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**Thursday,
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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

Thursday, 12 May 2005.

[illegible]

SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 12 Bealtaine 2005.
Thursday, 12 May 2005.*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Business of Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Bannon that, on the motion for the Adjournment of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health and Children to provide an update on phase 2B of the Mullingar hospital development.

I have also received notice from Senator McHugh of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to indicate when the extension to Portleau national school, Kilmacrennan, County Donegal, will be approved.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion on the Adjournment and they will be taken at the conclusion of business.

Order of Business.

Ms O'Rourke: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on sustainable rural housing guidelines, resumed, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business and to conclude not later than 12.30 p.m., with the contributions of Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be called upon to reply not later than five minutes before the conclusion of the statements. Today's schedule indicated that statements would conclude at 1.30 p.m. and I am sure many speakers on all sides of the House will wish to contribute. However, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, is taking the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2005 in the Dáil and has to be there at 12.30 p.m. He wishes to conclude this debate in the Seanad because he was very taken by all that had been said in the House on the last occasion. In view of this we are concluding the debate at an earlier time which I regret. The Minister also very much regrets it. However, it was dealt with comprehensively on the last occasion.

Mr. B. Hayes: Does the Leader agree that one of the central notions of a republic is the idea that majority communities have the responsibility to look after minority groups or denominations? Does she also agree that the recent spate of anti-Semitic attacks on the Jewish community here in Dublin must be deplored and condemned by all right thinking people? We have seen a spate of these attacks since November last year. Swastikas have been placed on that marvellous Jewish Museum, just off the South Circular Road and insulting slogans have been daubed in the Jewish graveyard in Dolphin's Barn and in other parts of the city. I ask the Leader to relay my comments to the Chief Rabbi. This attack was appalling because it was racist in intent.

We have a responsibility as members of other faiths and groups to protect small denominations in this State. The Jewish community has made an immense contribution not only to the social and professional life of Ireland, but also to its political life. All the major political parties have had Jewish representatives who have played a significant role through the years. I ask that the House should be at one in condemning those attacks and calling on the idiots involved to realise the offence they are giving to a small community.

Will the Leader arrange in the next two weeks for the Minister of State with responsibility for the decentralisation debacle, Deputy Parlon, to come to the House to take questions from Senators rather than reading statements? We have simple questions to put to him. The Government will become involved in needless industrial problems if it pursues its policy of telling Dublin-based civil servants that if they do not transfer to other parts other country, they will be denied promotional opportunities and will not obtain similarly-skilled employment in Dublin. This is horrendous bullying and harassment of civil servants. My party was attacked recently for seeking value for money in the public sector by some Chianti quaffing socialists. I do not refer to the Labour Party.

Mr. Norris: I thought the Senator knew it was not a socialist party. Senator Ross and I are the only socialists in the House.

Mr. B. Hayes: It is one thing to seek value for money, it is quite another to harass and bully civil servants. Decentralisation will come unstuck unless the Government changes its policy.

Mr. O'Toole: Recently, the Leader agreed to my request for a debate on the western rail corridor report on the basis it would be published, as she was informed, in April. We are halfway through May and I still have not seen the report. I am concerned that somebody has a vested interest in not producing the report. Government Members, including Senators Kitt and Dooley,

[Mr. O'Toole.]

have raised this issue and we should have a debate on it.

I have been asked regularly over the past year by a number of my constituents in the North why RTE cannot be received throughout that jurisdiction. If there is to be an understanding between people North and South of the Border, the same television stations should be available in all parts of the island so there is communication and a cultural link between people. As a spin-off of the Good Friday Agreement and given the need to bring people closer together, it would be helpful if RTE were available in all parts of Northern Ireland. Will the Leader ask the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources to come to the House to discuss this issue?

Mr. McDowell: I support the request made by Senator Brian Hayes regarding the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Parlon. His remarks yesterday were disturbing. The Taoiseach and the Minister of State have made much of their claim that no civil servants will be made compulsorily redundant as a result of decentralisation but it is becoming increasingly clear from the bullying and threatening tone of the Minister of State that this reassurance does not count for much. They may not receive their P45s but many civil servants who work in technical or specialist grades run the risk of being given meaningless jobs or no job at all if they do not do the Government's bidding on this matter. There is scope for a debate and a question and answer session with the Minister of State would be useful.

Postal services have been debated in the House previously but it would be useful to do so again. There is a perception that the reduction in postal services and the closure of post offices is an exclusively rural phenomenon. However, the post office in Coolock in my area of Dublin is under threat. This follows the closure of post offices in Donnycarney, Clontarf and Marino in my constituency. It is striking that these closures are not part of a planned programme but are opportunistic in that An Post closes post offices following the retirement of a postmaster or postmistress. I ask for a further debate not only on the closure of post offices, but also on the availability of postal services generally.

Mr. Leyden: I commend the Garda Commissioner, Noel Conroy, and the force on their vigilance and on their proposal for a clampdown on road traffic offences this weekend to address the significant loss of life on our roads. I call on the Leader to schedule a further debate on road safety and on what other steps can be taken in this regard. I hope this will be a golden weekend in Ireland with no fatalities. Last weekend, six

people died while last year one motorcyclist was killed every week. It is a terrible statistic, which has resulted in much hardship for families.

Reference was made at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise and Small Business to the number of single drivers involved in crashes in the early hours of the morning. The circumstances surrounding those tragic accidents should be seriously investigated. We should all assist and support the Garda. The upcoming campaign should be conducted 365 days a year and not only over 48 hours this weekend. I commend the Garda and the House should give the force its full support to keep up the good work to ensure there will be no fatalities on our roads this weekend.

Mr. Bannon: I support Senator McDowell's call for a debate on postal services. It is high time the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources came to the House to clarify his intentions regarding the post office network. The ongoing delay in decisions on the future of post offices is creating a great deal of anxiety among customers, postmasters and postmistresses. The Government should ensure social welfare payments continue to be made through post offices. It is alarming that the Department of Agriculture and Food is sending notices to farmers encouraging them to use banks for their single payments. They should be given the choice of using banks or offices. This would be another way to help save our rural post offices.

Postmasters are paid €12,000 per annum, on average, while a number earn less than €3,000 per annum. It is a great concern that they earn significantly less than the average industrial wage. A total of 16 postmasters are over 90 years, a further 47 are over 80 and 175 are over 70.

An Cathaoirleach: We cannot have a debate on the issue on the Order of Business. The Senator has sought a debate to which the issues he has raised are more appropriate.

Mr. Bannon: Elderly postal staff do not want to close their offices but no member of their family or friend will take on the work because of the low scale of pay for postmasters. This issue needs to be addressed urgently.

Mr. Kitt: I am glad Senator O'Toole raised the issue of the McCann report, which is due to be published this weekend. I welcome the Minister of Transport's visit to Castlebar and Tuam tomorrow to discuss the issue further and, hopefully, to give his approval for the opening of the western rail corridor.

I refer to the "Prime Time" report on planning and the need for a register, which was mentioned on "Morning Ireland" earlier. Mr. David Grant was the example given on "Prime Time". It is important that a register be set up as house con-

struction costs enough without the added expense of people giving bad advice. I hope planners and architects will have a register, as exists in other professions, so this entire area is brought up to the standard people expect, particularly young people in the process of house building.

Mr. Norris: I concur with Senator Kitt. I raised this matter several times and I mentioned that particular gentleman last week. He has been given permission for further hostel developments even though he placed lives in danger and was served with a fire notice, which he ignored by appealing it.

I also support what Senator Brian Hayes stated on the attacks on the Jewish community. I have been critical of certain aspects of Israeli policy but that is legitimate criticism of a Government with which many Israeli and Jewish people concur. There is absolutely no excuse for these shameful attacks. It would be a good idea if the remarks passed in this House were sent to the Chief Rabbi. I attended a wonderful ceremony in Belvedere College a few weeks ago to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Belsen, where three Irish Jewish survivors of Belsen and Auschwitz were also in attendance. How can we hold our heads up when swastikas are daubed on the Jewish Museum on Walworth Road? I condemn this. We should continue to have such ceremonies because young people do not know the horrors that went on during the Second World War.

I share the concerns expressed by the Labour Party about decentralisation, in particular the addition of inappropriate movements to the coercion that is now involved. There is no central supervision on costs and there is no cost benefit analysis. The unions asked for an independent analysis and independent costing but this has never been done. This will be another example of wasting public money. That leads to the question of the fiasco in Kilkenny where a project to deal with flooding was costed at £8 million, equivalent to €13 million, but is now costing €48 million and the designers did not even get the salmon run correct. It is absolutely mad. There seems to be no control over the way money is spent.

Senator Ross raised the issue of toll roads. We are being walked into a further development of these which will not be to the benefit of the taxpayers. Finally, I ask——

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Norris has already touched on many topics.

Mr. Norris: I ask for a discussion on the situation in Iraq, especially in light of further developments today when more people were killed in another suicide bombing and the American Senate committee is peddling the same weary old lies about Mr. George Galloway that were exploded in a British court, using the same old forged docu-

ments. The committee seems to be absolutely impotent in confronting the criminality of its own Government in conducting the war on Iraq. It could conduct an inquiry into the sex life of Mr. Bill Clinton and this rubbish about Mr. George Galloway but it cannot confront the illegality of its own policies.

