

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 13 Samhain 2008.
Thursday, 13 November 2008.

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Business of Seanad.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to make a statement on the current conditions and future plans for Gaelscoil Bharra, Cabra, Dublin 7.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to outline his proposed budgetary supports and resources for regional airports with specific reference to Waterford Regional Airport and if funding will be provided as promised for the proposed extension of its runway.

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, in the context of increasing concerns about water quality, to ensure that the group sewerage scheme funding be brought up to the level of the group water scheme as a matter of urgency following the pilot work that has taken place.

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

The need for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to make a statement on the increase in the rate of unemployment in Cork in the past 12 months and to put in place job creation policies to address the issue.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion on the Adjournment. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Donohoe, Coffey and Keaveney and they will be taken at the conclusion of business. Senator Buttimer may give notice on another day of the matter he wishes to raise.

Order of Business.

Senator Dan Boyle: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on radon protection measures, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business and to conclude not later than 1.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, spokespersons may speak for 12 minutes and all other Senators for seven minutes, Senators may share time with the agreement of the House,

[Senator Dan Boyle.]

and the Minister will be called upon ten minutes from the conclusion of the debate to take questions from spokespersons.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: We all watched the funeral in Limerick yesterday with sadness and great sympathy and the whole country was appalled at the event that led to it. I am very disappointed we do not have the opportunity in this House today to discuss gangland crime. The Dáil is having a debate on it today. I do not understand why not one of 20 Ministers of State is available to come to this House. Many Senators said they would like an opportunity to speak on this topic and many good suggestions were made on the Order of Business some days ago.

I am really disappointed about the lack of debate. Will the Deputy Leader explain the resistance to having current debates in this House? Could we please ensure we have them given that Senators on all sides of the House are seeking them? It is very important for the Seanad and country that we discuss topical issues. I appeal to the Deputy Leader to take up this issue and ensure it is acted upon in the coming weeks.

I want to focus on some of the decisions made by the Government in recent weeks. It is becoming very clear to me that neither the Taoiseach nor his Government has the temperament to deal with the difficult times and make the difficult decisions that are required. I say this for a number of reasons. The Government is in denial and not facing up to the truth about a number of issues. This is evident from recent decisions on medical cards and cuts in education. It was evident yesterday in the debate on cervical cancer vaccines.

The Government accused Deputy Kenny of being hysterical and of scaremongering in his response in the debate on cervical cancer vaccines. He asked his questions on the withdrawal of the vaccine thoughtfully and calmly and he received an hysterical response from the Taoiseach, whom I believe was in denial. Many Senators will have heard the Nobel prize-winning scientist on “Morning Ireland” this morning confirming Fine Gael’s view that the vaccine is life saving and effective. The scientist confirmed the view that one should not wait for screening and instead administer the vaccine, thereby saving lives. What Fine Gael was saying about the efficacy of the vaccine was accurate. It was not hysterical or scaremongering. I want to amend the Order of Business today to have a debate on the withdrawal of the cervical vaccine.

Senator Joe O’Toole: I concur with much of what Senator Fitzgerald has just said. On the Order of Business yesterday, I referred to the lack of business in the House at present. This was raised by my colleagues and by Senator Fitzgerald on the preceding day. Let us be absolutely clear that I believe the Government is winding down the importance of this House.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Joe O’Toole: It is trying to reduce to a minimum the impact of debate in the House and to undermine us in what we are doing.

A classic issue arose yesterday. When we mentioned the lack of legislation in the House, we received a response from the Government side on the important issues that were being debated. That was not the issue at all and we should therefore park that idea. Everybody on this side of the House believes yesterday’s fisheries debate, for example, was very important. However, it seems it requires multitasking on the Government side if its Members must deal with legislation, a motion and a debate in the same week or fortnight. That is the real issue.

We are dealing with the minimum amount of legislation and harmless debates. By this, I mean that if we want to discuss fishing we should place on the record some of the issues raised

by Senator O'Donovan over recent years on the appalling treatment of salmon fishermen along the west coast. When we raised the matter on this side of the House, we received very little support from the other side. The same applies to other issues, including that of quotas. We can certainly table motions to deal with these issues, on which the House must divide and in respect of which Members' votes must match their words. However, the idea of people standing up and saying what they want against Government policy must be considered in light of the fact that, day after day, the greatest critics of Government policy are on the Government side of the House. We need straightness in our debates and need to deal with the matter as we go along.

