

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Samhain 2017

Wednesday, 29 November 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

| Teachtaí Dála / Deputies | Seanadóirí / Senators |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Seán Canney, | Martin Conway, |
| Michael Collins, | Maura Hopkins, |
| Michael Fitzmaurice, | Colette Kelleher.* |
| Carol Nolan, | |
| Niamh Smyth. | |

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Grace O'Sullivan.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Teachta / Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 9.10 a.m.

Action Plan for Rural Development: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome all those in attendance. This is the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. I look forward to working with members, the Minister, Deputy Ring, and the Department to try to make this very important committee work for the people. The witnesses, whom I welcome, are in attendance to discuss the action plan for rural development.

I draw the attention of the witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(I) 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 it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to 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 or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on its 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 Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I ask members to turn off their mobile phones, which can affect the broadcasting system.

The committee will today discuss the action plan for rural development. To assist it in that regard, I am pleased to welcome Mr. William Parnell, assistant Secretary General, Ms Fiona Moylette, Mr. Eddie Forsyth and Mr. J.P. Mulherin of the Department of Rural and Community Development. I now invite the Department to make its presentation, beginning with Mr. Parnell.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank the Chair and members for the invitation to appear before the committee in order to discuss the action plan for rural development. Some members may be familiar with the plan through their involvement in the former Joint Committee for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. We would like to give members an overview of the plan and a sense of the progress that has been made to date. We have circulated a PowerPoint presentation of which members may have a hard copy through the secretariat, along with a summary of the first progress report on the action plan. I will go through the presentation in order to facilitate a further discussion and we will be happy to answer any questions members may have.

The action plan was launched in January 2017. It is a whole-of-Government approach to rural development and focuses on the economic and social development of rural Ireland. When it was launched, some sections of the media picked up on the town and village renewal initiative and one could be forgiven for thinking the action plan only addresses that aspect, but it is far more than that, with 14 Departments involved in its delivery, along with several agencies and the business and voluntary sectors. It is very important to realise, as the Minister has said, that developing and progressing rural Ireland is the responsibility of a wide range of actors, not

just the Department of Rural and Community Development. The role of the Department of Rural and Community Affairs is to provide co-ordination to ensure the energy of Departments is directed towards rural development in a synergistic manner.

Members may be familiar with the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, report published in 2014. The action plan builds on and goes beyond that report, which was presented to Government with several recommendations. The action plan is a Government commitment to deliver tangible actions. One of the key recommendations in the CEDRA report concerned the need to prioritise cross-Government co-ordination and the action plan aims to carry that out. It was developed following quite extensive consultation. We had a series of meetings with rural stakeholders, agencies, local authorities and so on, along with several bilateral engagements. The then Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Heather Humphreys, who was responsible for the action plan, invited input from Deputies and Senators and, specifically, members of the former Committee for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, from whom submissions were received.

The consultation process highlighted the positivity and resilience of rural Ireland. It identified issues that need to be addressed but we were very struck by the positivity encountered. The introductory section of the action plan contains an emphasis on moving away from the perception that rural Ireland is synonymous with decline because, although it has encountered challenges, there is much positivity and many very good things happening in rural Ireland and it is important for that to be acknowledged and built upon. We are conscious that there is no one-size-fits-all situation because every rural area is different. Areas only a few kilometres apart may have different sets of issues. Through the action plan, we hope to help to unlock the potential of various areas around the country.

The second slide which members should have deals with and contains a graphic that captures the objectives of the action plan. As I have stated, the action plan provides an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of various initiatives across Government to advance the economic and social progress of rural Ireland. That must improve the quality of life of those living in rural Ireland, whether through employment opportunities, accessibility of services or developing social networks. The actions in the plan are time bound and closely monitored to ensure they are on track. We are even open to adding new actions. We have added a further action since the plan was launched in January. It is important to note that we are answerable to the Cabinet committee on the economy with regard to progress on the action plan.

The action plan is a three year plan with over 270 actions for delivery across five thematic pillars. I will mention those pillars shortly but, as I have said, the plan is for delivery across a range of Departments, State agencies and local authorities and indeed other bodies, such as the business and community sectors. Since it is a whole-of-Government approach, there are many synergies with other Government policies. In particular, there are many synergies with the regional action plans for jobs. Food Wise 2025 is another example of an important strategy that ties in closely with the action plan. With 270 actions, we would not say that any one of them is the silver bullet, and members will appreciate that there are not always simple solutions to the sorts of issues we face in rural Ireland. The value is in the cumulative impact of those actions. If we can achieve what we are setting out to do by bringing Departments and agencies together to see the importance of working to improve the situation for people who are living in rural areas, the cumulative impact of those actions will make a difference. It is a three year plan so we recognise that it will take time for a new plan such as this to take hold and have an impact. We will give the committee a sense in a moment of some of the progress we have seen so far

under the plan.

The next slide in my presentation mentions the five pillars covered in the plan. While there are many actions, some 270, they are grouped under five pillars and even within the five pillars there are subcategories of objectives. The first pillar is about supporting sustainable communities. That pillar is about making rural Ireland a better place in which to live and to work. We will be doing that through programmes like the town and village renewal scheme and the Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais, CLÁR and Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development, RAPID, programmes. Another key objective under that pillar is to enhance local services whether through access to schools in rural Ireland or primary care. Empowering local communities is another theme in supporting sustainable communities. Building better communities is the final objective within that pillar. This will be delivered through ongoing investment in schemes like the Leader programme and other initiatives, such as the rural social scheme.

The second pillar in the plan is to support enterprise and employment. The areas we are looking at within that pillar are to grow and attract enterprises. This is where there was much synergy with the regional action plans for jobs. We have also made headway with the Atlantic economic corridor proposal. That is a very long-term objective but we have made good progress and the ultimate aim there is to support enterprise growth. We also have actions under the pillar of supporting enterprise and employment, to support growth in sectors such as the agrifood sector, the renewable energy sector and even the international financial services sector. We are firmly of the view that rural Ireland can and does deliver in these sectors as well as the traditional sectors that we are familiar with, such as tourism and agriculture. There is potential and we are seeing firms setting up in much more modern sectors that will produce high quality jobs.

The next pillar is maximising our rural tourism and recreational potential. We are probably all familiar with the increase in activity tourism and recreational tourism that is happening on a global scale. Ireland is well placed to capitalise on this area. Tourism numbers for rural Ireland have been increasing and the committee will be familiar with targeted initiatives such as Ireland's Ancient East and the Wild Atlantic Way, but we want to build on those and develop activity tourism through the development of greenways and blueways. There have been notable successes with both greenways and blueways in the past two years or so. We have a lot of natural and built heritage that can support increased tourism in rural areas, particularly through our national parks and nature reserves.

Fostering culture and creativity is also an important part of the action plan. It covers quite a range of areas, including pure arts, which help to bring cultural activity into rural communities. Arts and creativity are also important for social interaction in rural areas and for people's well-being. Within that particular pillar, we link in very closely with the Creative Ireland programme and local authorities have now established culture teams and are developing culture plans. The Irish language is a key part of our culture and within that particular section of the action plan, we have actions to promote the Irish language as a key resource within the Gaeltacht and other rural communities.

The final pillar of the action plan deals with improving rural infrastructure and connectivity. We have focused on three particular areas in this section. The connectivity piece ultimately involves the capital investment plan and investment in infrastructure, including roads, schools, health services and so on. We focused in particular on three areas that came to our attention during the consultation process. It will not surprise anybody that high-speed broadband is crucially important for rural communities and we have a number of actions in the plan to support

that area. We have actions in the plan to support rural transport links too, both through such services as Local Link and support for regional airports. The third area that we focused on in that pillar is flood relief measures. This is an issue that causes much difficulty and I know Deputy Canney would be familiar with the actions that have been taken and will continue to be taken to deal with the flooding issues.

That is a quick overview of the five pillars. While the action plan might seem quite long, both an Irish and English version are contained in it. The plan itself only runs to approximately 70 pages and at the head of each section is a brief summary of the objectives I have set out. It is quite accessible to people who want to look at the plan in a little more detail.

Moving on to the next slide, I will emphasise that the action plan is a whole-of-Government approach. We have replicated on the slide a page from the action plan that shows some of the key deliverables in the action plan itself and some high-level targets. They include supporting 135,000 new jobs by 2020, increasing overseas visitors to rural areas by 12%, and investing more than €50 million in sports, recreation and cultural facilities. They include inputs from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport as well as our Department and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Our Department plays a key role in the revitalisation of towns and villages through the town and village renewal scheme, as does the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht through some of the heritage schemes and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government as well. I do not intend to go through all of the key deliverables, but they are in place to give us a sense of some of the headline targets for the action plan. Of course, we will be looking to measure not only the delivery of individual actions but the impact of individual actions as well.