Labhrás Ó Murchú: Senator O'Toole raised a relevant point on the availability of RTE throughout Northern Ireland. Whatever reasons, technical or political, existed in the past for such an inadequacy, they are certainly gone at this stage. We are all proud of RTE in so far as it adopts a balanced approach to both national and international events. I recently hosted a group from the Unionist and loyalist community in Northern Ireland. It was a convivial meeting but I was surprised that one of them admitted she had never heard of a particular county to which I made reference. That shows a ghetto mentality still exists, and one way of breaking it down is using the broadcasting service. The advantage of RTE is that it is a public broadcasting service and so does not have a conflict between profit and principle. I fully support Senator O'Toole and we should try to pursue this with both the Government and RTE.

Mr. Bradford: I support the call from colleagues for a debate on the post office network and my query is related. I have received many complaints in recent weeks and months from elderly constituents who find it virtually impossible to make direct telephone contact with a number of State boards and bodies and semi-State agencies, particularly the ESB and Eircom. After numerous minutes waiting for an answer, they are put through to one automated answering machine after another and referred from button "a" to button "b" to button "c". It is unfair that when elderly constituents have a minor query on a telephone or electricity bill they are unable to make contact with a person in charge.

We should tell these State agencies that a system made up only of automated machines should not be imposed on the paying public. I ask the Leader to ensure that some reasonable customer service will be provided and that when an individual has a query they deal with a person and not a machine.

Mr. Dooley: I join with other colleagues in calling for a debate on decentralisation. I have sympathy with civil and public servants who find themselves in the position of having to move location in order to further their career, but we now have the principle of benchmarking and in the private sector it is not unusual for people to have to move to further their careers or to remain with the same company.

It is important we do not lose sight of what decentralisation is about. It is about decluttering

[Mr. Dooley.]
this city and overcoming some of its infrastructural problems, and building rural Ireland in line with the commitment of this Government in the national spatial strategy——

Mr. B. Hayes: A strategy about votes that never worked.

Mr. Dooley: ——and ensuring people have the capacity to continue to live and work in rural Ireland. We cannot lose sight of that at this stage.

An Cathaoirleach: There will be a debate on the matter.

Mr. Dooley: I look forward to making those points.

Mr. U. Burke: I ask the Leader to request the Minister for Agriculture and Food to extend the date for lodging single payment application forms with the Department. An examination in recent days showed that fewer than 30,000 applications have been lodged. This means that over 100,000 more applications have yet to be received just a few days before the deadline. Ordinary people who contacted the Department of Agriculture and Food helpline with queries were unable to get a satisfactory answer as it was clogged with calls and worse still, the people taking charge of applications on behalf of many farmers could not access the helpline either.

The Department has now stated a penalty of 4% per day will apply on late applications received between 16 May and 10 June. That is over the top but we can expect nothing more than the imposition of such a penalty from some of the people in the Department of Agriculture and Food. This is a serious matter because it deals with the single payment to be established for years to come, and will have a major bearing on the future livelihood of many farmers. I appeal to the Leader to request the Minister for Agriculture and Food to extend it. Despite the fact that she must comply with European regulations and other reasons given, it is important that a flexible approach is taken to this issue within reason and that it is extended to 10 June at least.

Mr. McHugh: Whenever RTE is successful in getting coverage in the Six Counties, it might nip over to Donegal, where some parts do not receive RTE either.

A Senator: There is great reception there.

Mr. McHugh: That is quite original; I have not heard it before. I concur with Senators Ó Murchú and O'Toole, and when the Six Counties get sorted out, I will just nip across the Border. We have had the special privilege in Donegal over the past six months of being visited by several Ministers including Deputies Cowen, Hanafin,

O'Donoghue, who came three times and is there again today, Roche, Martin, who came twice——

An Cathaoirleach: I do not understand the relevance of this to the Order of Business.

Mr. McHugh: Bear with me a Chathaoirligh, I have just one more Minister to mention and it is a fairly minor one. The Taoiseach has also visited.

An Cathaoirleach: That is not relevant.

Mr. McHugh: My point is that while Donegal has had the special privilege of these visits, the people of the county are not interested in a decentralised Cabinet on tour *en masse* but in decentralised jobs. I look forward to the debate on decentralisation and to the comments of Senator Dooley and the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon, who is the boy we want up in Donegal.

An Cathaoirleach: I do not know what your point was on the Order of Business, Senator.

Mr. J. Phelan: I join colleagues in calling for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, Deputy Parlon, to come to the House to answer questions on his brief. While he is here, he might also answer questions on the flood relief scheme in Kilkenny, to which Senator Norris referred. I raised the matter of the scheme with the Minister of State here a number of months ago and he dismissed it with his usual arrogance. It is time the Minister of State climbed down from his high horse and began to answer serious questions on overspending in the flood relief scheme in Kilkenny and other serious instances of overspending on infrastructural projects nationally.

Will the Leader arrange a debate with the Minister for Agriculture and Food on the scheme of early retirement for farmers which was introduced a number of years ago? While the scheme has been successful in its overall aim to reduce the average age among farmers, the pension payments farmers receive under it have not increased since its introduction. I acknowledge that the scheme is funded by the EU and that a case in this regard will have to be taken to Europe, but it is time we started the debate domestically. It is especially urgent at this point in time as the payments retired farmers receive for lands have reduced dramatically on foot of changes in the Common Agricultural Policy. It is unacceptable in this day and age that people are receiving the same level of payments from the farm retirement scheme that they received ten years ago. No other group in society continues to receive payments at a ten year old rate.

Mr. Feighan: Many issues have been discussed today, but the one which needs to be highlighted again is the matter of the anti-Semitic slogans

which have been daubed on the Jewish museum. Will the Leader ask the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to treat the matter very seriously? I grew up in a period of serious conflict in Ireland during which one saw slogans such as “Brits out, peace in” or “IRA” which caused great embarrassment and anxiety to local communities as well as to visitors. The slogans on the Jewish museum are the work either of mindless thugs or a sinister group and the House must ensure the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law comes here to treat the matter urgently. These serious incidents cannot be allowed to escalate.

Ms O'Rourke: Senator Brian Hayes spoke about the definition of a “republic”. I agree with him that one of a republic's characteristics is that those who can look after those who cannot. The Senator bemoaned the anti-Semitic attacks in Dublin and asked that our comments be conveyed to the Chief Rabbi, which we will be glad to do. The Senator referred to the many valued Jewish members of the political establishment including the Briscoe family, Mr. Goldberg, Alan Shatter of Fine Gael and Mervyn Taylor of the Labour Party. I will convey the regret of the House to the Chief Rabbi.

Senator Brian Hayes said he wanted the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon, to attend to answer questions on decentralisation. As next week's schedule is more or less established, we will seek to have the Minister of State attend the week after.

Senator O'Toole referred to the western rail corridor. Senator Kitt tells me the McCann report is due to be published today or at the weekend. The Minister for Transport will go to Castlebar to meet those with an interest in the matter. Senator O'Toole asked why RTE cannot be received in some parts of the North, which is a debate of several years standing. We have never been given a satisfactory reply on it. I will again seek to discover the reason. The Senator was correct to say that if one knows how other people live their lives, one has a better idea of what motivates or bothers them. While there may be technical issues involved, one would have thought that any hindrances could have been removed by now.

Senator McDowell said he was disturbed by the tone of Deputy Parlon's radio interview this morning, especially as it related to specialist or technical grades within the Civil Service. Senator McDowell asked also if we could arrange a general debate on postal services.

Senator Leyden commended the planned clampdown on road traffic offences on all major roads this weekend which he hopes will lead progressively to safer driving. The Senator indicated that one motorcyclist a week was killed last year. I am amazed at the conduct of motorcyclists and do not know how they manage to complete their journeys safely. Motorcyclists can appear to one's

right and left on the road without one noticing what they are at.

Senator Bannon raised the matters of postal services and single farm payments. He said also that the elderly age profile among postmasters was because people cannot be encouraged to take up the job.

Senator Kitt called for the registration of architects, which is a matter Senator Norris raised in the House previously. Senator Norris spoke about the Jewish community, decentralisation, the debacle of the flood relief project in Kilkenny, Iraq, somebody's sex life, tired old documents and George Galloway.

Senator Ó Murchú said he was proud of RTE and asked why the broadcaster does not spread its wings to let everyone know what it is doing. Senator Bradford called for a debate on postal services and said the elderly found it difficult to get answers when they made inquiries by phone. I fully agree with his comments. When one makes a call one hears stirring music like Fontenoy which goes on and on before being asked to press various buttons. People should answer the phones, speak clearly and put one through to the right person.

Senator Dooley called for a debate on decentralisation and Senator Ulick Burke said the date for single payments should be extended. Senator Ulick Burke painted a very black picture. I have received a note to the effect that the Department of Agriculture and Food has extended the opening hours of all local district veterinary offices. They were open until midnight on Saturday and Sunday last weekend and will be again this weekend. The offices will be open next Monday night until midnight also and during normal office hours thereafter. While contact will be telephonic rather than personal, the Minister and her executives have made an effort to open offices for long periods.

