were good facilities in the school but that this was down to the school communities' fund-raising and efforts in that respect. A small number of responses indicated the schools were cold, damp and old buildings. That number has reduced but it is still a feature of small schools. One response indicated that their child's school was 115 years old and they were not quite sure how much renovations had been done in that time. There was a very wide range of experience.

In terms of recreation facilities, the responses ranged from 85% plus to 63% indicating that their children had good recreation facilities. This in some cases reflected in the comments regarding the education facilities in that those parents who said that the school's PE hall has been used to provide classrooms commented that the school did not have any indoor space for children for recreation purposes. A number of respondents reported that there was very poor outdoor space areas as well, that there was little space to play and few play facilities in those areas. While the outdoor space might be a Tarmac area or a field, there was very little within that for children to do.

On the school transport scheme, 40% of parents reported that their child's school had a transport scheme, 52% of parents reported that their child's school did not have one and a number of parents did not know whether their child's school had one. Of those parents who reported their child's school did not have a transport scheme or that their child did not have access to it, 75% of them used their car to get their child to school.

Those were the main areas on which the committee asked for information on the experiences of children in schools in rural and island areas. From the perspective of the National

Parents' Council we would be very keen for the committee to note that when decisions are being made around rural and island schools that the standard of education is the first element that must be considered. Many important areas such as travel distance, remoteness, ethos and protecting communities also need to be examined but we need to make sure that all those decisions come secondary to the quality of the education of children in the schools. The key message from the National Parents Council is that the standard of education for children in rural and primary schools needs to be the same as that for children in the larger urban schools.

Chairman: I thank Ms Lynch and the other witnesses for their statements. We will now take questions from members. I remind members to be brief and to allow the witnesses sufficient time to answer the questions put to them. We are here to listen to their expertise, so I ask the members to put brief, short questions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: On the issue of school buildings, the witnesses might confirm if they believe the previous Government's policy was that school building priority was based on demographics? If a school had a burst in demographics in terms of a major increase in enrolments it would be included in the building programme, but if it did not have such a change in demographics, even if the school was falling apart and the roof was leaking, it would be down the list in terms of building priority. Have the witnesses information on the remaining number of poor standard schools in rural areas that are not moving up the school building list because the criteria does not have any objective measure? For example, if a school comes under a category of being a substandard building, which I believe is category B2, how much is that holding back the necessary provision of school buildings? It would probably be fair to say that the devolved scheme, particularly for primary schools, did much to clean up the building issue even though there was a local input. I am all for local input as I live in rural community. I find most rural people simply want to get the job done. They do not care how we get it done and they are more than willing to take on the responsibility.

The Department has moved away from the traditional transport model of catchment areas and is now very driven by a simple mathematical measurement of where a student's nearest school is located, irrespective of whether it is located in the parish, there has been a traditional pattern in terms of students from an area attending it or whether a bus passes it. How much is that factor affecting primary schools, in particular, but also secondary schools? We find that families from an area who traditionally attended a particular school are now been told that, in terms of mathematical measurement, their children are living nearer to another school and that their part of a parish or area has to change what was a traditional pattern. How much is that affecting schools?

How much is the transport requirement to have ten rather than eight pupils causing the cessation of routes with respect to primary schools in rural areas? The criterion for the setting up of a bus route was the need to have eight pupils but now the requirement is ten pupils. Has that caused a major disruption with many schools, particularly in the more rural of rural areas, having very little school transport?

I apologise for not being here for the start of the meeting as I had to be elsewhere. How high is it on the agenda of the INTO that the cuts in the pupil-teacher ratio in small two-, three- and four-teacher primary schools in rural areas would be fully reversed and that they would revert to what they were previously?

In terms of teaching principals, one of the witnesses seemed to indicate that if a school has an enrolment over a certain figure, it will get a principal post, but if it is under that figure, a uni-

form policy will be applied rather than a sliding scale. Have proposals to have a sliding scale been put forward and if they have, could we get a copy of them? In other words, if a school has an enrolment of 183, which was the magic figure that was mentioned, that school would get a principal post, but if a school has an enrolment of 170, the teaching principal would get to be a principal for four days a week, if a school has an enrolment of 110, the teacher in that post would get so much in respect of the principal role, and if one was in that role in a 20-teacher school that teacher might be a fully occupied teacher in that the administrative burden would be small.