That leads me to the question of delivery and how we ensure that we are making progress. There are more than 270 actions within the action plan. All these actions have been agreed with the responsible bodies for delivery. The actions are all for delivery within a definite time-frame. In some cases, the plan may refer to an action for delivery in 2017 or 2018. We have we followed up with the relevant bodies. We asked them to break down the detail between the first half of the year and the second half of the year in order that we can monitor more closely the progress that is being made. The Minister has established a monitoring committee, which he chairs. The committee includes key Departments and rural representatives. It is a wide-ranging committee, involving Departments, public bodies, rural stakeholders and the business community.

We have said that we will publish progress reports twice each year. The first progress report was published in August. This committee was supplied with a summary of the progress report. The monitoring committee is examining some important thematic issues. At the most recent meeting of the monitoring committee representatives attended from bodies dealing with mental health and mental wellness issues. Issues such as rural isolation are not only for older people. They are relevant for younger people as well. We hear a good deal about sports clubs having to stop, perhaps because they cannot field a team and so on. Mental wellness is an issue for people of all ages. We had some good inputs from groups, including the Irish Men's Sheds Association and Mental Health Ireland. We envisage that we will add further actions on an ongoing basis as they emerge from the monitoring committee. Indeed, we have added an action relating to a Gaeltacht region in the Iveragh Peninsula. Those involved are now developing their own action plan to try to support that particular area. It is part of our action plan in order that we can monitor and keep track of it.

I mentioned that we come under the remit of the Cabinet economic committee. We are be-

ing supported in the delivery or the promotion of the action plan by Pat Spillane, who was the chairman of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA. I will outline progress. As I mentioned, the first progress report was published in August. I need to correct the slide before the committee, which states that 201 actions were due for delivery. Actually, 227 actions were due for delivery in the first two quarters of 2017. They were either due for delivery or they were multiannual actions but with activities scheduled for 2017. Of those 227 actions, a total of 220 were completed or were in progress where they were multiannual in nature. The full progress report is available on our Department website. The website address is available on the screen for committee members.

I referred to measuring impact. A key objective for our 2018 workplan is to measure the impact of the actions. We have been working with some renowned researchers on rural development to try to develop a methodology to measure our impact. I will offer some examples of progress in the first six months. The town and village renewal scheme was launched for 2017. Funding of €21 million has been made available to support 280 towns and villages in the coming 12 to 15 months. One encouraging feature of the 2017 scheme involved asking local authorities to engage with local communities to identify projects that will have an economic impact on towns and villages and their outlying areas. We have seen some really good projects coming through.

In May and June, the Minister approved funding of €7 million under the CLÁR programme for 231 projects. As many committee members will know, the CLÁR programme focuses on areas that have suffered heavy levels of depopulation. A total of €11 million in funding was announced for more than 200 projects under the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. More recently, the Minister launched a seniors alert scheme with €2.3 million in funding to support older people with free personalised monitoring alarms. The local improvement scheme was launched in September with a fund of €10 million to improve non-public roads. In the past week, the Minister announced a further allocation for the scheme based on the level of work that local authorities have indicated they can complete by the end of the year.

There have been developments in other Departments as well. Enterprise Ireland has launched the regional enterprise development fund. The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has provided €9 million for 56 arts and culture centres. IDA Ireland has delivered advance buildings in Sligo, Tralee and Castlebar. Committee members are probably aware that Clare County Council has become the first council in the country to launch its own rural development strategy following from the Government action plan. It is encouraging to see local authorities take the objectives of the plan and try to replicate them in the local area. Údarás na Gaeltachta has a digital strategy for the Gaeltacht. The authority has innovation hubs operational in Donegal and Kerry. A great deal is happening. I am not suggesting this is all as a result of the action plan, but it shows what we can replicate, and I find it encouraging.

The EY Entrepreneur Of The Year awards were announced in recent months. Harry Hughes, who is the chief executive of Portwest, a company based in Westport, Mayo, was named as the EY Entrepreneur of the Year. Evelyn O'Toole, who is the chief executive of Complete Laboratory Solutions, won the industry category award. She was also named as businesswoman of the year at the *Irish Tatler* women of the year awards. Her company is a contract laboratory that provides testing to clients in the food, environmental, medical devices and pharmaceutical industries. The company has laboratories in Ros Muc and Galway. These are good examples of what can be done and what is being achieved in rural parts of Ireland. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly area has been named as the European entrepreneurial region for 2018.

We are keen to see and measure more of this coming through. Data are available on the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation website this month. There are a lot of high-value-added jobs being created by Enterprise Ireland client companies around the country, in places like Dundalk, Kilkenny and Ennis, and in areas such as pharma, financial services, biotech, cardio products and so on. This gives a sense of what is being achieved and what can be achieved. The aim is that the action plan will help to develop this and bring new and increased opportunities for people living and working in rural Ireland. Along with economic development, it is important we focus on the social fabric of rural communities.

I hope I have given members a good sense of the action plan and of what we are trying to achieve.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank Mr. Parnell for his presentation. The action plan is fairly clear as to goals and objectives. In the area of flood relief, I compliment the Office of Public Works, OPW, and officials on taking on the amendments I instigated to the minor works scheme, which is very important to rural Ireland. It will help more flood schemes to be done as they will be better able to satisfy cost-benefit analyses. Flooding is becoming increasingly prevalent, as we have seen in the past couple of weeks in Donegal and Laois. The home relocation scheme is another very important aspect of rural Ireland for people for whom no other engineering solution can be found. The Department is working very closely with the OPW to meet the concerns of rural people in this area.

Last Saturday week, I had the honour of opening a new men's shed in Athenry, and I met many people who are involved in men's sheds in east Galway. These are one of the most positive things I have seen happening in the regions. Men come together to discuss things, to carry out projects and invest back into the community in the form of services which would otherwise not be provided. I would like the Department to provide more support in the form of funding, because the regional organisers of the men's sheds do it without payment and this is not sustainable going forward. There are more than 400 and I would like to see a structure put in place to support them. They are getting their governance right but it is important to recognise the asset we have in the men's shed concept by continuing to support it and grow it.

Mr. Parnell mentioned the Atlantic economic corridor and it is of paramount importance that we push it for the sake of balanced regional development and rural western constituencies. It needs to be highlighted in the national planning framework and I understand the Department has made submissions in this respect. The Atlantic economic corridor is the future for Ireland, and not just for rural Ireland, because there is overdevelopment on the east coast and a poor quality of life, with people unable to live and work on account of the expense and the congestion. We need to create a counterbalance, and the key ingredient for the cities in an arc from Cork, Limerick, Galway and Sligo up to Derry and Belfast is infrastructure. In modern Ireland this includes roads, railways, connectivity, broadband, water and wastewater, and these need to be developed to create jobs. Mr. Parnell mentioned the need for parishes to field a team of 15 footballers and we need young people who are getting married and having families to be able to live and work in their parishes and communities. The western rail corridor is a very significant component of that, and to realise our full potential we need to close the gap between Claremorris and Athenry, and to look at linking the rail network to Shannon Airport and Knock Airport. It does not take billions to do these things and the cost of bridging the gap between Claremorris and Athenry would be less than €100 million, which is not a lot in the context of overall public spending on transport. We need to work with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure this agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just a plan, is provided.

Another important area is broadband, and the Minister, Deputy Naughten, is working on the national broadband plan and the broadband tender. I am sure all members will agree that the current roll-out of broadband is intermittent and divisive and is causing stress and consternation by being rolled out to sections of road and communities in a haphazard basis. There is no equality and it is creating a huge amount of division in communities. The broadband providers say they do not have the juice in the lines to bring them another half a mile up the road, and business in rural Ireland cannot access them as a result, even though they can see it on a pole down the road. I was at a meeting the other night in Knockdoe and the 30 people there said that one of their main problems was broadband. Ten years ago it would have been bad roads or potholes but broadband is right up there as an issue now. It is not so much that there is none of it but that there is some of it and it is not being delivered in a coherent fashion. This is the case in every parish in Ireland, and I have heard from other Deputies that it goes up one road, bypasses another and comes down another with gaps left in the middle, in no man's land, for no particular reason. The technology is there to deliver it but the Department needs to put pressure on broadband providers to ensure they do not bring it into a road unless they can do the entire road or the entire area, rather than leaving it segregated as it is at the moment.