Senator McHugh who it seems does not like visiting Ministers spoke about decentralisation. He said Deputy Parlon was “the boy”, but I would say it is Senator McHugh who is the boy. We will endeavour to have the Minister of State attend. I am sure he will agree.

Senator John Paul Phelan called for Deputy Parlon to attend to discuss overspending on the flood relief project in Kilkenny. The Senator also called for a discussion with the Minister for Agriculture and Food on the relative decrease in payments to farmers under the early retirement scheme.

Senator Feighan bemoaned the anti-Jewish slogans and called for the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to attend to the matter immediately. The Minister was here last night during a very vivid debate — which I watched on the monitors — and spoke for 40 minutes off the cuff. I will not ask him to attend again.

Mr. Feighan: I asked the Leader to ask the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to address the matter.

Ms O'Rourke: I mistook the Senator. The Minister was called "cowardly" last night. There are many adjectives one could use to describe many people, but "cowardly" is not one I would use to describe the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Order of Business agreed to.

Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines: Statements (Resumed).

Mr. Kitt: I am delighted to welcome the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, back to this House. We have resumed debate on the draft guidelines for planning authorities which were published in March 2004. The Minister has clearly explained that he favours these reasonable proposals on suitable sites for persons who are part of or contribute to rural communities. We all wish to accommodate these people. I was interested by a recent Teagasc survey carried out in County Galway which investigated issues in small rural areas, such as Glinsk in north Galway, Laurencetown in east Galway and Moyglass and Woodford in south Galway. Those surveyed expressed their wish to live in rural Ireland and the majority said they felt secure in rural areas.

In the Border, midlands and western region opportunities exist for increased housing development. The ideal situation would be for employment opportunities to accompany this development. The Minister referred to returning emigrants who might have the prospect of building a house. The necessity of commuting from much of rural Ireland to, for example, Galway city is a problem. Mr. Derek Davis recently spoke on the radio to welcome the rural housing guidelines and to remark on the sad films which recorded past scenes of emigration. The situation has improved in that people now travel by choice.

I was interested by the coverage of this matter by local newspapers in Galway. Early reactions to the Minister's guidelines were positive. There were warnings against a planning free for all, with which all would agree. Galway County Council's director of services said the council planned to carry out a review of the development plan and to comply with the Minister's guidelines.

I do not accept the claim made in the *Tuam Herald* that planning permission would be more difficult to attain in Galway under the new guidelines. Galway councillors from every party have been proactive in discussing these issues. I met with them last Monday on the issue of planning. I was surprised to hear a report after the meeting that prior notice applications, which councillors formerly had the power to grant, would no longer

be possible. I do not understand why this will be so. However, I also heard that every applicant to Galway County Council will be given a time extension in order to discuss planning applications further. This is a positive measure. Planning permission is granted at a high rate in County Galway but many applications are withdrawn at the last minute. People are told it is better to withdraw than be refused. The picture of the number of applications which are granted is therefore not complete.

I give due credit to Mr. Nick Killeen for his input on the matter of provision being made for situations in which there are specific health requirements. The Minister referred to design aspects, which are important. He gave the example of the unfair practice of banning brick in all cases. I do not see why certain types of windows are ruled out by planning authorities. I hope local authorities will investigate the issue of the 1.5 mile fringe around towns, which has caused difficulties in the past. Site distance appears a significant issue even on minor roads. Back lands could be nicely developed in towns, particularly where land is scarce.

The Minister noted the need to promote housing in smaller towns and rural villages. I have regularly raised this issue with local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. We need infrastructure in terms of water and sewerage schemes if cluster housing in towns or villages is to be developed. It is a good idea that contractors take responsibility for the installation of sewerage in a number of towns and villages. The Mutton Island scheme started off with €100 million. Sewerage schemes might be installed in most villages for €1.5 million to €2 million. Good value is to be obtained by developing a number of schemes simultaneously.

It is important to have a register of architects, particularly in light of recent discussions on "Prime Time" and "Morning Ireland". The Minister referred to regional seminars on planning, but I hope he will go further than that. I ask him to set up a register for architects and planners because people who pay for housing design deserve better value for their money.

Mr. Norris: I am sorry that the debate must be brief, but I understand the Minister is under pressure. Some aspects of these guidelines are welcome, for example, the drawing of a distinction between urban and rural housing. The development needs of rural areas are based on the desire to sustain rural communities, which I understand completely. I also understand the desire to have one's family close by and to develop on one's own land.

I note that the guidelines set down certain restrictions such as the following: vehicle access should not endanger the public; waste water dis-

positional systems must be adequate; siting and design must be taken into account; an integrated approach must be taken to the visual surroundings; and so on. However, in the context of the savage attacks on organisations like An Taisce, these guidelines sound like pious aspiration. I do not believe they will work or that they are intended to work. They are intended as a populist measure and will do damage to the country. This can be demonstrated by examining the facts.

One in four of the 290,000 housing units built since 1991 was an individual one-off house in a rural area, namely a detached building with an individual septic tank. The counties with the highest percentages of such housing units are Galway, 63.1%, which is a very high figure; Monaghan, 54.1%; Roscommon, 52.5%; Cavan, 52.4%; and Leitrim, 52.3%. Such housing developments increase car use and car ownership. We already have car ownership levels that are far higher than in other countries.

The Irish Planning Institute has commented on current rural housing development and listed 16 concerns, of which I will mention but a few. The institute pointed to the potentially negative impact on important landscapes and rural amenities, although that is not likely to bother the Department that has given us the Tara motorway. Other concerns included the potential loss of distinctive rural conditions, cultural traditions and heritage in the built form and the detrimental impact of the proliferation of septic tanks. This latter point is a particularly important one to which I will return later. The institute went on to point out that one-off housing development leads to an almost exclusive reliance on the car for all journeys, ribbon development and dereliction in rural towns and villages.

It is clear that the rural housing guidelines have been produced without any assessment or consideration of the capacity of the Irish countryside to absorb this kind of housing development. One third of all applications for housing are for one-off houses in rural areas. This has increased from 17,572 in 2003 to 23,744 in 2004. We do not know what the figure will be for 2005, but we can presume it will be higher than last year.

There has been no examination or audit to determine what percentage of one-off houses constructed over the past decade have efficient waste water disposal systems, supplied and maintained in accordance with EU directive standards. Concern has been expressed that water treatment systems are installed in one-off houses and are not maintained. In some cases, the system installed by the builder is not a specified proprietary treatment system but an ordinary septic tank. The company that manufactures the proprietary treatment system becomes aware of a problem only when the customer complains about a fault. It sends an operative to carry out repairs and discovers that the wrong facility has

been installed. We do not have an audit and we do not know what is going on in terms of waste water treatment. What we do know, however, is that we have extraordinarily polluted water tables.

The argument has been advanced that people should be allowed to build one-off houses in rural areas to sustain family links. While I can understand this argument from a human perspective, let us examine the facts. How many of these houses are actually built for family members? I draw the attention of the House to an article in *The Irish Times* of Wednesday, 15 December 2004.

The individual quoted in the article is not someone who can be dismissed as a crank, a do-gooder or a partisan member of An Taisce. Mr. Jim Harley is a senior planning official with Donegal County Council. He outlined 16 examples to councillors where planning permission was sought by local people who said the planned property was for their own use. However, the properties in question had never been owner-occupied and were put up for sale before building was completed. This is one instance of behaviour that is endemic throughout rural Ireland.

Members of this House have referred to this issue. They asked why farmers were not entitled to sell their sites, build houses and so on, in order to pay for their children to go to college. Let us be honest about it and not pretend that these houses are for families. They are built so that people can make money.

In another case, a letter was received from a local priest confirming that a planning application for three new homes was for three brothers, but all three houses are now for sale. The council dealt with these matters as bona fide applications and what else could it do? There was another case where an application was supported by a letter from a solicitor. One of the conditions of the planning permission was that the house would be for the owner's use, but it was put on the market immediately. Mr. Harley said that such scenarios are making a mockery of the entire planning process. Councillor Francis Collins gave an example of somebody in Derry who made a successful planning application by using his driving licence as evidence of residence. The driving licence was from Donegal.

The article in *The Irish Times* was published before the guidelines from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government were released. Those guidelines are intended to ease restrictions in the planning process even further.

We must make progress but we should not fool ourselves. We must ensure we know about waste water disposal and have a complete audit. We need to ascertain the capacity of the countryside to absorb one-off housing developments. In those

[Mr. Norris.]
 circumstances where families want to build in order to stay together, that is fine. However, people should not be allowed to engage in profiteering. We must keep a close eye on the situation because it is not right to destroy the tourist potential of the country in order to allow a few fat farmers to make money.

Mr. Roche: I notice that Senator Norris has lost a lot of weight recently.

Mr. Norris: The Minister is not looking consumptive himself.

Ms White: I welcome the Minister and take the opportunity to accord him, his predecessor, Deputy Cullen, and the departmental officials due praise for publishing the sustainable rural housing guidelines. The guidelines contain a wide range of new measures for one-off rural housing. Subject to good planning practice, people with rural links will be favoured for planning, as well as any applicant seeking planning permission in an area that is suffering from population decline.