Would the witnesses agree that rural Ireland does not have access to broadband either at home or in the schools and that what we need is not a very poor 100 Mbps but 1 Gbps, or fibre connectivity? If Dublin wants to live with 100 Mbps of broadband, that is fine. The demand from myself and other people living in rural Ireland is to have 1 Gbps, to have fibre connectivity to houses. In the village in which I live in a remote part of rural Ireland, we will have fibre connectivity to the school and to 100 houses in the community. It can be easily done, the buoys are already up and we will have that connectivity at the end of January. The idea that we cannot aspire to having 1 Gbps, or in other words fibre, is wrong. I would welcome if all the schools demanded that we move into 21st century and have 1 Gbps.

I was examining school outcomes as part of a project I did last year, and it is hard to get statistics on them. I used a simple test, namely, out of every 100 pupils how many got to third level education through the system? The findings seemed to indicate that students in many rural areas, including in remote areas, where there would be a socio-economic mix among the parents, were performing at the top of the scale in line with urban advantage schools. I refer to Belmullet and other places like that. In terms of rural education outcomes, if we compare them to the parents' educational levels, they surpassed the equivalents of the cities. Having examined the statistics, if I compare urban blackspots, DEIS urban schools where 20% to 25% of students might get to third level, I do not know a rural second level school where that percentage would be acceptable or where the parents would accept that. How much data do the witnesses have on young people's outcomes compared with the socioeconomic backgrounds of their parents? If I am right in what I conclude, rural Ireland has been a huge resource of well-educated, well-rounded young people who have come into the production economy. In other words, many of them get high-end jobs and are part of the tiger economy. We always talk about our highly educated, motivated young people. Whereas they see the jobs tend to be located in urban areas - in other words, they migrate out - the statistics on third level access would seem to show that a disproportionate number of these people come from rural areas. I will give a simple example by way of comparison. A higher percentage of children growing up in west Cork, specifically the rural area of west Cork, will go on to third level than the average for the whole of the city of Dublin because the high levels of progression to third level in the affluent area of south County Dublin is more than dragged down by the very low levels in the more socioeconomically deprived areas around the rim of the city. If I am correct, rural Ireland has been a fantastic resource, between schools and community, that has kept the economy going. Therefore, if it were to decline and die, one would lose - if I might put it in crude terms - a fantastic raw material that has driven the economy for the past 20 years. One would certainly reduce the pool considerably because, unfortunately, in parts of urban areas, the number of people who become high-end achievers is relatively small. I am interested in this point.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank the witnesses for their presentations, for which I am very appreciative. I apologise for the turnout at the committee. I am slightly out of my comfort zone on the rural agenda, but the witnesses might appreciate I have some questions about broadband

in particular. The INTO document states there are 3,124 schools in the State. It goes on in the section relating to broadband to outline that 1,500 schools do not receive high-speed broadband services. Could the witnesses detail the day-to-day realities of the expectations of the teacher and the student in rural areas in terms of the curriculum in comparison to the urban environment where, presumably, high-speed broadband exists?

Separately, out-of-school activities and STEM were mentioned. I would like to hear the Minister start to refer to STEAM rather than STEM and to bring the arts into that picture. The witnesses will appreciate that the arts also fall under the remit of the committee. Out-of-school activities were mentioned. My vision for the arts is one in which they are valued as much as science, technology, engineering and mathematics and in which the infrastructure exists to excel outside the formal education environment. Young people should be seen as artists in their own right, not only as future artists or audiences. My belief is that we need a national youth arts strategy that would enable this area to grow outside the formal education environment to provide extracurricular activities for young people. Reduced access was mentioned by the ASTI, and I welcome that.

I am showing my ignorance here, but the fact there are one-teacher schools has come as a surprise to me. It is scandalous that any school would be left with one teacher, particularly in terms of inclusion, isolation and so on, so I thank the witnesses for including the issue in their contributions and highlighting it for me. Sin é.