I look forward to working with the Department and the Chairman in this committee. We have a lot of work to do but we have the template with the Action Plan for Rural Development. I know that everybody in the Department is committed to it, as are the Ministers, Deputies Ring and Kyne. I lend my support to the plan.

Rural transport was also mentioned but we do not have rural transport at the moment. Last night I was in the Dáil canteen and was speaking to a political correspondent who told me they were getting the bus at 10 o'clock. I said I wished I could do that at home but we do not have these services. We have to create ways to incentivise communities to provide this missing transport link with a community taxi service, and we need to assist in this, not just on paper but with some sort of funding. The biggest obstacle seems to be insurance and the regulations around that. However, I compliment the work that has been done and welcome all the money that has been made available through the different schemes in the past year. I also welcome the additional local improvement scheme, LIS, money that came from the Minister, Deputy Ring, the other day, as it is vital and we need to continue to roll it out as it is showing tangible results in rural areas.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank Deputy Canney for his support and his comments. The first issue he mentioned was men's sheds. I mentioned in my introduction that, at the most recent meeting of our monitoring committee, we had a presentation from the chief executive of the Irish Men's Sheds Association, IMSA. It was a very interesting presentation. The association outlined its plans in terms of developing its network on a county basis. We are certainly aware of some of its funding needs. The Deputy mentioned that the association is trying to get its governance straightened out, not that I see any difficulties in that regard at the moment. We could have an ongoing engagement with the IMSA, and as it begins to develop its own plans for the future, we would certainly be open to talking to it. Many of the schemes we operate now are run on a competitive basis, but there may be funding opportunities for groups such as the IMSA nonetheless. It is a very important area to focus on. As the Deputy said, it is quite new and it is bringing about positive change right across Ireland, in urban and rural areas.

The Deputy also mentioned the Atlantic economic corridor. This issue was spoken about when we attended a meeting of the Select Committee on Community and Rural Development at which the Minister was present a couple of weeks ago. The Atlantic economic corridor again

shows the importance of a joined-up approach because it will require the input of so many different Departments and local authorities. The Deputy is quite correct to talk about the importance of infrastructure, but the funding that will be provided and the projects which will be funded are matters for the capital investment plan, which the Government will be publishing in the short term.

To say a word about the Atlantic economic corridor and the practical progress which has been made, as the Deputy would know, the concept of an Atlantic corridor has come and gone down through the years. When talking about the Atlantic economic corridor, there is sometimes a perception that it is no more than a road. I do not mean that in any kind of disparaging way, but it is much more than that. The particular proposal on which we are working emerged from the business sector and the chambers of commerce in February 2016. The American Chamber of Commerce also supported it. It is more about joining the economic hubs along that corridor or arc to create a balance with, and an investment alternative to, the east coast. If it works, it could be a model which might also work in other areas.

The Minister has established a task force to drive this concept forward. It involves Chambers Ireland and other business leaders and also includes the third level sector, key Departments and Government bodies. The Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, is its chairperson. It has met four times but we have also established a few subgroups to take certain issues forward in between the main meetings of the task force. For example, there is a subgroup looking at the issue of infrastructure. It is trying to map out the infrastructure in that particular region and identify where the gaps are and what might be needed to progress the concept. There is a second group which is looking at enterprise space to see what enterprise space might be available to support start-up or scale-up companies. We also have a third group, which has just been established, to deal with communications and communicating the message of the Atlantic economic corridor in order that it is widely understood. We also had a group looking at the prospect of EU funding and at what would be available. We are trying to bring some of those ingredients together to inform the task force's view on where investment might be needed. A number of submissions have been made into the national planning framework process, both from the Department itself and from Chambers Ireland, which have highlighted the potential of the Atlantic economic corridor.

We are acutely aware of the importance of broadband if we are to achieve the economic development I was speaking about, but also of its importance for social connectivity. So many people now stay in touch through social media, email and so on. As the Deputy is aware, the Department of the Minister, Deputy Naughten, has primary responsibility for the roll-out of the State-led investment in broadband in rural communities. I know the Minister is very familiar with some of the issues Deputy Canney has raised. From the perspective of our own Department, we are playing our role in supporting the roll-out of broadband. As the Deputy knows, the tendering process for the State-led intervention has yet to be completed. Our own Department has a unit which is facilitating and anticipating the roll-out of broadband and helping to prepare for it.

The Department is supporting the appointment of broadband officers in each of the local authorities. All 31 local authorities now have broadband officers in place. They look at both broadband and mobile phone reception. The initiative of appointing broadband officers has proven to be very well received by those in the industry because they now have a single point of contact in each local authority to whom they can go. Through the broadband officers, we are trying to resolve issues which might otherwise slow down the roll-out of broadband once the

contracts are awarded. We are not confined to broadband roll-out under that particular strand or phase of the roll-out. The broadband officers are also there to facilitate providers who may be providing broadband commercially at the moment.

The Deputy may be aware that a task force on mobile phone and broadband access published a report at the end of 2016. An implementation group was set up to oversee and drive the implementation of the 40 recommendations which the task force made. The task force had very good representation from rural communities and rural stakeholders. Good work is taking place there. The progress report for the third quarter will be published shortly and will be made available on our Department's website. With the local authorities and the broadband officers, we are starting work on the development of digital strategies and a digital readiness assessment tool for the local authorities in order that they can make the best use of high-speed broadband once it is connected and made available to them. We are also working with the local authorities to identify possible priority areas for connection once the broadband is rolled out in order that we can connect points which will have the best possible impact for a community. That might mean connecting a community centre or some other public building. In a way, we are trying to pave the way for the full roll-out of broadband.

The final point that the Deputy made concerned the rural transport programme. Again, the committee will appreciate that this falls under the remit of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In September the LocalLink branding and programme were launched, and some improvements have been made in routes already. Our understanding is that the National Transport Authority expects to deliver some additional routes, and we will be looking for a report from it through the monitoring process early in 2018.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the witness for that very in-depth presentation. I welcome the fact that one of the key deliverables of this plan is the creation of 135,000 jobs by 2020. However, I have concerns, in particular with the Industrial Development Authority, IDA. Rural counties like my county of Offaly have been totally neglected. The IDA does not seem to be interested. I wonder if a task force could be set up to make IDA more answerable in midland counties. I know that counties like Laois are not getting a look-in. What seems to be going on is unacceptable. There are very few visits. I have met an IDA representative on two occasions. On one of those occasions I brought him to the town of Edenderry in north Offaly, a town which has a very high number of vacant commercial buildings and is crying out for investment. It is a town with great potential. Nothing has been done, and as a Deputy, it is very frustrating. I would like to see 135,000 jobs created in rural Ireland, because we need them. Can something be done there? The only way forward is to set up a task force, because the IDA does not seem to be interested, and now is the time to make it accountable and answerable. Deputies should not have to run around after it. More needs to happen in that respect.

The setting up of the local enterprise offices, LEOs, throughout the local authorities was certainly a positive approach. They are working very hard and very well, providing mentoring for small and medium enterprises, as well as supports, such as micro-finance. However, they are on their own. We need foreign direct investment as well. Of course, we need a balance between the two. We need the local enterprise offices to do the work they do, and I believe they are working very well. However, we also need the IDA to take more responsibility and to be more accountable.

On the issue of broadband, I agree with what has been said by other members. There are serious gaps in high-speed broadband. The fact that we now have broadband officers is welcome, but the issue needs to be moved on more quickly, because it is holding us back. At a recent

meeting in Athlone, IBEC pointed out that it was a huge disadvantage. We do not want the IDA having any more excuses than it already has, so I would like to see high-speed broadband put in as soon as possible. I would like to see high-speed action on this issue.

Rural transport is a huge issue which I have raised in the Dáil. The programme for Government stated that the report on rural transport would be done within six months. This is unacceptable. If this was a report on an urban area, it would have been published long ago. We can all see that we are disadvantaged and that we have to shout and demand things. We should not have to. Could this committee write to the Minister concerned to ask for the publication of that report as soon as possible? It mentions that it will look at the possibility of opening up new routes. That needs to happen because we are behind.

The plan is fantastic and I welcome it, but we need more accountability and more pressure on all concerned to realise the key deliverables of this plan. I look forward to seeing many of these aims delivered, and I remain hopeful and positive that they will be.