On Thursday last, I launched a book entitled *Positive Planning for Rural Houses*. I stated at the book launch that the sustainable rural housing guidelines are revolutionary, representing a major boost for the people and culture of rural Ireland and the countryside itself. The future of the Irish countryside is of great importance.

Systems are in place to ensure that planning meets recommendations concerning site selection, design, waste water disposal and road safety. The guidelines emphasise the key role good house siting and design can play in successfully integrating new development into the landscape. They also exhort local authorities to raise planning standards in a proactive manner.

Last week Clare County Council launched the Clare rural design and conservation awards scheme. The scheme comprises nine awards, including those for best urban house and best rural house. My point is that planning authorities, such as county councils, should have design competitions to raise housing design standards as well as ensuring the appropriateness of the setting which should blend in with the local environment.

Councillors should take a more active role in drawing up county development plans, instead of leaving it to planners. Local representatives are elected by the people to represent them concerning such planning issues, yet many councillors have admitted that they vote in favour of plans they had never seen. I would like to hear the Minister's opinion on that point when he replies to the debate. Councillors must energise and educate themselves, study county development plans and be *au fait* with them so that they can speak on behalf of their constituents.

I urge the Minister to speak to Professor Clinch of UCD's department of planning and environ-

mental policy in order to ensure that rural design occupies a key place in that university department.

Mr. Roche: I did his inaugural lecture.

Ms White: I know. I read the Minister's speech. There is a perception that this concerns UK planning guidelines, but it is important to clear the air. Councillors and the general public should be made aware that UCD's department of planning and environmental policy is sympathetic in this regard. They are not technical planners alone, but also have a sensitivity concerning the rural environment.

The sustainable rural housing guidelines are revolutionary. I do not agree with the pure attitudes expressed earlier by Senator Norris whose remarks were over the top. I support him on many issues but he has adopted a superior attitude to people living in rural areas.

We must have our own individual vision for the countryside when it comes to planning guidelines for the design of rural housing. We should not have to adopt planning design parameters from Europe, England or Wales. We did not have the Romans here and we do not have restricted planning guidelines. I was disappointed and surprised that Senator Norris adopted such a rigid attitude on this matter.

I praise the Irish Rural Dwellers Association for its proactive work in this area. It would be a good idea if a member of that association were appointed to An Bord Pleanála. It would be good for relations between activists and lay people who love the countryside and take these issues seriously. I congratulate the Minister who knows what he is talking about in this regard.

Mr. Roche: There is some doubt about that in today's newspaper editorials.

Mr. Feighan: I welcome the Minister to the House and I am glad he has been enlightened about rural housing by the previous speaker. Senator White raised a few serious issues but I wish to clarify one matter. While some Senators have displayed a superior attitude, Senator White may wish to clarify her remarks concerning county councillors.

Ms White: They do not admit it themselves, but they are not all county councillors.

Mr. Feighan: I speak as a former county councillor but I do not think Senator White has been a councillor. She should not adopt that kind of superior attitude to county councillors.

Ms White: It is not a superior attitude.

Mr. Feighan: I was a county councillor in 1999—

Ms White: Why was it such a mess in the past?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Feighan without interruption.

Mr. Feighan: I was a county councillor in 1999 and I take great pride in the work I and other councillors did on Roscommon County Council. I can only speak on behalf of County Roscommon.

Ms White: This is nonsense.

Mr. Feighan: It is not nonsense.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Allow Senator Feighan to continue without interruption.

Mr. Feighan: Every county councillor took great pride in drawing up the county development plan.

Ms White: The Senator is exaggerating what I said.

Mr. Feighan: Senator White, you may stand up and you may——

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senators should address their remarks through the Chair.

Ms White: The Senator should not personalise the debate.

Mr. Feighan: Senator White may speak as a Member of the House, but she cannot speak on behalf of county councillors.

Ms White: The Senator should not exaggerate.

Mr. Feighan: County councillors have worked with planners, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and county managers. In County Roscommon, they drew up a county development plan over two years. Councillors cannot be accused of not having participated in county development plans over the past five years. Neither can they be accused of having had no input. Councillors are elected by the people and I welcome their participation in county development plans. Senator White may not have meant to imply otherwise, but I wish to clarify that point for the record.

I am delighted by the new rural housing guidelines. In the past, many houses were closed up when people emigrated, so it is great to see people coming back to live in rural Ireland. I grew up over a shop and was not fully aware then how handy it was to have access to such facilities. When people move from urban to rural areas they often miss such facilities being close at hand. Planners sometimes regard a street as a place with footpaths and lights but in rural areas many farmers regard the road outside their farmhouses as a street.

While some guidelines are necessary, it is good to see that those pertaining to rural housing are being relaxed. Roscommon is a rural county where councillors have worked closely with planners, the county manager and the county engineer to draw up a sympathetic development plan for rural housing.

I do not intend this point to be taken as a serious criticism of the Minister, but the introduction of rural housing guidelines may undo some of the hard work we have done over the years in County Roscommon. In north Roscommon the Lough Key development plan was handled sensitively but it was very restrictive. We sought submissions over three years when planning to change that plan. It was the first time we had changed it in 20 years. County councillors worked to ensure that the baby was not thrown out with the bathwater. We did not try to loosen the conservation guidelines, but we did make the area more open to sustainable housing development, which is what we need. Nonetheless, I am concerned that the new housing guidelines may help counties such as Kildare, Meath and Wicklow — the Minister's own constituency — where it is difficult to obtain planning. In counties such as Roscommon, Leitrim and Offaly, however, the guidelines may be more restrictive than elsewhere. I am somewhat concerned they might overrule our development plans.

We would all prefer if site distance were not an issue, but it is. People must comply with site distance regulations in the interests of road safety. In one area, people sought access to a national road from houses which were in a *cul de sac*. There were many serious accidents in that area because the residents were playing Russian roulette when leaving their homes. It was a numbers game and they were bound to be affected at some stage. I agree, therefore, with the planning authorities that site distance is a vital element in housing developments. It is in the interests of people living in such areas. Applicants should seek pre-planning meetings with planners in order to ease confusion and iron out difficulties.

I am disappointed it has taken so long to produce the new rural housing guidelines. I am not sure the phenomenal level of building in rural areas in the past five or six years is sustainable. My concern, therefore, is that the guidelines shut the door after the horse has bolted. Nevertheless, I welcome them and hope they will be put to good use.

Mr. Moylan: I welcome the Minister to the House and compliment him on the recent decisions he has taken as many people were waiting for them. Steps need to be taken to support the future development of rural communities. Many people believe houses should be built in back gardens or small areas in Dublin and larger

[Mr. Moylan.]

towns. Farm families, on the other hand, many of whom have a large number of hectares of land, have been unable to build a farm for family members, including sons and daughters. Under the new guidelines, people who have roots in or links to rural areas will receive planning permission in certain areas. This will prevent an influx of people seeking to build holiday homes in many scenic areas without depriving local people of the opportunity to continue to live in their locality. An important aspect of the guidelines is that they facilitate people who have a commitment to their local area.

Each local authority currently has responsibility for defining those who are entitled to receive planning permission as part of rural communities. They include farmers, their sons and daughters, persons taking over the ownership or running of farms and those who have lived most of their lives in a particular rural area. The provision that people from rural areas and those who can make a commitment to the development of rural areas will be entitled to receive planning permission is a welcome development.

I hope new houses will continue to be designed and located to integrate well with their physical surroundings and will be compatible with the conservation of sensitive areas such as natural habitats. As the Minister indicated, special areas of conservation, special protected areas and natural heritage areas will not be allowed to be used as a reason for a blanket refusal of one-off housing applications. This is also welcome because some rural areas in which local people wish to build are covered under these categories.

The guidelines will help to revive areas and communities suffering persistent and substantial population decline. Everyone is in favour of preserving our ground water which is the envy of most countries and the guidelines will ensure steps are taken to protect our water and maintain the highest water standards. The Minister has taken a balanced approach to this issue in stipulating that every effort must be made to protect our underground water sources, on which people in rural areas depend.

Planning authorities must examine their development plans and policies so as to ensure they are in line with the new rural housing planning guidelines. Planners may argue it was easier to obtain planning permission prior to the changes but this is not the case as a glance at the figures on planning applications refusals in rural areas would show.

The purpose of planning should be to make the best use of available natural resources and guide us in making planning decisions as opposed to ruling out development with a view to creating a rural wilderness, an approach favoured by some planners. An Bord Pleanála rejected on appeal approximately three quarters of all planning

applications approved by local authorities. When local authorities granted applications — we also had many difficulties in this respect — and third parties appealed An Bord Pleanála was found wanting in looking after the interests of rural areas.

The majority of rural dwellers are neither farmers nor directly depend on farmers. Although less than 8% of the population is engaged in farming, many people have ties to rural areas. The Minister, through his guidelines, will afford many of those who originally came from rural areas an opportunity to return to them.

Local authorities must develop affordable private sites in our towns and villages where services are available to enable young families to build houses in them.

Mr. J. Phelan: Hear, hear.