Vice Chairman: I would like to say a few words as well. I am on the board of management of a rural school so I know at first hand the issues that have put us under serious pressure over the past few years. A few other schools on the rural peninsula where I live are under severe pressure. The problem is numbers. I thank each of the witnesses for their presence, their presentations and the work they have done. I also pay tribute to the boards of management and the parents' associations that work voluntarily, give their time freely and are struggling. I noted with a passing glance on the front page of a newspaper in a shop the other day all the new instructions and rules the Minister is coming up with for boards of management. Does the Government think we are all paid or something? Why does it continue to make it more and more difficult for boards of management to carry out their work in schools? I find it quite incredible. Many boards of management and schools are criticised just because they are church schools. The State must realise that only for the church keeping school doors open and paying for and building schools, we would be in a difficult position. I can assure the committee and the witnesses that many Ministers in recent times have tried to take churches out of schools only to realise very quickly the value the churches have had in schools. Thankfully, never once has a church issue come up in the school in whose board of management I am involved. We do not discriminate against anybody coming into our school, and I would like to have that stated as a fact. Neither I nor any board of management would tolerate that but we are made to look as if we were some sort of hierarchy that would refuse people coming into our schools because of this, that and the other.

I see many other issues in the day-to-day running of the school. One of the schools in my community is a one-teacher school. The school itself pays a second teacher. The board of management is in an incredible situation in that this is allowed to happen in this State. There is no clear understanding between rural schools and urban schools. In urban Ireland, areas can be highly populated, but in rural Ireland, no matter what one does, there are few employment opportunities, there is a falling population and there is no clear understanding in government of the situation. Unfortunately, it is the school sitting within the latter kind of area that is punished

severely and the pupils who are punished in the long term. We talk about walking principals, which is the best way to describe them. There is a school in Schull in which there are about 150 students. Diarmuid Duggan is an excellent principal of the highest class but, at the same time, he is stretched to the limit. He is trying to carry out his teaching duties while also trying to deal with the day-to-day issues of parents and trying to run a school. This is an incredible situation to be left with, and there is very poor understanding of it.

Reference was made to broadband. In many rural schools we can forget about 100 Mbps because there is no bit at all. The problem in such schools is having any kind of broadband service. Some of them will be waiting for quite some time to come because I have been to quite a lot of meetings and I cannot see this being resolved in the future.

If any one of the witnesses has recommendations about the Gaeltacht, I ask him or her to make them to the Gaeltacht committees. It is a very important time to do so. There is a Gaeltacht, Irish language and islands committee, and the clerk to this committee is also the clerk to that committee. He will speak to the witnesses after this meeting if they would like to submit any details or make any submissions.

We are examining sustainable rural Ireland and our schools. Another question I need to ask the witnesses concerns newly qualified teachers and the very low wages they are expected to start off on and the pressures under which they find themselves. Are they staying with it? Are they moving abroad? Are teachers being lost because of this issue? Maybe we as a political system, as politicians, can help the witnesses in trying to raise awareness in the Dáil that there needs to be a clearer understanding between rural and urban schools. If that is not there going forward, we will always have the issues we are discussing here today.

Mr. Kieran Christie: The Vice Chairman and his colleagues made a number of points about us and our colleagues who are exclusively concerned with the primary sector. A number of issues were raised about transport and Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned catchment areas. I taught in a rural school for many years and catchment areas have always been a source of some problems. When one came back to school there were often issues around catchment areas because they had been redefined. As the Deputy said, families that had traditionally gone to a particular school found they were now in a position where they were being encouraged to go to other schools. I also draw attention to Dr. Emer Smyth's work in her book *Cherishing all the Children Equally*. There is a conundrum here in that almost half of junior cycle students do not attend their nearest school. Parental choice in education is largely driven by socioeconomic status. It is a fairly complex question but is definitely one that rears its head frequently at second level.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What is the breakdown between rural and urban areas?

Mr. Kieran Christie: I do not have particular information on that.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am a perfect example of that. I grew up in Dublin 4 and we were within 100 yards of a school but it was too posh for us so we were sent out to the Christian Brothers three miles away. There must have been ten schools that were nearer. Sandymount was one of those. It was easy because it was a very modest distance on a straight bus lane. We used to cycle. In a rural area, I imagine that one would find the pattern is not quite as choice free.