Mr. William Parnell: Deputy Nolan has spoken about issues that are outside the remit of my Department. For example, the question of the IDA is obviously a matter for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. However, I would say that the regional action plan for the midlands region is certainly one of the tools that the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation uses to progress the issue of jobs in the midlands. Deputy Nolan mentioned the LEOs and the IDA. Enterprise Ireland has an important role to play as well. Having worked in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for many years, I know that far more jobs are created in rural areas by client companies of Enterprise Ireland than by IDA client companies.

There are some very good new initiatives being undertaken in the midlands. For example, the completion of the International Low Frequency Array, I-LOFAR, telescope in Birr is a really important development for the midlands region. The importance is not so much in the telescope itself, but the demand it can bring for data analytics and so on. One of the actions in the plan we were very keen to see developed was the concept of a tourism product for the midlands region. Fáilte Ireland has carried out a feasibility study, and in budget 2018 it was announced that Fáilte Ireland would receive €1 million in order to commence work on the branding of a lakelands offering. There are some good things happening there, but I appreciate a lot more can be done. We have already spoken about broadband, and we understand the issue. Again, that is a matter for the Minister, Deputy Naughten's Department. Similarly, rural transport and the report that Deputy Nolan mentioned are matters for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Deputy has raised issues that are of relevance to rural Ireland, on which we would like to see progress made within the action plan.

Senator Colette Kelleher: I thank Mr. Parnell for a really clear presentation and a very good plan. It is particularly good to see that the plan is a dynamic one, and that the Department of Rural and Community Development is open to new themes, ideas and issues being absorbed into it as it progresses. That means that when we are speaking with the Department's officials we can flag issues that may need further consideration. The area I am particularly interested in is the social fabric in rural areas, particularly within the ageing population. On 26 October, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, published a report which stated that between 2015 and 2030, the proportion of the population over the age of 65 will grow from an eighth to a sixth, and the number of people over 85 is due to double.

I am the co-convenor of the all-party Oireachtas group on dementia, of which Deputy Mi-

chael Fitzmaurice, Senator Maura Hopkins and Deputy Seán Canney are active members. There are 55,000 people with dementia today, with very high concentrations in rural areas. On one of my first days here, Deputy Fitzmaurice pointed out to me that Roscommon probably has the highest rate of dementia in the country. The HSE's National Dementia Office is currently carrying out a mapping exercise determining where people with dementia live. That body is also examining the match of services. We know anecdotally that where the concentrations are highest, particularly in rural areas, there are the fewest services. That is a big part of social infrastructure, and it is something that is going to grow. Also, the models that will work in rural areas will not be the same as the models that work in urban areas. For example, home care and assistive technology will be more important for people with dependencies such as dementia and disabilities. What consideration has been given to this piece of the social care infrastructure and is the Department open to ideas in that regard, including to working with the national dementia office or the Department of Health which has held a consultation on home care? Is the Department of Rural and Community Development open to cross-departmental engagement on this issue and to piloting innovative approaches in this regard?

In regard to housing, does the town and village renewal scheme include housing? There are currently 200,000 vacant and derelict properties/sites throughout the country. The house in which I grew up has not been occupied since we sold it many years ago. I come from a family of ten. The house has six bedrooms and it is located on the main street of my home town of Macroom. There are many more vacant properties around the country at a time when we are experiencing a housing crisis. What interface is there between the Department and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in this regard? As well as jobs, rural people need a place to live and live well, particularly in the small towns and villages. I accept that the Department of Rural and Community Development is not the lead Department in respect of housing provision but housing forms part of sustainable communities. I would be interested to hear the witnesses comments on social care, in particular dementia services for older people, and on whether it is open to further engagement on the issue.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank Senator Kelleher for her questions. As I said in my opening remarks, it is important to consider the social fabric. Within the action plan there is a series of actions in the health care sector, including, for example, to increase the number of GPs in rural areas by 2019. The Connecting for Life programme provides support for local strategies across rural Ireland, the aim of which is to address suicide and mental well-being. The Senator commented on the ageing population. There are actions in the plan around the delivery of new primary care centres and community intervention teams in rural Ireland. Action 31 of the plan deals with enhancing supports for older people in rural areas through a network of day care centres. The seniors helpline is another action of the plan. These actions are all for delivery by the HSE or the Department of Health but they are part of the process. We are conscious of the need to address issues such as mental health and also health care, including for older people. The Action Plan for Rural Development is available online, in respect of which we can provide the link to the Senator. We can also provide copies of the plan through the committee clerk, which might be helpful to the Senator. Actions 24 to 32, inclusive, relate to the health care sector.

On the question of housing and the town and village renewal scheme, Ms Moylette is responsible for the management of that scheme and so I will ask her to comment on it.

Ms Finola Moylette: The town and village renewal scheme is an element of the overall plan, with a fairly high target in terms of the numbers of towns and villages we hope to help get back on their feet and developing again. We are developing a pilot around residential oc-

cupancy in town and village centres and we are engaging directly with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the local authorities and others on the best approach that can be taken in this regard. We hope to introduce a pilot early next year around what we can do and so on. We are trying to figure out how we can bring properties that are available back into use for residential purposes. In this regard, we are looking at services in towns and villages and getting the right mix of people into those places. As I said, we hope to have something in place early next year.

Senator Colette Kelleher: In regard to social care, the actions in the plan are welcome but I am concerned about scale. In light of the ESRI report I believe we need to scale up. While what is contained in the plan is welcome I am concerned that it is, perhaps, not adequate in terms of the range of issues with which people are currently presenting and the likely increased challenges in this regard given many of the people concerned will be living in rural areas. I welcome the plan but I ask that the witnesses reconsider the scale of the response to the issue.

Mr. William Parnell: We will convey the Senator's views to the Department of Health, which is responsible for social care issues.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Mr. Parnell for his presentation. I welcome and commend the Minister on the additional allocation for the local improvement scheme, LIS, which, I understand, is money not utilised in other areas. In regard to CLÁR, we have been told by several councils that jobs are rated by CLÁR on a 1 to 20 basis and that if it does not rate a job very good the Department will not permit the draw down of funding. I would like the witness to comment on that issue.

Given Mr. Parnell's statement that the Department of Rural and Community Development will communicate with other Departments one would think it is an agency. What input does the Department have into the national planning framework and can it veto it? As Mr. Parnell will be aware everybody across rural Ireland believes it is a lame effort. Can the Department of Rural and Community Development block or veto the framework or does it only have an input into such that it will come into force anyway?

I found Mr. Parnell's comments in regard to the Atlantic economic corridor interesting. During the negotiations on the programme for Government, it was agreed that TEN-T funding would be made available. What was done in Foynes via TEN-T funding is excellent in terms of its connection to Limerick, Dublin and Newry. It also connects Cork with Dublin. The west of Ireland project was withdrawn in 2011. Am I correct that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is refusing to even apply for TEN-T funding? If that is the case, then we are wasting our time talking about issues such as the Atlantic economic corridor or rural Ireland.

Mr. Parnell spoke about Men's Sheds, CLÁR and local improvement scheme funding. Everything is good. What Senator Kelleher outlined is great in terms of what we can do but we are putting on a band aid when what we need is surgery in terms of how we fix the patient in rural Ireland.

Do the witnesses have any input into the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP? At the moment 80% of the money goes to 20% of the landlords, but the small family farm is not protected. Do the witnesses have a veto or rural proofing so that they can bring out a document and say this is not right? Can they go to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to talk about infrastructure? I know the local authorities are restricted. First, every council is 30% to 40% down on the funding it got for local roads in 2009. If we are going to create work we must get

people to work by travelling on the roads. One has to have a middling good road. We may not need the 40% because we have become more efficient. In terms of the Atlantic economic corridor, I welcome the Taoiseach's announcement on the Cork to Mallow road. This is not parish pump stuff. The corridor goes from Cork right up to Donegal. We need to build a road from Mullingar to Castlebar. That is not in my area but we need to do it. We need to develop roads from Donegal down as far as Cork. Are we going to do that? There is a three-year plan but I do not want us to draw up plans and not to bring them to fruition. We have 270 aspirations. We can tick them off, such as the one relating to the CLÁR programme, for example. The Department is responsible for certain parts. They are not the big money spending jobs. Will the big jobs be done or can the witnesses make sure they can veto some Department and say they do not agree with its proposal and that it will block it? Alternatively, the witnesses could come back to the committee to look for help.

The witnesses referred to broadband. The Department is funding a person in each council. I refer to the talks to form a Government. I do not blame Ministers and I am not having a go at the Government but we were told by Department officials that by June of that year there would be a tender but 18 months later it turns out there is no tender. We see broadband being extended to parts of rural Ireland whereby a company will go up a road and leave two or three houses unconnected because they know a few quid will be available in a year or two. The reality is that no matter how one does the figures or no matter how well things go there will be 130,000 or 140,000 businesses and houses in rural Ireland in 2021 or 2022 that no one can tell us when they will get broadband.