Mr. Moylan: This would reduce the numbers seeking planning applications in rural areas and allow people to contribute to their communities at parish, village and town level by safeguarding the future of schools, hurling, football and soccer teams. The Minister stated he will not insist that people move into social houses if local authorities continue to provide them only in larger towns. The onus is on us to ensure local councillors provide services in our towns and villages at an affordable price to facilitate those who have a right to build in rural areas in doing so. As one who has pushed for many years to get people to build houses in rural areas, I urge people not to rush out to try to buy sites in rural areas. If planners and public representatives ensure affordable sites are made available in towns and villages, people will not need to move to rural areas and problems such as the need for young families to acquire a second car will be avoided.

Senator Norris raised the issue of owner occupiers in rural areas. To ensure it will not be put on the market most local authorities impose a condition when granting a planning application that the house must be occupied for a period of three or five years. While it is possible that some houses are sold on, it is incorrect to claim this is the norm. In some cases people who build a house will have to sell it because they are required to move or change job but, in the main, their intention will have been to stay and make a contribution to the local area. If one or two people have to sell, that is fine.

I compliment the Minister on taking these issues on board. The ball is now in the court of the local authorities. Having been involved in drawing up several county development plans, I compliment councillors for doing an excellent job in this regard. Although they do their best, legislation has sometimes prevented them from enabling more people to build houses in rural areas. Following the Minister's meetings with

county managers, I hope they will instruct their directors of services to allow freedom to develop in rural areas.

Mr. J. Phelan: I welcome the Minister and the debate on the rural housing guidelines. While I share most of the sentiments expressed by Senators, I have serious reservations about Senator Norris's comments. I am somewhat disappointed by the guidelines. Following their announcement, I contacted my local authority, Kilkenny County Council, of which I am a former member, and was informed by several staff in the planning department that the guidelines will not result in any significant changes in County Kilkenny with regard to rural planning. All of the proposals in the guidelines are already in the county development plan and, therefore, people in Kilkenny who are having difficulty securing planning permission are being given false hopes by the Minister. There are two areas where improvements have been made — returning emigrants and serious medical conditions — but these guidelines are not the panacea the Government presents them as. There is a long way to go to ensure that people who have a genuine affiliation with rural areas and who want to live in them are looked after.

Inconsistency in planning is the major bugbear I encounter as a politician. Looking at some of the buildings that get planning permission when others do not, it is hard to understand what is going on. I urge the Minister to use whatever influence he can to ensure planners in rural areas are consistent. Serious discrepancies exist between planners even within counties. I understand that when a county development plan is written, people interpret it differently but it is difficult to explain to someone who has been refused planning permission that one planner reads the development plan in one way when a year earlier, another planner would have granted permission, or they would get permission if they were building the house in a different part of the county. That inconsistency infuriates people.

Senator Kitt mentioned issues planners have about the types of housing being built in rural areas. I have a case of a young family who secured permission to build in my parish in County Kilkenny and part of the permission was for the building of a house with a particular type of brick. They sought to have the house built with this brick but were told they could not have it on the house. Every other house in the vicinity that was built in the past five years has this brick on it. It is simply because the planner has changed and the new planner does not like brick. How do we explain to that couple that while their neighbours can build the houses they want, they must build a house to satisfy the planner that is at variance with the other houses in the area? That is

an example of the inconsistency in the current planning process.

Another area of interest is population decline. County Kilkenny is perceived as being on the east coast and having done well in recent years. However, there are significant areas of rural County Kilkenny that have seen population decline between the last two censuses. Tullogher, Windgap, Galmoy and north Kilkenny outside Castlecomer have seen significant decline. Contrary to the prediction of Senator Norris and others of an explosion of rural housing, the population has decreased in many areas. I would encourage as many people as possible to ensure the schools stay open, the post offices are kept open and rural clubs and societies have a future because there are people living in their catchment areas.

I was disappointed with Senator Norris's attitude. It reflects a certain outlook that exists mainly in Dublin where Dubliners feel they can go to rural areas on a Friday evening and look at the landscape, green fields and rolling hills and love it. They go back on a Sunday evening and that is it. There are people in rural area who must live there, make a living and support their families and they have legitimate issues with the planning authorities and process.

Senator Norris's last comment about fat farmers selling sites was shocking. It was unworthy of him and he might reflect on what he said because it is far from the truth. I am the son of a farmer and many farmers I know would prefer not to sell a site. I have two brothers who are farmers and they would not dream of selling a site. They would not even sell a site to me if I wanted one. Some farmers find themselves in the position where they must sell a site to continue in agriculture. In certain circumstances, if a sustainable house is built, it is acceptable.

The other issue that crops up is that to build in a rural area, a person must be able to trace back five generations. I find it refreshing when new people come into rural areas. When a new family moves in it is a great thing and this barrier that has been erected that a person cannot build in a rural areas unless he can trace back his family ancestry is wrong. New families are a breath of fresh air.

Senator Moylan was correct when he mentioned water. The problems with ground water are not a result of houses that will be built in rural areas from now on. All of those houses will have top quality water and sewerage treatment systems. The main problems lie with agriculture, which is being addressed in the nitrates directive, towns and villages that have either inadequate or no treatment system in place and older houses in rural areas that have faulty treatment systems. The new houses will not create problems for ground water because they have high-tech and up to date systems. I welcome the publication of the

[Mr. J. Phelan.]

guidelines and I hope they lead to more consistency in the planning process.

Ms Ormonde: I welcome the Minister to the House and commend him on the recently published rural housing guidelines. This is an issue on which I have been campaigning for some time.

As the Minister is aware, I have put forward a number of points on this matter that have been brought to my attention by councillors and members of the public. It was clear that there were concerns about the previous planning policy on rural housing. Action needed to be taken and I am glad to see the Minister and his Department have taken those views on board in the new guidelines.

Over 40% of people live in rural areas, a fact that has not been emphasised enough. For many years, these people have suffered discrimination as a result of planning policy. The policy clearly had a devastating effect on certain communities and in some cases planning bodies were not being reasonable on this issue. Everyone participating in this debate has heard of cases where the planners would not listen to reason.

These guidelines will protect rural communities, offering hope to those whose planning applications were blocked simply because the planning authorities did not like their applications or a catch-all policy was in operation that took little notice of individual cases. Despite the scaremongering, the guidelines will not lead to a repeat of ribbon development that had a damaging effect on parts of the countryside. Several years ago when travelling through the countryside, I saw some of these Southfork-type housing developments, which were responsible for the emergence of this debate on these guidelines. They will ensure these types of blanket development will not recur. I never again want to see Southfork-type developments, no Member wants to see the environment destroyed by them and no county councillor, manager or planner wishes to become involved in them.

These guidelines will ensure that those people with ties to rural communities can continue to live in them. While the Government is committed to the policy of decentralisation, it does not simply apply to various gateways and hubtowns. Decentralisation needs to be examined from a more basic viewpoint. We want to see people continuing to live in the countryside, keeping our rich rural communities alive. We do not want to discourage them from doing so because they cannot get planning permission to build homes there. If that was the case, large tracts of the countryside might as well be designated as national parks to prevent anyone from living there. A thriving and friendly local community is as eye-catching and as important as any natural view. These are the communities upon which our country has been

built and they are just as much a tourism attraction as various scenic sites. They must be cherished and, thankfully, these guidelines will help to achieve this.

I am pleased the provision regarding improvements to services for planning applications was introduced in the guidelines. To many people the planning process can seem a complete mystery, leaving them unsure of what is allowed and what is not. The number of planning applications that have been refused or dismissed due to simple errors would be reduced if there was more consultation between the planners and the public. I accept the Minister has encouraged local authorities to publish easy-to-read guidelines for planning.

Returning emigrants will be pleased with the guidelines. Many who spent their lives abroad have dreamed of returning to the areas in which they were raised. Blanket planning rules cannot be allowed to ruin that dream. There are also many planning cases involving health circumstances. I am glad this factor has been included in the final guidelines. How can any caring society force the disabled or ill to move away from relatives and friends who might care for them if they are prevented from building houses in their communities? Such prevention is not only wrong but verges on the idiotic. It can be argued that it discriminates against the disabled and those with serious illnesses.

As a former member of a local authority, I recall a case in the south Dublin area where a family with a disabled son wanted to sell a plot of land to a sibling so he could be close by. The parents were elderly and concerned how best they could cope with their son. Unsurprisingly, the sibling was refused planning permission. What was the sense of this decision? The area had no particular scenic attraction and was not in danger of being blighted by development. However, the planners did not listen. I hope these new guidelines will prevent such situations occurring again.

I welcome the Minister's proposal for regional seminars to publicise and explain the guidelines. I accept that some county development plans will have to be redrafted. We must recognise the time local authority councillors put into preparing these plans. I have had the experience of spending hours on plans trying to achieve the right balance in our areas only to see the planners prevail on every occasion.

An Bord Pleanála has another agenda. I do not understand the board's composition. Its regional planners often give positive opinions on planning applications only for the board to turn them down. I cannot understand how the process works. Will the Minister examine this issue?

Many fine geography graduates want to enrol for a masters degree in planning. However, they cannot get on the course because they are

stopped by professionals in cahoots with the planners and local authorities. Will the Minister examine this? We need our planners to be empathetic to local needs but, as we have seen, they have their own ethos. In view of this I am concerned these guidelines will not be implemented.