Mr. Kieran Christie: The Deputy is referring to a situation where there are ten schools. He is referring more to the primary sector than the secondary sector in that case.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am referring to the secondary sector.

Mr. Kieran Christie: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If one puts a spot here and counts the schools within two or three miles, I could name them out for Mr. Christie.

Mr. Kieran Christie: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Choice is there.

Mr. Kieran Christie: Yes, the choices-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In that situation, people would-----

Mr. Kieran Christie: It is absolutely correct that the choice is much more obviously available at second level in a city context than in a rural context.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does Mr. Christie have any breakdown of that 50% figure? He said that 50% do not go to the nearest school. In cities that seems to be-----

Mr. Kieran Christie: I was referring to the findings of Dr. Emer Smyth in her publication in 2016. We could dig deeper into that figure.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It would be interesting to look at it. I want to tease this out. There is no school transport system in the city. One just goes to whatever school one feels like. Having grown up in that milieu, I understand it perfectly. One attends the second, third, fourth, or fifth nearest school. It is like taking one bus or another - they are coming in every direction.

By contrast, in rural areas there seems to be a policy driven by the Department every year. I saw it when I was in Government and I have seen it in Opposition. The Department wants to force it because it is very handy for its bean counting to force children to go to the nearest school, whether it is a good or bad school. It also wants to get rid of concessionary tickets. We refused to do it when we were in Government. They are purposely trying to downsize the buses so there are not so many concessionary tickets because naughty people are sending children to the school of their choice rather than to the nearest school. That is taking choice out of rural education, which urban people take for granted because in an urban setting there is massive amount of choice.

Senator Fintan Warfield: If one is religious enough.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: One still has a lot of choice in the city if one is not religious. There are Educate Together schools and so on but one does not have any choice down the country if people are being made to send their children to the nearest school.

Vice Chairman: Will Ms Leydon comment on that?

Ms Moira Leydon: We have to be very careful about that. As I said earlier, we have a very good database of educational participation, outcomes and socioeconomic characteristics in Ireland. It is very recent, representative and solid. It is building all the time with the Growing up in Ireland study which is globally at the top. The divides we see in education in terms of broader socioeconomic patterns are not rural-urban. There is no research evidence to say there are marked differences between rural and urban in terms of outcomes of education, whether we define those narrowly in the occupational direction or more broadly in terms of civic engage-

ment and well-being. Dr. Emer Smyth has two decades of exemplary research behind her. Her most recent work is *Cherishing all the Children Equally*, which is a beautiful compendium of all sorts of post-1916 reflections on where we have gone as a society from the point of view of young people. Her data is that nationally 50% of junior cycle students do not go to local schools. It is well over 65% in the Dublin area.

As the Deputy alluded to, it is a complex issue. School choice is something intrinsic in our second level system. In very many ways, one of the strengths of our system is that for very many decades the State has said we will not have a highly selective schooling system in which there are pronounced differences between socioeconomic classes going to different types of schools. Instead it said the local school will provide, in the first instance, a broad enough curriculum so that it will be suitable for all sorts of ability type and dispositions and, second, that the quality of the local school will be maintained by national standards such as we have now in the Teaching Council, NCCA and the State Examinations Commission. In a way, the question of parental choice in education, as the Deputy alluded to, is very complex and is not just to do with socioeconomic status but also with broader issues. We can certainly send the committee on the Emer Smyth evidence.

I want to come back to one point. The Deputy is absolutely right. I will throw out a few figures. In its 2006 economic survey of Ireland, which was the height of our boom, the OECD said investment in education after the Donogh O'Malley era contributed something like 18% to our overall GDP growth in the previous period. That is incredible. It is very clear that investment in education pays off in terms of developing the human capital to keep the economy going. It would be wrong from the point of view of public policy to only talk about our rural-urban dimension. All the evidence says that the inequality in education outcomes is as pronounced within schools as between schools. In schools there will be very high achievers going off to third level and much lower achievers going to different, not so prosperous, destinations. Public policy is an expression I keep using. From the point of view of public policy, it has to be about making sure that all students in every school have the opportunities to make sure they have those options. I will not labour the point.