They are two of the infrastructural issues. We talked about mobile phone coverage. It has disintegrated because some companies are trying to concentrate on one area. There are areas where I travel every day where the coverage has got worse yet we are talking about improving things in rural Ireland.

Do the witnesses meet the Department of Finance or the Central Bank? When the large banks got the money from us they absconded from rural Ireland. I refer to Ulster Bank and the main pillar banks. I am talking about the smaller towns. That has caused a problem because the people in the area were going into the town to spend money but now they are going up to 20 miles away and people are not going into the small towns as much. We need something to provide the service credit unions provided 20 years ago. We need companies to provide loans in the way credit unions did in small towns but they are being stymied. What does one do if one does not have a financial sector and one has the payments wrong and there is no infrastructure? I agree with what has been said that there are great things going on in rural Ireland. It is the best place to live but we must address the problems.

I agree with Senator Kelleher. Dementia is a major problem in Leitrim and Roscommon. We have a higher rate there than anywhere else. However, I am not talking about those areas alone, I am talking about Ireland in general. There needs to be some incentive to provide services in towns where people with dementia can be safe. We need pilot schemes. We must provide for elderly people as well. People want a little shop and a church and perhaps a community centre. That would allow them to have enough to be happy with life. I am talking about providing up to five chalets, for example, where people might like to live. There would be a lot of paperwork involved. Such issues need to be addressed. We can achieve that.

Is the funding in the context of flooding that was mentioned extra funding or is it the €460 million that is in the five-year plan? If it is the €460 million provided for relocation that amounts to ten houses because it will cost €2 million and it is €200,000 a pop. That is nothing new. We

are talking about something I read about two years ago. Nothing has been provided for businesses that have been affected. We can get over a lot of the bits and pieces but we must address the main issue. The one critical issue is whether it is possible within the context of the national planning framework and the CAP – there will be a new CAP – to veto infrastructure. If Departments can do their own thing and not listen to us then we are not going anywhere.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice. He raised a huge list of issues and I will try as best I can to respond to them. He will appreciate that not all of the issues he raised fall within the Department's remit. His main point was about the national planning framework and the infrastructure that is required. The Department has made a formal input to the national planning framework. We have also been in regular contact with officials in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on the national planning framework. We have indicated that we would like to see a strengthening of the section on rural Ireland and rural development and perhaps something a little stronger about the regions other than the cities. Deputy Fitzmaurice raised the question of a veto. The national planning framework will be a Government document so the question is a matter for the Minister rather than officials. That would probably be a policy issue.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The question is whether something is bad for rural Ireland. From the way Mr. Parnell worded his response he is not happy with the national planning framework. I agree. I thought what emerged in that regard was deplorable. If we are to drive on rural Ireland someone has to stand up and speak for it. This committee will not be afraid to stand up for it. In fairness to the Chairman, he will give us that opportunity. What I am saying is that if we do not stand up and block some of this stuff, where it is wrong, and get it right then we are wasting our time.

Mr. William Parnell: Sure. The point I was making is that I felt the section on rural Ireland in the national planning framework could be strengthened. I know there was a discussion at the meeting of the select committee on 15 November, which again focused heavily on the national planning framework. The Minister himself responded on that and perhaps offered some suggestions as to how the committee might make its views known.

I have to confess that I am not familiar with the situation regarding the TEN-T funding. I will try to establish the situation on that with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Deputy Fitzmaurice had a question on our input into the CAP. I will ask Mr. Mulherin if he can answer that question.

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: I am responsible for managing the Leader programme. This comes under Ireland's rural development programme, which is part of Pillar 2 of the CAP. The funding for that and the rest of CAP is set for the period until 2020. Discussions are only beginning at this stage as regards how the CAP will operate subsequent to 2020. There will be several facets to that, including discussions on the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which will set the overall budget for what is available for CAP. Then there will be individual discussions on the different parts of it, including direct payments and the rural development programme, both of which are managed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. There will be a consultation process as part of that. We have regular engagement with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on a variety of matters, particularly on Leader, as well as in other areas which come under the action plan.

The European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan, has commenced a consultation process on the CAP. It is early days and it will be over the next several

years that matters will be finalised. We will continue to engage with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and other Departments that will have an impact on it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What about the 2017 mid-term review?

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: The 2017 mid-term review did not impact on the Leader programme.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Rural Ireland is more than the Leader programme.

Chairman: Will the Deputy address his questions through the Chair?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am sorry. Rural Ireland is more than just Leader. There is the Pillar 1 payment under the CAP where 80% of the money goes to a certain number of people while 20% goes to 80% of the people. Has the Department of Rural and Community Development an input in that?

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: The Department of Rural and Community Development will, as part of the consultation process, have an input into the policy decisions taken by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. As I said, however, it is early days and the mid-term review did not impact on that division of direct payments. That will be decided as part of the new CAP. The consultation on that has just commenced with the European Commissioner, Phil Hogan. We will be feeding into that in the coming months and years.

Mr. William Parnell: The Deputy raised quite a broad range of issues. While I appreciate they are all important to rural Ireland, many of them fall outside of the remit of my Department. Perhaps some of the issues might be best answered by the relevant Departments.

It is important the issue of mobile phone coverage is raised. While we are aware of the feeling about broadband provision, mobile phone coverage is also important and relevant. Sometimes it can be lost in the discussion that takes place around broadband. Mobile phone coverage is part of the work in which the Department is engaged. Poor mobile phone coverage not only affects rural areas. Certain urban areas can have patchy coverage too. There are a variety of reasons why this could be. Handsets are not just phones anymore but cameras and mini-computers and there are many different functions happening in a phone which can affect the signal. Different handsets have different qualities in terms of reception. While we are all insulating our houses to make them warmer and to cut down on carbon emissions, the insulation material, particularly aluminium-clad board, can also impact on mobile phone signal.

The mobile phone task force made several recommendations which are being worked through. ComReg is doing some work around customer information, particularly concerning different handsets. It is looking at mapping the future needs of mobile phone and broadband services. The Department is working with some local authorities to run pilot schemes to deal with black spots. One of the key actions is looking at better use of State assets to provide infrastructure which will help boost signals.

Flooding goes under the remit of the Office of Public Works, OPW. I am not in a position to comment on its budget.

The Deputy referred to pilot schemes for dealing with dementia. One of the projects the Department is working on is to develop a national policy on social enterprise. Social enterprise often can be to the fore and proactive in looking at and addressing these social issues. The Deputy gave an example of a possible pilot where there might be a housing cluster. In the past

few weeks we visited a housing cluster in Mayo which is a social enterprise and where some of the residents have dementia.

Senator Colette Kelleher: Where is it?

Mr. William Parnell: It is in Claremorris.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Is it Brickens?

Mr. William Parnell: There is Brickens but there is one in the town too - Mayfield.

Social enterprise is a sector which has never had a proper policy in place. Over the past several months, we have been working on developing a social enterprise policy, as well as working closely with the Social Finance Foundation in researching the sector with a view to developing a government policy. This is an area where there is opportunity to see pilot schemes coming forward. There are pilots out there. Part of the objective must be to ensure these examples of good practice are replicated across the country. This will not be fixed overnight. We need, however, to start the process and change the perception again of social enterprise and what it can achieve.

Deputy Michael Collins: Many of the issues Deputy Fitzmaurice brought up would be of equal concern to me, coming from a rural peninsula, Mizen Head, and a rural constituency, west Cork. These concerns are replicated across the country. I am involved in the Rural Independent Group and we all have the same concerns.

Last night, we met representatives from Vodafone. Mobile telephone coverage has regressed. Mr Parnell's explanation is understandable that there is much on a mobile phone that was not there before. At the same time, however, the mindset in all Departments and companies involved must recognise that they need to work with the local community if they want a solution. I saw with Vodafone last night that it is willing to work with us. Maybe something should have happened about this five years ago. One goes back to the local community if one wants to resolve an issue. As a famous west Cork man said, a pencil pusher in an office or pressing buttons on a computer is not going to sort it out. Once it is thrown open to the local community, it will be resolved within hours, if it is going to be resolved at all.