Mr. Glynn: I commend the Minister's guidelines on rural housing. It was an innovative move on his part and reflects the importance he attaches to rural housing and the conservation of rural communities. For the last 25 years I have grappled with this issue as a member of a local authority. I live in a town in a rural area and it has been frustrating to witness how people interpret the contribution made to county development plans by local authority members. All sides of the House will agree that every local authority member must tell local authority management and planners that they were elected to represent the ordinary Joe and Mary Citizen.

It is abhorrent that communities are dying. It is people who drive rural communities. Churches, post offices and schools are closing down in rural areas. Serious declines in populations have occurred in parts of County Westmeath, resulting in several GAA clubs having to amalgamate to put out a minor team. We can talk until the cows come home on this issue but a strong stance must be made by local authority councillors. They are the people on the frontline doing an excellent job for their people. As a former member of a local authority and a Member of the Oireachtas, I have had frustrating experiences with certain planners. At meetings, I have been so ignored as to have been made feel invisible. The Minister referred to courtesy and it is the case that many of these problems can be resolved by common sense and courtesy. Regrettably, in many cases those attributes are absent.

Another point raised *ad nauseam* is that one cannot build along a particular road because the surface is not good enough on a so-called bog road. The best people in this country were reared along country roads and bog roads. Not many of us came too far from the bog, given the natural features of our country. What is wrong with living in the country, or along a bog road?

Reference is regularly made to the great difficulties farmers currently encounter in getting assistance to run their farms. How can they get it? It is next to impossible even for a farmer's son or daughter to get planning permission to build on the farmer's land. Only last week I had two site visits. While the officials from Westmeath County Council were very helpful, in both cases the applications were refused even where a local need was clearly established. There is no logic to that.

The arrival of the new Minister, Deputy Roche, at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, is a breath of fresh air.

He and his predecessors have said clearly that the planning permission area needs to be tackled. One can go to any part of Westmeath, Longford or any county and see the numbers of schools which have closed. There will never be rural development if there are no people, but how can there be people in an area if they cannot get planning permission to build their homes? The situation is ludicrous.

I agree with Senator Ormonde's comments on An Bord Pleanála. It is the one body in this country which completely confuses me. I do not know what it is about. A local man in my home parish, a man advanced in years, bought a tract of land and someone in County Kildare, I think, objected to the man's local authority granting him planning permission. An Bord Pleanála then overturned the permission. I do not understand that. There is no sense or logic involved.

I warmly compliment the Minister for his actions and strong words. Others have talked about the issues while the Minister has taken action.

Ms White: Hear, hear.

Mr. Glynn: That is important. The Minister has a great interest in local authority members, as have Members of this House, for obvious reasons. The councillors of this country are the people who are driving development. They are helping developers and helping people trying to get their own houses. That is what rural development, sustainable development and growth are all about. I urge the Minister to keep up the good work. More power to his elbow.

Mr. Scanlon: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about the sustainable rural housing guidelines for planning authorities put forward by the Minister, Deputy Roche, and I warmly welcome them. I have been calling for such guidelines for some time, from when I was a member of Sligo County Council and since my election to Seanad Éireann. Some of them will improve all aspects of the planning process, especially for members of the public who currently find it very confusing and full of red tape.

One of the continuous annoyances brought to my attention by constituents relates to pre-planning matters. Thankfully, the guidelines include a renewed and strengthened emphasis for improving the service from the planning authorities to applicants, with particular reference to improving the availability and responsiveness of pre-planning consultations. In fairness to the planners in County Sligo, they are quite good in that regard.

Another issue involves people making applications on behalf of the public. I am aware of two recent such applications where the person making them did the percolation test knowing that it had already failed. Despite this, the person made applications to the county council and charged

[Mr. Scanlon.] the individual. Many people can ill afford €2,000 for such an application to be made, yet certain people submit them on their behalf knowing that they have to be refused.

The new guidelines will ensure that applicants and planning authorities can work together. This will allow for a much better situation for people applying to build. The local authorities will be able to examine the necessary planning criteria and then select the best available site for a house and the best design solution for a site. The type of consultation provided will save time and money and allow members of the public to work in conjunction with the local authority and the planning guidelines. This will work both ways, as members of the public who wish to build will be better able to understand the planning issues and regulations, while the planning officials will listen and respond to the concerns of the applicants.

I am pleased with the reference in the new guidelines to returning Irish emigrants, and the special emphasis the Minister has given to this area. These emigrants were born and lived for substantial parts of their lives in rural Ireland and left the country principally for reasons of work. It is my hope that the guidelines will ensure that emigrants who now wish to return to their home areas to reside near other family members, to work locally, to retire or to care for elderly members of their families, can do so.

I am also pleased that in drawing up the guidelines, the Minister took submissions from the relevant organisations who manage the development process in rural areas, such as planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála. I agree with the comments on the board made by previous speakers. I am aware of numerous applications where, sometimes for vexatious reasons, an objection has been made. That objection goes to An Bord Pleanála. One of its inspectors then investigates the application and the objection and sometimes finds in favour of granting the application. Nevertheless, a board which would probably not even be familiar with the rural town, never mind the area in which an application might have been granted, can over-rule its own inspector's advice and refuse the planning application. There is something badly wrong in such a situation and it needs to be addressed.

From letters in national newspapers one can see how certain people, mostly urban thinking people, feel about rural planning. There is no doubt that people in the countryside are protective of it, but it is important that people who want to can live where they were born, bred and reared, in their local areas where their families live. If we do not keep those people and allow them to build houses and live in their local areas, how can we sustain rural villages, local churches, schools or football teams? Thankfully, things are changing and because of good economic growth

in this country, people can get jobs. They no longer have to go to England or America and can stay in their own communities. It is important that they are allowed to stay there and to build their homes.

I wish the Minister the best of luck. I compliment him and his officials for a job well done. I hope that the planners accept his proposals in the spirit he intends. It is all about interpretation, and the spirit in which the planners take on board the regulations.

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): I thank all the Senators for contributing to what has been one of the fullest debates I have attended in this House. It was also thought-provoking because Senators understand the pulse of reality in rural Ireland, along with the wishes and concerns of councillors. Accordingly I considered it important that I sit through the debate and I am grateful that I could do so for most of it.

I will not have time to deal with all the issues but will deal with some of the key ones. Senators Bannon and O'Rourke made the point that many old buildings could be renovated and turned into homes or small-scale enterprises, such as the *Gîtes de France* holiday accommodation with which we are familiar. I accept that view. We can inject vibrant life into rural Ireland and reactivate beautiful, old vernacular architecture if we adopt a less prescriptive or ideological approach to planning. Work could be done in that respect.

Senator Bannon also spoke about the importance of pre-planning meetings. Many other speakers made the same point. Pre-planning meetings, courtesy, consideration and consistency are the issues that arose time and again during the debate. I have emphasised and will continue to emphasise those issues. Senator McCarthy warned of the dangers of being over-bureaucratic in our approach to planning while Senator O'Rourke spoke about the stress the planning system can put on people. That is a reality and I see it every week in my clinics. The stress and strain put on people by the planning system is outrageous. When it is accompanied by inconsistencies it is impossible to convince people that there is an even-handed planning system.

The same thoughts were evident in many of the contributions. The focus of the guidelines is to create more certainty about and to inject more balance and humanity into the planning system. The guidelines will also support Senator Moylan's aspiration that we support and bolster rural communities. Indeed, that is the specific policy of this Government. The essence of a vibrant rural Ireland is a community of people. A Cabinet Minister with responsibility for rural Ireland has been appointed for the first time. This policy was also admirably outlined by Senator Ormonde.

Senators O'Rourke, McCarthy, Glynn and many others spoke about the need for good customer relations. They are absolutely correct. The only way the public service should operate is as a public service. On the first day I came into my Department I met with senior management. I wrote down four objectives and the first was better customer service. Senators on all sides of the House are aware that where there is good customer service there is good planning. Where there is bad customer service there is, inevitably, bad planning. This is a matter which my Department will focus on in the seminars it will hold throughout the country. It was also raised by Senators Bannon, Ormonde and many others. We will emphasise it in the planned meetings.

We will also emphasise the importance of pre-planning meetings. There is no sense in making it impossible for people to second guess what will happen and to produce the type of thing Senator Bannon showed me earlier. These concepts are plucked out of the air. There is no logic to it. Pre-planning meetings will help both sides, the planners and the applicants. I believe the seminars will have to emphasise the necessity of pre-planning, a more open approach and, above all, the dangers of an over-bureaucratic or prescriptive form of planning. The planning system must deal with the problems and issues that arise in the real world and in the real world people do not fit into nice, neat pigeonholes. There must be flexibility.

Senator Kitt referred to the *Tuam Herald*. I was a little mystified as the writer must not have been as familiar with the guidelines as he or she should have been before issuing an opinion. These guidelines will create more certainty and that will make planning easier. Senator Kitt also mentioned changes made in Galway. The guidelines are not an *à la carte* issue. They are statutory and I expect councils to observe them. Where they do not, I will deal with it.

Two other important issues dealing with the pre-planning process were mentioned. Senator Bradford, in a good contribution, spoke about the excellent work done in Cork where the council has provided advice on appropriate design. The Senator is correct that this type of proactive approach should be operated elsewhere. Senator White mentioned the design competition in County Clare. A number of counties are utilising design competitions and I welcome and support that approach.