I want to respond to Senator Warfield's point.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When I was Minister with responsibility for the RAPID areas, I was told if I look at schools in the most socioeconomically deprived areas of Dublin where perhaps 20% go to third level, which is a crude measure - we could use any measure such as the number who wind up in prison - where there were not only individual outcomes to consider but also the effect of the community. It reinforces things in the school population and the aspirations of children and parents. Peer pressure made it more difficult for children to get on even if they wanted to whereas if I went to the leafy suburbs of south Dublin I find the opposite effect - the community effect was uplifting there. My experience of rural Ireland is that it replicates more the urban, middle class experience than the urban highly deprived area experience. If I am right, pushing people into highly deprived areas will weaken the human capital into the future. That is my point.

Mr. Ed Byrne: I agree to an extent with Deputy Ó Cuív. Educational sociologists have always pointed to four main issues with regard to outcomes for children. The first is parental educational achievement, that is, the child's own parents' educational achievement and how they view education. The second is community structure. Does the child come from a community that values the things that are educational? The third is family structure. The family itself is an issue, in whether there are two parents or one, whether there is a nuclear family and

whether there is good support from the wider family. The fourth and biggest issue is poverty. If there is poverty, education is very difficult. If one is living hand to mouth, it is hard to come up with what may be important in the longer term.

I note something else the Deputy said regarding building, policy and demographics. At second level, there is another issue occurring. I would suggest that the voluntary secondary school sector, as in schools that were church-led, are now receiving far less resources than the newer-build ETBs and community and comprehensive schools. Therefore, they are beginning to fall into disrepair and that will have a knock-on effect on teaching and learning in those areas.

Mr. John Boyle: There have been many wide-ranging questions. Deputy Ó Cuív had a considerable number. With regard to transport, I have first-hand experience of the effect of that change from ten pupils down to eight in the west Wicklow area on the far side of the Blessington lakes. It has created huge difficulties for some of the national schools there. It appeared that families were going to be divided, in that the older children would continue to attend the school they had been attending from the outset and that younger children would have to go to a different school. I had representations on that issue only last year.

I was very interested in the comments on the “roofs overhead” policy, as the Department of Education and Skills officials in Tullamore would have described it over the last decade, in which they very much prioritised demographic factors. It was very difficult to argue with. A child starting school surely deserves to have a place in school, no matter where that child is living. However, there was a consequence of that policy. My colleagues in the ASTI have mentioned it as well. A number of schools were left behind. There was queue-jumping in that new communities very often availed of a new school in double-quick time, while communities that had schools in a state of disrepair had to wait. The numbers there have decreased dramatically, let us be honest about it. When I first got involved in the INTO executive and we went to Tullamore, we would have a list as long as our arms. That list has become shorter.

The priorities for schools in the primary sector were not so much about the renovation of the schools, because there were numerous schemes until the summer works were curtailed and the devolved scheme was very useful for rural schools. There were schemes to deal with the issue of the state of disrepair of schools. The reason the traditional long-established schools were lagging behind was that they were not being provided with the other facilities outside of the mainstream classroom. Children with special educational needs were going out into the rain to pre-fabricated buildings with no toilets and very poor heating, lighting and so on. Principal teachers did not have offices because they were given over to a resource teacher. The big problem, in a country that has done so well for decades in the sporting field, was that the vast majority of these schools had no PE halls. There was no strategy in the last ten or 15 years to provide any previously-established school with a PE hall. That has been a big priority for this organisation over a long time.

It is a very high priority for INTO to have the cuts to the pupil-teacher ratio reversed. We have had numerous motions at our annual congress. We actually have a target beyond even the previous pupil-teacher ratio. Our priority reflects the promises that were made by the Government back in 2001 and 2002, which was that every child in an infant classroom in this country would be in a class of less than 20 pupils, be it rural or urban. There were other promises made around that time as well about numbers dropping down to world-class pupil-teacher ratios at primary level. We are lagging very far behind those.

We welcomed the change to the one-teacher school situation announced in the budget.