I was on a local community council in Goleen which got wireless broadband for the area when people did not even know what it was. We went after it and took advice from all over the world. Local people thought we were off our heads at the time because they did not know about it. Broadband was first introduced in this country around 15 years ago. Unfortunately, no progress has been made in rural areas since then. While I acknowledge that many people are satisfied with wireless broadband, many are also trying to do business in rural areas and many people from rural areas living abroad or in cities such as Dublin would like to return home. Many of those living abroad have holiday homes in rural areas and they have made clear they would work at home if a good broadband service was available. We are hearing that broadband will be available next year or the year after. Unfortunately, I believe I will be applying for my pension before it is rolled out to my home.

The simple way to roll out broadband is to give communities responsibility. I assure the witnesses that if the Department provided funding to local communities, they would carry out a dig and lay fibre optic cable in every boren and road. All that would be needed would be the connection. We listen to nonsense in the Dáil about rural broadband and millions of euro in funding being provided to this or that company. My hair will have turned grey before broad-

band is provided. In election after election, people tell me on the doorsteps that the service is not improving. Broadband should have been introduced under the Leader programme and funding should have been provided to communities. They would then lay fibre-optic cable before handing over to the telecommunications company to make the final connections. This is how to make progress in providing proper broadband in rural communities. If we do not do that, we will hear about millions being spent for another four or five years. Millions are flying around the place but nothing is being done on the ground.

We hear there are broadband officers in local authorities. I have never met anyone in the council who maintains contact with companies such as Eir. There is a housing estate in Bandon where 45 of the 65 households have broadband. One house may have a broadband service, while the house next door may not have it. This is madness and shows a complete breakdown in understanding.

The Leader programme has collapsed. I shuddered when I heard the European Commissioner, Mr. Phil Hogan, is carrying out a review of CAP. This could mean curtains for ordinary people. The Leader programme is a shambolic disgrace. Officials appear at meeting after meeting and if Deputies were honest, they would agree that the Leader programme is a shambolic disgrace. I understand the programme will conclude in 2020. There is nothing happening with Leader in west Cork. The Department removed the excellent Leader company which was running the programme in my area. The European Commission had commended it as one of the best Leader companies in the country. The local authority now has responsibility for Leader and nothing is happening on the ground. I am not pointing the finger at one individual but this is a major disappointment. The way to get rural areas going is from the ground up. People running tourism projects in the local community get things done but nothing is happening with Leader at the moment.

The issue is no longer raised. Previously, when I attended meetings to discuss funding options, I would advise people to seek funding through the local Leader company. I no longer mention Leader and instead advise people to try other options such as sports grants.

The Government made a big hoopla about rural proofing legislation and stated it would sort out everything. As I stated in the Dáil a couple of weeks ago, this was the biggest cod ever discussed because the chances of any Government policies being rural-proofed are as high as me becoming the king of England, which, as the witnesses know, will never happen to someone with a name like Michael Collins.

The Dáil is discussing separate legislation on alcohol and road traffic. Have these Bills undergone rural proofing? When I raised this issue with the Minister for Health, he stated he spoke to stakeholders, and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport told me he was speaking to stakeholders. I am not pointing a finger at the officials but we need to work together if we want rural Ireland to start rebuilding. Rural areas are great places to live and they offer excellent opportunities. The road traffic Bill should be binned until it has been rural-proofed, which the Government promised for all legislation. I was present at the discussions on forming the Government when this issue was discussed. I stayed to the bitter end of the discussions but we have been continuously misled by the Government that legislation would be the subject of rural proofing. The road traffic Bill should not have been introduced before it had been properly proofed and we had determined how people from rural communities would travel into their local town to the shop or pub. They will not be allowed to go to the pub for a drink from now on. The Minister is misleading people when he claims that the Bill has been rural-proofed. He indicated he would meet representatives of the Irish Farmers Association and other groups. He

should have done that before introducing the Bill.

The legislation on alcohol will result in supermarkets in rural areas closing because a bottle of wine has been advertised. Does the Government think we are blind? Does it believe people will drink a bottle of wine if they see one in a shop? Will cans of drink be placed on high shelves so that no child will see them or will sweets be removed from shop counters? This is nonsense. The Government is away with the birds and dreaming up schemes. It is as if we are all raving alcoholics who will go crazy if we see a drink. We must use our heads going forward.

In speaking about CAP, I will be slightly critical of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney. He does not deserve criticism because if it were not for him, we would not have a Government. As I made clear previously, he brought the Government together and he got little praise for doing so from his own crowd but that is not my business. I will be critical of his role in the negotiations on the reform of CAP. Deputy Fitzmaurice referred to some farmers receiving payments of €150,000, while others receive payments of €2,000 or €3,000. This is an absolute disgrace. I will not say what it was that the Minister and I nearly came to at meetings. These payments are totally unfair. The gap must be bridged if we want farming to continue. I do not expect payments of €150,000 to be reduced to €5,000 but they should be reduced to a normal level and payments at the lower end of the scale should be increased.

Fishermen's issues are not being addressed in the Dáil. Fishermen live in rural Ireland. When inshore fishermen were going strong, communities thrived but that is no longer the case. I have spoken three or four times in the House about fishermen whose lobster pots were wrecked during Storm Ophelia. No one gives a damn about these fishermen who are seeking a small amount of compensation to prevent them from going out of business. Deputies claim to be fighting on behalf of the people of rural Ireland when we are really turning our backs on them. Storm Ophelia hit the coast with tremendous power and wrecked lobster pots. A compensation package should be introduced. At a minimum, the Government should engage in discussions with the affected fishermen who are under severe stress as they try to make a living. They are being totally ignored.

I could go on but I do not want to finish on a negative note. There are also many positive developments. For example, the Health Service Executive provides a small amount of funding for rural communities such as Dunmanway, Scull and Goleen in west Cork. Meals and wheels are being provided to elderly people living alone with just a little funding. Rural areas receive a tiny amount of funding. Millions of euro in funding are provided in cities and nothing is done or it is camouflaged. It means a great deal to elderly people to receive a hot meal at home every day. The Citroen dealership owned by Denis and Mary Ryan gave us a van free of charge to deliver meals on wheels. A plethora of things can be achieved with a little funding. A little bit of funding will develop rural Ireland.

Mr. William Parnell: I am glad Deputy Michael Collins finished his contribution on a positive note. Within our Department's remit, we have put some investment into rural Ireland through various schemes, including the town and village scheme, the CLÁR programme and the local improvement schemes, to which Deputies referred. A small amount of money for a local improvement scheme can make a major impact.

I need to be careful not to stray into issues that are best addressed on the floor of the Dáil. I will make one or two comments and then hand over to Mr. Mulherin, who might talk about Leader. I take the point about mobile phone coverage and working with local communities.

One of the advantages of these broadband officers is that they are acting as a go-between or facilitator between the local communities and the service providers. There is nothing secret about the names of broadband officers. We have listed them in a reply to a parliamentary question so if a member needs the name of a local broadband officer, we can certainly provide it.

The other thing I can comment on is rural-proofing in so far as to say that in order to strengthen the concept of rural-proofing, the Action Plan for Rural Development contains an action to develop a new and effective rural-proofing model which will ensure that rural development issues are considered in the decision-making processes of all Departments and State bodies and agencies. When the Minister appeared before the select committee on 15 November, the issue of rural-proofing came up. My recollection is that the Minister indicated that he would be happy to have an input from the committee regarding moving forward with that particular action. Mr. Mulherin will be in a position to comment on Leader.

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: The Deputy raised three broad issues relating to Leader. The first one concerned the delivery of the programme. As the Deputy will be aware, the programme takes some time to get up and running. A similar situation would arise across other EU member states. Notwithstanding that, we recognise that there were issues with the delivery of the programme in terms of programme implementation and administration. As a result of that, a forum with all the stakeholders, including local development companies and the chairs of the local action groups, was held in May 2017 where we discussed the issues impacting on the programme and engaged with the different groups to come up with solutions to address those problems. As a result of that, we developed 31 actions to simplify and improve the delivery of the programme. Those actions cut across every aspect of the delivery of the programme. They involve fairly fundamental changes to how the programme is delivered. I would be happy to go through them with the Deputy at any stage. They are very significant changes. At this stage, we are beginning to see the impact of those changes. It will take some more time because it takes time for a project to go from an initial stage through to approval and completion. The figures that are approved right now show that for the first six months of the year, fewer than 45 projects were approved by Leader local action groups for less than €1 million. Right now, we are approaching the 500 mark so that is a tenfold increase in the second half of the year. All the indications from the local action groups are that this will increase significantly in the coming months so we are fairly confident that with the changes that have been made and the work that has been done at local level, the amount of funding allocated under Leader will increase substantially. We would certainly like the message to go out to encourage local communities and businesses to apply for Leader because the changes have been made and it will be of real benefit to different areas in rural Ireland. If the Deputy wishes to discuss the actions, I would be happy to do so.