A number of Senators mentioned the problem of poorly-constructed planning applications. Senator Scanlan referred to agents submitting no-hopie applications, where there is no chance of success. He is correct.

Ms O'Rourke: Then they tell people to go to their local representatives.

Mr. Roche: This is improper and dishonest. In fact, Senator McCarthy made the same point when he spoke about the rogue agents who blame local council planners for the problems that arise from poorly or incompetently prepared planning applications. The unfortunate clients are, as Senator O'Rourke said, then advised to go to their local representative. These same people will then talk about corruption in the planning system. It is their approach which is corrupting the planning system and causing difficulties. Young people who can ill afford it are going through multiple planning applications because of this incompetence. My Department is examining ways of addressing the problem of people who have no planning skills and little training passing themselves off as planning consultants, planning specialists or even architects. That issue must be tackled.

Senators Glynn, Paddy Burke and others raised the issue of planning inconsistency. I agree that inconsistency in the planning system is a scourge. It erodes and destroys public confidence. With the guidelines in place there is no reason for the gross inconsistencies we have seen all too frequently in the past. There is a special responsibility on county managers in this regard. They are the chief planners in each planning area. There is no excuse for inconsistency between a planning application in one field and a planning application in the other.

I gave a speech in UCD recently on the inauguration of the new professor of planning programme. I held up a planning application which had been brought to my attention that morning by somebody from outside my constituency. In it a planner had stipulated that a wood frame building could not be built on one side of the road but on the other side of the road the same planner had given planning permission for five wood frame buildings. That is not only inconsistent but it is *ultra vires*. The planning system is blind as regards the choice between the different systems as long as they meet the requirements. That type of inconsistency brings the system into disrepute.

Senator Brennan mentioned the proposed national application form and made the valid point that local circumstances must be taken into account. The new form is in two parts and the second part will encompass the arrangements foreseen in the Senator's contribution. A number of other Senators mentioned improved efficiency in customer service in the planning system in general. I am particularly anxious that there be more efficiency in planning.

The type of inefficiency public representatives see daily is unacceptable. One goes to the local authority only to be told that the file cannot be found or that documents are missing from the file. That is unacceptable in this day and age when an e-government system is being rolled out. The implementation of a full on-line e-planning

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system — some local authorities are excellent, others are mediocre and some are bad — will utilise modern technology to lift the burden, which undoubtedly exists, on planners and on applicants. E-planning will be helpful in creating a transparent system which everybody can accept.

Senator Ulick Burke referred to Deputy Cullen's draft planning guidelines last year and questioned if they had any impact. Interestingly, Senator John Paul Phelan, who mentioned the inconsistency, referred to the views of a county council planner in Kilkenny which suggested that the guidelines did have an impact. I agree with Senator Ormonde that the previous Minister, Deputy Cullen, deserves great credit for introducing the first draft guidelines last year. It would be odd if a council such as Kilkenny County Council, which has adopted its development plan, did not incorporate the draft guidelines. I hope they are in the plans.

Senator Ulick Burke also referred to the slipshod work done by agents and I agree with him in that regard. Senator Ormonde referred to the needs of families with special health or disability requirements and the needs of emigrants. I am pleased to have been in position to include special assistance for families with disabilities. It would be the wish of every Senator who is in touch with reality that it should be done.

I also said in my opening remarks that I was pleased to do something for emigrants. People left this country in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when there were no jobs here. It was their remittances that kept this country going. We must open our arms and welcome them.

I was particularly struck by the *tour de force* contribution of Senator Ó Murchú. He posed an interesting rhetorical question to those who have been most trenchant in their objection to the guidelines. He asked whether many of the great houses which dot the countryside such as Powerscourt, Carton and Fota would have been given planning permission if existing planning arrangements were in force when they were built. How right he is.

Ms O'Rourke: There would have been a resounding "No".

Mr. Roche: It is extraordinary if one thinks about it. The very same people who are getting themselves into a lather of sweat about one-off guidelines and the concept of the *hoi polloi* living in rural Ireland are those who would want to protect the great houses. I want to protect the great houses. I have a good track record in that regard but I also want to give an even break to people who have come from, live in and who can contribute to rural areas.

I do not agree with my good friend, Senator Norris. Not for the first time we are on different

sides of the argument. The idea that there is something wrong with counties like Roscommon, Monaghan, Donegal or Galway having a high proportion of one-off houses suggests the Senator should pay a few more trips to rural Ireland. The reality is that the proportion of one-off houses is closely related to the distribution of population. In my opening contribution I referred to an interesting study which showed that more one-off planning permissions were granted in the Six Counties than in England, Scotland and Wales together because that is the way we are; we are Irish and we do not, and cannot, all live in towns or cities.

Senator Norris also made the point that it was dreadful to build one-off houses because it requires people to drive cars. He is not the only person who has made that point. I had a go at the Green Party recently in this regard. People who live in towns also drive cars. Most people aspire to having a car and there is no crime in having one. In this city where public transport choices are available people still prefer to use cars.

Reference was made by Senator Norris to an article by a Donegal County Council planner. Those views are most interesting but I am not familiar with the article so I will not say too much about it. I have no doubt Senator Norris was absolutely punctilious and correct in the way he cited the reference but in other councils the difficulty to which he adverted has been resolved by providing residency requirements. Anybody who has been a councillor knows full well that one can put a residency requirement, which is a burden, in planning permissions. It is not for me to comment on the particular case as I have not read it.

Senator Feighan spoke of the superior attitude taken to councillors. He was most unfair to Senator White. We all accept that councillors do their best and work hard but we would equally accept that perfection is not always attained. He was concerned the guidelines might be abused in some planning departments. I can assure him the guidelines specifically recognise the different requirements of an area which has been depopulated, which is what he was talking about, and areas which are close to urban centres.

A number of Senators referred to An Bord Pleanála. We cannot adopt an *à la carte* approach to it. I have frequently been critical of the board but we cannot adopt the approach that when it makes a decision we like, it is great but when we do not like its decision, it is appalling. That is at the core of the current debate about the M3. Many of the people who would be writing to *The Irish Times* about me if I interfered with An Bord Pleanála, were in fact advising in the past 48 hours that that is exactly what I should do. I spoke recently to the chairperson of An Bord Pleanála. The board is making a great effort. It is aware that in the past decisions were made and

processes were adopted but if one looks at its performance it is doing its best.

Senator White and another speaker suggested that the Irish Rural Dwellers Association should become a nominating body to An Bord Pleanála. I am sympathetic to that view. I told the association that if it makes a submission I would give serious consideration to it.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to sustainable development in rural Ireland. The people of rural Ireland are its heart. If we drive the people out and put them all towns, high rise buildings and whatever, we will not do this country any service. The new guidelines reflect this and seek to promote the viability of rural communities. The guidelines bring greater clarity for planners and applicants alike. They should help to ensure that planning inconsistencies and rigidities in rural Ireland are eliminated.

The objectives of the planning and development Act are most interesting; it was never intended to be an Act to promote the sterilisation of rural Ireland.

Ms O'Rourke: It was never meant to be punitive.

Mr. Roche: The Act is about orderly development. What I am doing in these guidelines is adding a little bit of humanity and, I hope, a little bit of common sense.

Ms White: Common sense is the bottom line.

Mr. Roche: I again thank Senators for their contributions.

Mr. Bannon: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. I have just one question which relates to all of us here.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Bannon cannot ask a question. That concludes statements on sustainable rural housing guidelines.

Ms O'Rourke: We thank the Minister and his officials for their care and attention to this debate.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Ms O'Rourke: At 2.30 p.m. next Tuesday, 17 May.

Adjournment Matters.

Hospital Services.

Mr. Bannon: I thank the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy

Tim O'Malley, for coming to the House. However, I cannot thank the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, for the appalling situation at Mullingar hospital where, in spite of promises, work has failed to be completed under phase 2B. The people of the area seek assurance that the development of Mullingar hospital will go ahead despite the Hanly report and the inaction of the Department.

The Government ring-fenced €57 million for the development. The shell opened in 1997. The control plan was signed off by the Midland Health Board in 2002 and the development plan went to the Department in 2003. Eight years later the people of the midlands are still waiting for this facility to be opened as promised. It has been promised in the run-up to two general elections but very little has happened since. The building needs to be finished, equipped and staffed. It is questionable if this will happen.

I have heard from a reliable source that it is planned to string the people of Longford and Westmeath along until after the next general election and that the plug will then be pulled on the plan for the hospital. That is in the public domain in the area. It is a strong possibility given the history of this development. No timetable has been announced for the completion of phase 2B of Mullingar hospital. The time has come, if the Minister of State will excuse me for saying it, to put up or shut up on the issue. Empty words will not scotch rumours of the kind to which I referred. At this stage the only proof of the Minister's intentions will be action. We have had enough words and empty promises. On behalf of the people of the midlands I ask the Minister to honour the promises in regard to phase 2B of Mullingar hospital.

The hospital's annual budget is not rising at the same rate as two other hospitals in the former Midland Health Board region, Tullamore and Portlaoise. Staff numbers in Mullingar hospital are falling. Mullingar hospital is the only hospital to consistently receive less funding year on year. In 2000 Mullingar hospital's percentage of the overall budget was 34.9% while in 2004 this was reduced to 32.3%. An analysis of the figures for the past five years gives an alarming picture of the downgrading of the hospital. Tullamore hospital has received an increase of 76% and Portlaoise hospital has received an increase of 87%. Mullingar hospital has fallen behind with an increase of a mere 59% over the five year period from 2000 to 2004.