However, Ms Deirdre O'Connor gave a very stark analysis of an example of what happened to a four-teacher school. It used to have 84 children and four teachers. The number of pupils increased and the number of teachers was decreased to three. We now have 28 children in those classes. That is actually a 33% increase. Where I work, our class sizes in south Dublin actually reduced from 28 to 27 and in some cases to 26. In some rural schools, there is a multi-class situation of three teachers and 28 pupils per class. It is unacceptable and is a big issue for our union and members.

We concur with Deputy Ó Cuív's aspiration of having 1 Gbps broadband in schools. The policy of the Department of Education and Skills in recent years has been to provide 100 Mbps to post-primary schools. We would love to have that for starters. If we got 1 Gbps after that, it could be built on. We have situations in some of our larger schools, which are much larger than some secondary schools, in which iPads cannot be used because the facility to run them is not there. There is basically just enough power to run the white board and maybe a desktop computer or laptop. Obviously, the children in Ireland will lose out badly, especially in rural areas. In a multi-class situation, if a teacher had the facility to use iPads or other such platforms to engage one group of children in group work while delivering another curriculum to another group, the quality of learning for that period would be enhanced dramatically. We would like 100 Mbps to begin with and hopefully 1 Gb after that. Ms O'Connor will cover----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I wish to explain on that point. The 100 Mbps is provided here via fibre to the cabinet. That works in a city area. Quite simply, it will not work in rural Ireland. It is either the 1 Gbps or it is nothing. It is a tactical issue. The only way of bringing high-speed broadband to the homes of rural Ireland, if we define that as 100 Mbps or more, is to actually bring in fibre. That means that rural Ireland could leapfrog urban Ireland. The urban solution of 100 Mbps is not a possible one.

Mr. John Boyle: Okay.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When talking about rural Ireland, we all need to collectively demand fibre, period, end of story. I know it is not my job to be proselytising the witnesses here today, but I believe it is very important that we put the message about that this thing is being looked at upside down. We need fibre in every rural area. There is no point in having 100 Mbps in the school and having the person sitting at home with 5 Mbps.

Mr. John Boyle: Absolutely.

Ms Deirdre O'Connor: I would like to address Deputy Ó Cuív's points on the teaching principal and the possibility of a scale. We have looked at the practicalities of that. It arises in the context of the substitution for those teachers. One could devise some kind of a scale but might end up with the teaching principal out of his or her classroom more often. Our minimum demand is for a day a week. However, that has to be accompanied by a proper arrangement for a supply panel for teachers. What is happening at the present time in some areas is that teaching principals are not able to avail of their administrative days because of the lack of availability of substitute teachers. It goes back to the point that was made about equality of pay for our younger teachers. We have to make it attractive for our younger teachers, not only in terms of pay, but also in terms of working conditions. A supply panel of substitute teachers would be of huge benefit to rural schools, small schools and schools with teaching principals. A teaching principal would then know that he or she definitely could get a substitute for administrative days. That is a key point. There are technicalities to that, such as how the teaching day or week is divided up in terms of substitution and the proper resourcing of it.

On the points Senator Warfield made about the curriculum and broadband, schools have adopted ICT hardware. Most schools now have access to whiteboards and to other hardware. However, one of the big challenges for schools is the maintenance of that hardware. There is no support for schools for maintenance or ICT support. Teachers are well disposed to the use of ICT and broadband where it is available. Young teachers are coming out of colleges of education with a four year BEd or even six years of training and they are well up to speed with the use of such technology and are able to deliver the curriculum.

The Vice Chairman made some points regarding the figures on teachers and the numbers in small schools. One of the figures we examined in the context of another piece of work was the number of teacher posts that were created in the west as opposed to the east. It is clear that the population growth in eastern and urban areas is driving up the number of teachers in those areas and leading to a lack of permanent teaching posts in western counties and a fall-off in numbers in some of those schools. That is something we must monitor and take into account.