The second point concerned broadband. As the Deputy will be aware, a strategy is developed for each local action group area. The strategy is developed under a set number of themes that have been developed for Leader. One of the themes relates to broadband. Each of the local action groups have had an opportunity to identify areas where they could use Leader funding to support broadband. Part of the conditions attached to that is that it would synchronise with and support what is being done under the national broadband plan. There have not been many broadband projects but my colleagues in a separate unit in the Department are facilitating part of the broadband roll-out. They have met with a number of local development companies to discuss and explore where Leader could add to the delivery of that broadband. They have taken the feedback from those local development companies and I expect we will have an event with all the Leader local action groups in early 2018 to identify where Leader can add value and explore the opportunities for Leader to support the roll-out of broadband.

The third point related to the delivery of Leader in west Cork. As the Deputy will be aware, an independent selection process was used to decide who was going to deliver and who was going to be the local action group in west Cork. An independent selection committee chose the successful local action group based on the quality of the strategy that was submitted. Two strategies of a very high standard were submitted in west Cork but the one that scored the highest was ultimately chosen by the independent selection committee.

Chairman: Does Deputy Michael Collins wish to come back in again?

Deputy Michael Collins: With regard to the changes made to Leader, the changes are what messed up the whole thing because it was rolling out nicely in communities. Obviously, there would have been a bit of tweaking somewhere, although not in west Cork, thank God. Everything has changed. Mr. Mulherin could ask every Deputy in the country. It does not have to be an Independent Deputy. It could be a Government Deputy. The whole process is completely stalled. That is what is being said on the floor of the Dáil, in here and at other meetings. Mr. Mulherin says it takes time but it is nearly 2018; there are only two years left and nothing is happening. Local improvement schemes, which I welcome, were mentioned. They are brilliant schemes but the funding is coming out of Leader funding. The Minister said that here last week. Chunks of money are being taken out of Leader and used elsewhere.

In respect of the independent selection committee, I was well aware of the process in west Cork. It was quite questionable. I received no answers because I came in here on several occasions and looked for clear answers. I got no answers. How can a company that was commended by Europe and spent the money in an excellent manner, as West Cork Development Partnership did, score fewer points than a group that had never been involved in the roll-out of the programme? It is quite astonishing and questionable but then again, we might have an inquiry into these things down the road - who knows?

Senator Maura Hopkins: I apologise as I had to step out for another meeting. My first question concerns Pillar 2 - supporting enterprise and employment. The action plan has a number of key actions in that area. I want to ascertain how closely the new Department works with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in terms of trying to support job creation in rural areas.

There are different challenges within different rural areas. What type of analysis has been done with a view to assisting weaker rural areas? Obviously, we know that parts of rural Ireland are doing quite well but there are other areas that require significant attention and support. I know there are a wide range of actions that feature across all rural areas but we need to support weaker areas. I mean that in the best possible sense. They do need support in terms of how we get five, six, ten or 20 jobs into those areas because without jobs, it is very difficult for families to be able to live there.

Mr. William Parnell: We spoke about jobs earlier in the session. We work very closely with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The regional action plans for jobs are key instruments in trying to support job creation. As I said in my introduction, the action plan for rural development has a lot of synergies with other Government strategies, in particular the Action Plan for Jobs and the regional action plans for jobs. It is right to focus on jobs because if we are going to improve not just employment opportunities for people in rural areas, but the social fabric, we need to have more jobs and better jobs in rural areas

I take the point on the fact some areas are weaker than others. In our discussion, we spoke

about how there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Local enterprises have a role to play. Enterprise Ireland has a role to play. Over the past month, the website of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has had quite a spread of jobs throughout the country. We need to get further into the regions and see what can be done to support job creation. The Leader programme is one component of this because one of the themes is supporting enterprise and job creation.

This year, through our town and village renewal scheme, we have been trying to focus on projects that will have a real economic impact not just on the towns themselves, but also their outlying areas. The town and village renewal scheme is not simply about the public realm, although that is important. Once we get people into towns and villages, we need to increase footfall and economic activity for that public realm to make a difference. In areas such as Uíbh Ráthach on the Iveragh Peninsula in Kerry, a task force has been established, arising from our action plan for rural development, to see what can be done to support the particular region. It is a Gaeltacht area. The people there have brought together some of the key Government agencies as well as local stakeholders. It is a good example. If it works well, it could be a good model.

Clare is a very rural county, and I mentioned earlier that Clare County Council has introduced its own rural development plan. It is the first county to have done so and it has appointed a rural services director. There are other schemes such as CLÁR, which the Department delivers. It reaches out to the areas of highest depopulation. It provides support for small infrastructural projects. The objective is to try to retain people in rural areas to help them with their local needs. Jobs can make a big difference and we will continue to work with our colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and with other Departments such as the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on developing greenways, or blueways in the case of Waterways Ireland.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the extra funding provided for local improvement schemes this year. It is a positive although it came very late. The fact is the local authority could not spend it in the time it had to do so. The most recent allocation was announced a week ago. In fairness, the local authority could not accept the amount it received because it could not physically get the work done in the timeframe before the end of the year. The end of the year for having works completed to claim the money is 1 December. While I welcome the effort, it was too late to deal with the amount of money that could have been used. The Minister has promised he will give money again next year, but it is a shame to see money going back when it could have been spent if we had got it earlier. However, I am thankful for what we got in Kerry this year.

A big bone of contention for me is that people in rural areas are completely impeded from clearing rivers, and the rivers are all choked and blocked. It is costing the country a bomb to deal with flooding problems, blocked roads and flooded houses. It is just not right. If farmers go near a river, cross-compliance means they will lose their payments. This is wrong because over the years, farmers were the custodians of the land. They looked after it and handed it down to whoever came next. They are now stopped from clearing out the rivers and this must be reversed. What is happening is not good for the fish because there is no daylight in any river. They are all closed in.

Rural isolation is a desperate problem in the parts of the constituency I represent, and to think we have a Minister who will further affect people in rural areas. It is sad to think the Minister, Deputy Ross, will get away with his proposal to stop people having one and a half pints. They will have to stay at home. The only way they might know about what is happening around

them is when they hear the deaths on Radio Kerry every morning. Their neighbour could be dead down the road and they would not know about it if it was not for Radio Kerry.

We have had no Leader programme since 2013. Whatever anyone tells us, it is just not happening. What are the obstacles? Why was it not left to work away the way it was, besides aligning local development companies and local authorities? It is a farce to think a group that did not get Leader funding has permission to object to the people next door who did get an allocation. That is ridiculous. The red tape must be cut and the money must be allowed to be spent in the areas for where it is designated and intended. It is not happening. It is five years since Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív, and I publicly praise him today, had a system in place. Phil Hogan and Fine Gael blew it out of the water and we have had nothing since. That is the gospel truth.

People in rural areas need broadband just like people in urban areas. It is not happening fast enough. I cannot understand it. We have groups on to us now because while there is broadband a half a mile away on either side of them, they are in the middle and they do not have broadband. They cannot understand what is happening. Why was it not done in a methodical fashion? There are ructions and uproar because people cannot understand why they have been left out when the people next door have it. The local authority made a submission to address these areas. I ask the powers that be to ensure that these areas are filled in. Those people have the same rights as the people around them. They feel that having waited for so long, they may never get it now.

Mobile phone coverage has reduced in the past two or three years in most places. We had no coverage at the back of my house when mobile phones came out. It was fine for all the years in between, but we are going back to it again. It is the same for people who get out of the plane in Farranfore. Any one of the three roads out of it is a good start for people who have arrived in Kerry, but there is no mobile phone coverage on the three roads to Killarney, Tralee or Castleisland.

Payments to farmers under the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme were reduced by one quarter in 2008. At a time when every other group in society seems to be getting recognition, I ask that the full payment to which they are entitled is restored to participants in that scheme.

Rural parishes throughout the country are experiencing problems in hosting events such as field days and carnivals because they are unable to secure the necessary insurance. The Government must act to ensure people can continue to enjoy Puck Fair, the fair in Kenmare, the agricultural show in Kilgarvan, the St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Sneem, the Patrick O'Keeffe festival in Castleisland and similar events in County Kerry and elsewhere. The only thing left to many rural towns and villages is their day out and it is an important part of their identity. The organisers of these events struggled last year and fear they will not be able to operate next year. Our own show in Kilgarvan, which has been running for 27 or 28 years, faces great difficulty in securing insurance cover. Something must be done for these people.