The writing appears to be on the wall for the hospital. As regards staffing numbers, in 2001 there were 753 full-time employees, while the number had dropped to 664 in 2004, a decline of almost 10%. Patient numbers, by and large, have increased since 1997, with a total of 52,569 being treated last year. Interestingly, the reduction in staff numbers has come about since 2002 when

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the local Fianna Fáil representatives were elected.

The reality is that Mullingar hospital is not being maintained at the same levels as its sister hospitals in Tullamore and Portlaoise and questions must be asked. Why is the special care baby unit, which was built three and a half years ago, lying empty? Why has the Health Service Executive failed to provide funding to staff the unit? Why has the funding been denied to complete the required staffing levels? The HSE has constantly refused funding for the extra staff needed to open this special care baby unit. A number of nurses who took up employment there on the assurance that the unit would be opened in the near future, have left in frustration. The population of the Mullingar catchment area is growing rapidly and this is leading to increased demand on already overstretched resources at the hospital. However, no help is forthcoming and there is no satisfactory outcome on the horizon for the people of the area.

Will the new wing at Mullingar hospital be completed before the general election, or is it the Government's plan to axe it, if re-elected? I want a straight answer to this question as well as the commitment that phase 2B, promised before the last general election, will be delivered before the next one. I am inviting the Minister of State to clarify the situation. If this does not happen, I assure the Minister of State that I, as a public representative from the area, will be bringing thousands of people onto the streets of both Mullingar and Longford to protest at the inaction of this Government on the issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): I am taking the Adjournment debate on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney. I thank Senator Bannon for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to give the House an update on the project.

The Health Act 2004 provided for the Health Service Executive, HSE, which was established on 1 January 2005. Under the Act, the HSE has the responsibility to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services, including its capital programme. Phase 2B of the Midland Regional Hospital is being progressed in this context.

The necessary funds to progress phase 2B form part of the funding provided to the HSE in the capital envelope of the capital investment framework 2005-09. The hospital is being redeveloped in phases. Phase 1 was completed in 1989 and phase 2A in 1997, at a cost of €13 million. Phase 2A included "shelled out" accommodation — external walls, floors and roof — for completion in phase 2B, the final phase of the current redevelopment programme, which is at the design

stage. The "shelled out" accommodation is on four floors over the existing radiology department and a single floor over the entrance concourse. It was provided for future ward accommodation and an operating department. The accommodation was provided as part of the phase 2A contract as a long-term value for money construction solution which will minimise disruption to existing functioning accommodation during the phase 2B construction works contract.

The Department of Health and Children approved the Midland Health Board's stage 2 development control plan, together with stage 3 sketch design cost plan for phase 2B in September 2004. It is anticipated that stage 3 will be completed in the near future. Phase 2B includes the fit-out of the "shelled out" accommodation together with additional accommodation, to provide the following — pathology and operating departments; general medical and surgical wards; medicine for the elderly-rehabilitation unit; day services, including surgery; administration and staff accommodation; acute psychiatric unit; child and adolescent psychiatric unit; occupational therapy department; catering and educational facilities; and a new entrance concourse.

The HSE service plan for 2005 was recently approved by the Tánaiste and, as required by relevant legislation, laid before the House of the Oireachtas. The detailed capital funding programme for 2005 is currently being finalised in the context of the capital investment framework 2005-09. This process also requires that issues relating to non-capital costs and staffing implications be addressed by the HSE prior to commencing new construction on individual projects.

When the capital investment framework is finalised, the HSE will then be in a position to progress its capital programme for this year. This process involves making provision for commitments, carrying forward from 2004 and initiating new contractual commitments for individual projects, in line with overall funding resources available for this year and beyond. The Tánaiste is aware that the procurement priority for phase 2B has always been the fit-out of the "shelled out" ward accommodation, as the first stage, to provide additional beds to enhance the delivery of clinical services by the hospital.

Mr. Bannon: The Minister of State has given no timescale. I have asked for a timescale so that this project may be delivered to the people of Longford-Westmeath before the next general election. I wish the Tánaiste would come back and be honest with the people and tell them the truth on this particular issue. We want the truth now. It is a scandal that the shell has been in existence for more than nine years without being fitted out. There is also the matter of the reduction in services at the hospital, for which the

people of Longford-Westmeath will not stand any longer. I want to convey that message to the Tánaiste. As I said before, I will bring the people onto the streets on this issue because it concerns every single family, parish and townland in Longford and Westmeath. I assure the House we will take action on this if the Minister does not.

Schools Building Projects.

Mr. McHugh: A high standard has been set, today on the Adjournment debate, so I hope I am up to speed.

It is appropriate that we have had a debate on rural housing today. In this context we tend to talk about addressing depopulation and the decline of services, whether post offices, shops or schools. There is a connection as regards the corollary of depopulation and the decline of rural schools. The corollary is the positive aspect which arises in certain parts of rural Ireland, in particular Donegal, whereby development plans have been put in place to populate areas that were otherwise in decline. The specific area I am highlighting today is Portlean. Portlean national school is the victim of success. There has been an upsurge in the numbers of people moving to the area and deciding to rear their families in the locality.

Portlean national school is a two-teacher school with a core enrolment of around 53. Next year, however, that number will increase, and once it goes over 53 the school will require an extra teacher. At present, two teachers work in two classrooms. There is also a special needs teacher who must be facilitated in the staff room, which is not good enough. I am calling on the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, to act seriously as regards the need for a third classroom, plus a general purpose room to facilitate pupils availing of special needs education. The general purpose room will also be needed once implementation of the PE curriculum is announced, whenever that will be. However, many small schools are facilitated on a short-term basis through the provision of prefabs. This is a short-term solution, which is not good enough because two or three years down the line more space is required as enrolment increases. Portlean national school meets the criterion of the small schools initiative that works must cost between €250,000 and €400,000 similar to nearby national schools at Dromfad and Browne Knowe, which benefited under the initiative.

I ask the Minister of State to convey the strong representations of the board of management of Portlean national school for an additional classroom as a matter of urgency to the Minister for Education and Science. This can be achieved through the small schools initiative and I call on the Minister to deal with this case as a priority. It has been raised in the past through different

mechanisms. For example, the Donegal members of Government have lobbied on behalf of the school. An initiative will be undertaken by professional lobbyists in the next two to three weeks. The school, staff and students require approval under the small schools initiative and I ask the Minister of State to follow up on this.

Mr. T. O'Malley: I thank the Senator for raising the matter, as it affords me the opportunity to outline to the House the Department of Education and Science's strategy for capital investment in education projects and the position regarding the application received in the Department for additional accommodation at Portlean national school, Kilmacrennan, County Donegal.

Modernising facilities in our 3,200 primary and 750 post-primary schools is not an easy task, given the legacy of decades of under-investment in this area, as well as the requirement to respond to emerging needs in areas of rapid population growth. Nonetheless, since taking office, the Government has shown a sincere determination to improve the condition of our school buildings and to ensure the appropriate facilities are in place to enable the implementation of a broad and balanced curriculum. Funding under the schools modernisation programme has been progressively increased in recent years to achieve our goal with a total of almost €2 billion allocated for this purpose since 1998. It is the largest investment programme in the history of the State.

Since the beginning of the year, the Minister for Education and Science has made a number of announcements relating to the schools building and modernisation programme. This year €270 million will be allocated to primary schools and €223 to post-primary schools for building works. This represents an increase of 14% on the 2004 allocation.

The programmes supported will include the following: 141 major building projects on site and a further 28 due to commence in the coming weeks; 122 major school building projects, which will prepare tenders and move to construction during 2005; 192 primary schools, which have been invited to take part in the small and rural schools initiative and the devolved scheme for providing additional accommodation; up to 120 schools which have been given approval to rent temporary premises, pending delivery of a permanent solution to their long-term accommodation needs; 43 schools that have been authorised to begin architectural planning for their major projects; 590 schools that were recently given approval to commence essential small scale projects under the summer works scheme; and 124 schools approved to progress through the architectural planning process with immediate effect, ranging from new school building projects to extension and refurbishment projects, allowing

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for the continuous roll-out of projects under the schools building and modernisation programme.

The new schools building and modernisation programme 2005-09 will be underpinned not only by a significant increase in overall funding but also by major improvements in the administration of the funding. Devolving more funding to local level through the summer works scheme and small and rural schools initiative will allow schools to move ahead much more quickly with smaller projects while also delivering better value for money.

The school authorities of Portlean national school made an application to the Department in May 2004 for the provision of an additional class-

room. Enrolment at the school has necessitated a further examination of its long-term accommodation needs to ensure the provision of capital funding is appropriate to meet this need. The project will be considered under the schools building and modernisation programme.

I thank the Senator for the opportunity to outline the position of this school project and to highlight the enormous work being undertaken by the Department of Education and Science in implementing the schools building and modernisation programme to ensure infrastructure of the highest standard is available for all our school going population.

The Seanad adjourned at 1 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 May 2005.