The resourcing of boards of management is very interesting. One point about a multiplicity of small schools in one parish is that the parish is obliged to sustain, for example, three separate boards of management for three separate small schools. That is, perhaps, 24 volunteers to run those schools. The issue is how those boards of management are supported given that they are the employers of teachers and therefore need human resources, HR, support, legal support and advice relating to those areas. There is something of a mismatch because the Department of Education and Skills says that the board must carry out certain functions and the Department cannot assist with that, particularly with regard to employment and so forth. It is a very difficult area. Again with regard to boards of management, the issue of parental choice has been raised. It is important to bear in mind that 80% of primary schools enrol all comers. That relates to Senator Warfield's point as well. Those schools are especially schools in rural areas, which are extremely inclusive in terms of children with special educational needs, children of all faiths and none, children who have come from abroad and local children.

Those are the matters on which I wished to respond.

Mr. John Boyle: I am glad the pay equality issue was mentioned. I do not have bald facts relating to the effect of the pay equality issue on teacher supply, but a survey was carried out after the first cut in 2011 in the parish of Gaoth Dobhair. The parish of Gaoth Dobhair would have a long tradition of providing primary teachers, many of whom have achieved 515 points in their leaving certificate to get into teacher training. That is a measure of the quality of primary and secondary education in Gaeltacht areas, but it is only one measure. The whole-school evaluation, WSE, reports indicate that primary schools in rural areas do just as well as primary schools in towns or urban areas.

However, the parish of Gaoth Dobhair survey showed that quite a number of the senior football players who won Comórtas Peile na Gaeltachta emigrated to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. They won World Games medals recently in Páirc Uí Chrócaigh. Some of their partners, friends and girlfriends also went with them and they are doing very well in Gaelic games there too. They chose not to come to Dublin where there was a good deal of work available at the time. They chose to go to the Middle East because they were earning €36,000. Had they remained in Ireland and had their pay remained the way it was formerly, they would have been earning more than that, so there was a very significant cut. There is no doubt that teacher emigration has increased dramatically due to the cut to new entrant pay.

I am confident that there will be a full reversal of those cuts in the spring. The three unions

involved are absolutely determined to ensure there will be a full reversal of the cuts to new entrant pay. It beggars belief that the State would invest so much money in training so many bright young people to become teachers over four or five years and then would allow them to emigrate in very large numbers. All one need do is go to Dublin Airport just before Christmas to see the droves of young teachers returning, from the Middle East in particular, for their two week break in this country. The issue is affecting all schools, teachers and the morale of teachers. It is also affecting rural Ireland and its small schools. I am glad it was mentioned and that the committee gave us time to air all of our issues. While there are myriad issues, that issue affects every school. It is affecting rural Ireland in a big way because if teachers from the parish of Gaoth Dobhair emigrate to the Middle East, as happened during my time in St. Patrick's College in the 1980s, there is a grave danger that those teachers will never return to this country.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We all agree that it is basically age discrimination. If there was gender discrimination, we would all be up in arms. It is age discrimination. I believe, and I said this to groups of teachers who have appeared before the committee and particularly primary school teachers, that whatever money is available for wages and wage restoration should first be used to end that discrimination as it cannot be called anything else. Pursuing that objective will certainly have my full support.

Vice Chairman: Does Ms Lynch wish to comment?

Ms Áine Lynch: We have a contribution to make on a couple of the matters raised. Regarding school transport, the National Parents Council position is that it must be completely overhauled, rather than tinkering with it at the edges. There must be a more modernised system for transporting children to and from school. Parents often have children in different schools at different age ranges with different starting and finishing times. It becomes a logistical nightmare to try to get the children to and from school. Then there is the amount of traffic on the roads in urban areas because there is no school transport system within the cities. Instead of going from 8 km to 10 km or this or that mileage, there should be a complete overhaul of the school transport system. Proper school transport infrastructure should be put in place. It could be a mix of paid by the parents, subsidised and free, depending on the ability to pay and other factors. However, there should be a complete overhaul of the school transport system with proper infrastructure put in place for all schools in Ireland. That is our view on school transport.