Something must be done, too, for the young fellows in rural Ireland who are facing a predicament because they cannot go anywhere without a car. It is impossible now for a young man to get motor insurance and all we hear from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, is that the parents of that young person should be put in jail if the latter is caught driving unaccompanied. I know a young fellow in Killorglin who was driving to Kenmare to partake of an apprenticeship. When his parents became worried that they might be penalised, he gave up the apprenticeship. Thanks to the Minister and his scaremongering, youngsters are

being frightened off the road. It is shameful and disgraceful what Fine Gael is allowing him to do to rural Ireland. I am sorry for that young fellow, who is at home today in Killorglin.

Chairman: Many of the issues the Deputy raised were dealt with earlier in the meeting. As such, I ask the officials to focus in their responses on the points that were not previously addressed.

Mr. William Parnell: The Deputy referred to the local improvement scheme, LIS. County Kerry has been allocated just under €1 million this year for that purpose. There was an initial total allocation of some €10 million in September for such schemes across the State. Some days ago, the Minister announced a further allocation based on what local authorities indicated they could additionally deliver within the timeframe available to them.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We are thankful for that.

Mr. William Parnell: Kerry received an extra €268,000 from the recent call, bringing its total allocation to €995,000. As the Minister indicated when he was before the select committee two weeks ago, he has been able to fund the LIS programme this year through savings that arose under the Leader programme. He further indicated that he has secured an allocation for LIS in its own right for 2018. The reallocation of funding from Leader in 2017 will not affect the overall draw-down of funding. There is an allocation of €250 million over the lifetime of the Leader programme, and that funding is part-supported by the EU. What we have is a case of re-profiling the expenditure. Indeed, the previous Leader programme continued beyond its initial projected period of 2007 to 2013. There is a process to allow for this type of re-profiling and it is consistent across a range of programmes.

One of several significant changes we have had in regard to the Leader programme is that it is no longer seen as a funder of last resort. Previously, one could only apply for funding under the scheme if the particular project one wished to advance was not being delivered elsewhere. We have changed that particular rule in recognition of the importance of Leader in its own right. Other improvements we have made, which we spoke about earlier, have brought additional benefits to the programme. My colleague, Mr. Mulherin, might wish to give further detail in this regard.

Some of the issues the Deputy raised are beyond the Department's remit. As the Chairman said, we have already dealt with broadband and mobile telephony issues.

On the Deputy's point about agricultural shows, we are aware that costs can be a problem. Our understanding is that some support is provided to assist event organisers through the Irish Shows Association, which is under the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I can clarify that for the Deputy, if he wishes.

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: An allocation of €1.7 million was approved for Leader projects in Kerry. An additional €400,000 is in the pipeline, which will take the total funding over the €2 million mark. Both Deputies Healy-Rae and Deputy Michael Collins referred to changes in the scheme. There are two separate issues at play here, one being the change in the delivery model that followed on from the Local Government Reform Act 2014, which has seen local community development committees, LCDCs, get involved in delivering the programme. The second factor is the changes we have made in recent months to the administration of the programme. As I said earlier, 31 actions were adopted to effect substantial reform of how the programme is delivered. We expect to see the impact of those actions in the coming months.

The delivery model itself involves local action groups, some of which are based on LCDCs and others on local development companies. In all cases, however, the local development companies in each area are still involved in the actual implementation. When one looks at the data on levels of approval around the country, there is nothing to suggest one model is preferable to the other. The highest number of approvals in the top three counties are where LCDCs are involved. Based on the information we have, both models are performing equally well. If the Deputy would like more information on the 31 actions we are implementing, we are happy to provide it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I no longer pay attention to figures because we have been promised this amount and that amount for the past three or four years but nothing has been delivered. We had a perfect model for delivering the Leader programme but now there are more hoops to jump through and hurdles to be crossed. I am sceptical the new model will see the programme working in the way it previously worked. Why try to fix what was not broken? Local authorities have plenty to do without having to involve themselves in administering the Leader programme. It will be managers rather than local government members who decide where the funding goes. My concern is that urban areas will benefit rather than the rural areas for which the funding was earmarked. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: Before we conclude, I want to comment on the plan. It is a very valuable plan and it is a first attempt at trying to draw together such a broad area. There are so many different actions and it is cross-departmental. While we need to interface with various Departments and set out challenges, it is important that actions are delivered on and that we can see their progress.

On the town and village renewal scheme, which was in the limelight when the scheme was launched, we can see the real impact of it. In County Clare, my village received €90,000 last year and another €100,000 this year. This has had a real impact on the village and I can see the difference it made. Deputy Michael Collins said earlier that if we give a rural community a chance and some moneys, it will explode. Consider Newmarket-on-Fergus down the road. Deputy Seán Canney will be familiar with the area as he visited there when he was a Minister of State. The local development group, Obair, put together a proposal for creating a hub in the middle of the village. It purchased the premises itself and the €200,000 that was allocated this year will enable it to set up a meals-on-wheels service in the building and to train up chefs. This is a massive initiative for Newmarket-on-Fergus. It is positive and it will create jobs in a rural area and have a direct, positive impact on the outlying areas. We can all be down on rural Ireland, saying that it is dead and so on, but here is the real impact of the plan for rural development being delivered on the ground.

I welcome the extra provision under the local improvement scheme. This scheme was dead and gone, so its re-establishment and the funding for it is very welcome. The town and village renewal scheme had been discontinued for many years also, as was the sports capital scheme. As the economy has improved and we are in a better financial position, the Government has managed to fund these schemes.

There are, however, challenges, and we have heard about them today. One of the major tonics that rural Ireland needs is high-speed broadband. We have heard the issues involved in this. A plan is in place and the Minister is doing his best, but I would like to see broadband rolled out faster. If high-speed broadband was available in rural areas of Clare, the county could compete with Dublin.

The other elephant in the room is the national planning framework. The gulf between Dublin and the rest of the State is glaring. Successive Governments' plans and strategic plans have failed. The national planning framework document gives us all an opportunity to try to address this imbalance. I agree that we need to create a counterbalance between the west and the east of the country. Consider the Atlantic corridor road project and the provision of rail services and connections. If there is a rail service, it needs to be connected to a university or to an airport, such as Shannon Airport. To make the service user friendly, those connections need to be made right along the way. If this committee is to do anything, we need to make an impact on that particular document to counter balance the provision of services in the Dublin area and the west. The national planning framework is for another day. Hopefully we will discuss that topic at our next meeting.

I thank the witnesses for their time, their answers and their engagement. I look forward to engaging with them in the future. Deputy Niamh Smyth would like to speak.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the meeting. I concur with the Chairman's comments on the national planning framework. This committee should have an input into the framework as it develops. I also agree with the Chairman's view on the gulf between rural and urban Ireland. When we look at a map of Ireland and its motorways, which is the very basic requirement when it comes to infrastructure in a region or county road networks, and given that Cavan and Monaghan have no public rail system, people are totally dependent on that road system. I welcome that additional money has been put into the local improvement scheme, which suffered a funding famine over the past ten years. So many people depend on this to get to their farms and homes every day because they are ruled out if their road is not a public road. The local improvement scheme is the only opportunity to have their road in a safe condition to get to and from their homes.

I would like to see this committee having an input to the national planning framework, and to dissect it and investigate it to see how we can best put forward our ideas for rural Ireland, especially constituencies and regions that do not have the public transport network we would like. When one looks at the map, it is quite frightening to see fabulous motorways across the country but for us they all lead, unfortunately, to Galway and south of there. When one looks north of the Galway to Dublin motorway, there is very little to be seen in terms of motorway infrastructure. Even the M3, which stops at the Cavan-Meath border, really makes people in the Border region feel inferior and almost as though they are in a forgotten part of the island. When one comes close to the Border, the motorway suddenly stops at the Meath-Cavan border. Issues such as this must be addressed if we are serious about dealing with depopulation and encouraging businesses. We are never going to get companies such as Google or Facebook but we have a huge, indigenous population within our own communities that will get on their own two feet to create work for themselves and others if they are given the opportunity and if the infrastructure is put in place. There is a significant onus on us, with this plan coming to fruition, to ensure this happens in any way we can.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Smyth. I thank the witnesses for their time today and we look forward to further engagement in the future.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: I wish to inform the committee that Senator Denis Landy has tendered his res-

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ignation to the Seanad and therefore will resign his position on this committee.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.28 a.m. and adjourned at 11.38 a.m. until 11.00 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 December 2017.