On the broadband issue, everybody wants high-speed broadband in primary schools. According to the latest figures, approximately 1,000 primary schools currently do not have access to high-speed broadband. Even if we started today with its delivery as the highest priority in the country, we know it would not impact on many children in primary school at present because it would be too late. In terms of digital skills strategies in schools, it is really important that we do not say those strategies will commence when the schools get their high-speed broadband. There must be a specific strategy that deals with what those schools should be doing to develop digital skills in the absence of high-speed broadband. We know from many European studies that children in Ireland are falling behind their European counterparts due to the fact that while they might be passive users and viewers of the Internet, they are not creating digital content at the same level as their European counterparts. Much of that can be done without Internet access. It is important that a digital skills strategy does not wait for one third of the schools to get up to speed to be able to engage with it but has a specific digital curriculum for the 1,000 primary schools that do not have high-speed broadband.

Those are the two areas I wish to highlight.

Vice Chairman: Finally, I invite Mr. Christie to respond.

Mr. Kieran Christie: Senator Warfield raised the issue of STEM versus STEAM. My colleague might have a comment to make on that but I also wish to make a few brief comments. The ASTI would concur with the Vice Chairman regarding our appreciation of the valuable voluntary work that is done by parents, teachers and other individuals in communities throughout the country on boards of management. It has become a far more onerous task. The workload burden associated with it has become quite dramatic in recent years, so we concur with the Vice Chairman's view.

Like my colleague, I was pleased with the Vice Chairman's comments and those of Deputy Ó Cuív on the differential pay scale. It has been a canker in the system over the last eight or ten years and is having a seriously deleterious effect on teacher morale in our sector. The position of the ASTI is not unknown to anybody in the room so I will not delay the meeting with that. It has serious implications for the system which could be quite major. There is no urban-rural divide on this. New entrants to the profession, whether rural or otherwise, are going to Dubai, England and so on. In September there are road shows where schools come over from England and set up stall to encourage our young and brightest entrants to the profession away.

With the forbearance of the Vice Chairman, perhaps Ms Moira Leydon will address the point made by Senator Warfield.

Ms Moira Leydon: We are all looking at the clock but it would be unfortunate if we did not address the issue of STEM which Senator Warfield raised. There is good news and bad news on that. Industry drives much of the policy for education. We need to be quite explicit sometimes. There is good knowledge that what drives STEM subjects - science, technology, engineering and maths - is the imagination and aesthetic appreciation. It is implicit rather than explicit and perhaps policy needs to reflect that. The good news is that we have an arts strategy for education. It is being driven by the very eminent educationalist who has done us all wonderful public service over the decades, Professor John Coolahan, and is being funded by the Government. The bad news, which is endemic, is that when a school has an art teacher, he or she is within the pupil-teacher ratio. One of the big issues we have, which is particularly apparent in rural schools, is that there is a rigid pupil-teacher ratio. That means that when there are a particular number of pupils, the school gets a particular number of teachers. The evidence is very strong that art and music are slowly but surely dropping off the curriculum. Schools have to provide 35 subjects so it has to get the teachers who teach the mainstream subjects. It is very hard for schools to appoint teachers whose degree is primarily in art. I am a great believer in putting forward practical proposals. We need to be able to give concessionary allocations to schools to allow them to appoint art teachers which will allow many more students to avail of this very enriched form of education. It will be particularly enriched with the new syllabus that is coming in. We need to look at sharing teachers between schools, which they do very successfully in primary schools. It is not rocket science. We have a fantastic precedence of sharing resource and learning support teachers and we have a little bit of that at second level. There is no reason why we could not look at models of sharing art teachers. In a typical first-year intake in a second level school of about 120 pupils, there might be 28 doing art which will drop after junior certificate. It is very sad, given the fantastic cultural richness in this country. I would be very pleased to talk to the Senator afterwards. There is good news but the allocation is killing it and we need to look at that.

Mr. Ed Byrne: I just want to add one thing.

Vice Chairman: Mr. Byrne should be brief.

Mr. Ed Byrne: Art is not just about art. The arts are major things but most of the arts within school are extracurricular. They impinge upon time. It is time that teachers have always given but which is now being counted by bean counters.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Byrne for being so brief. That concludes our consideration of this topic and I thank the witnesses for assisting us today. They are now excused. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.45 p.m. until 2.15 p.m. on Wednesday, 14 December 2016.