I agree completely that we need to be relevant. Issues of importance do arise, including the one raised by Senator Fitzgerald and gangland crime. Essential legislative changes are required to give greater authority to the police and Judiciary to deal with gangland crime. The Leader stated yesterday he would be happy to allow for this. There are 20 Ministers of State and 15 Cabinet members. Why, therefore, can we not have a debate on the issue raised by Senator Fitzgerald, for example, or that of gangland crime and the legislative changes necessary to address it?

The Leader responded positively yesterday to issues raised by various Senators on this side of the House. Some Members on the Government side, including Senator Ormonde, stated how important it was to keep the issue of gangland crime on the agenda, yet there is no attempt made to deal with it today. There is no attempt to be topical or to respond to what is going on in the world around us. Instead, it has been decided to talk about radon gas. While it is important, it is not as important as any of the other matters we could be discussing today. There is no urgency about the debate on radon gas, as important as it is, bearing in mind that I raised the issue of radon gas many times over the past four or five years and referred to the various parts of the country where it poses a problem. It is not the issue; the issue concerns what we are not talking about.

Senator Dominic Hannigan: I listened to Mr. Brian Goggins of the Bank of Ireland on the radio this morning announcing half-year profits for the bank of €650 million. He stated the profit will be retained as opposed to being distributed as dividends. It is clear the bank needs to do this to ensure it can recapitalise. However, recapitalisation should not be done at the expense of small businesses. At present, small businesses throughout the country are finding it very difficult to obtain credit, term loans and overdrafts. We need to ensure we do not sacrifice small businesses at the altar of bank recapitalisation because it is small businesses that will generate jobs that we hope will bring the country out of the recession. The banks took in €25 billion since the bailout in October and the Government needs to tell them to extend lines of credit to small businesses.

Yesterday the Environmental Protection Agency published its report on water quality. There were some shocking and very worrying statistics therein. Faecal coliforms are being found in over half of our groundwater samples. Some 30% of our rivers are polluted and 66% of lakes nationally have unsatisfactory water standards. While the Minister recognises this and has stated further investment is required because we do not want another crisis such as that in Galway, it is not clear that investment is forthcoming. Will the Deputy Leader arrange for a debate in the House with his party colleague to determine where money will be invested to improve our water quality?

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Dominic Hannigan: Given that Irish grocery prices are 25% higher than those in the United Kingdom, I was glad to see the announcement this morning that one major retailer

[Senator Dominic Hannigan.]

intends to invest €350 million in the establishment of 35 new stores in this country. I hope a discount retailer will help to drive down prices for Irish shoppers.

I was glad to see the price of oil has dropped to its lowest level in two years, that is, to \$53 per barrel. This is interesting because more than 60% of our electricity is generated from oil and gas. Yesterday, Sustainable Energy Ireland stated our electricity prices are 20% higher than the European average. It is vital that the reduction in the price of oil be passed on so our hard-pressed consumers benefit.

Senator John Hanafin: Given that the price of oil has dropped significantly and given that there is a real need to ensure the public finances are kept in order and we reduce our carbon footprint, would it not now be appropriate to consider increasing further the tax on petrol? This is because the tax on petrol was the most acceptable part of the budget, notwithstanding the fact that some people drew attention to it. We do need to raise taxes and there is public acceptance at the price point that now obtains in respect of petrol.

Given that the price of oil will fall further, would it not be appropriate for this House to suggest to the Minister that increasing the tax on petrol could help considerably in light of the significant borrowing required to get us through the recession? In addition, could Members of this House not encourage members of the Irish Central Bank who go to Frankfurt to ensure European Central Bank rates will continue to fall? Where there is significant room for manoeuvre, they should be encouraged to secure another decrease of 0.5% or 1% such that, by 2010, we will be through this downturn in the economy.

Senator Eugene Regan: I second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Senator Fitzgerald.

Let me refer to the cutbacks in the budget affecting the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority. The cutbacks proposed are 26% and 43%, respectively, whereas the allocation to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is reduced by 4%. I question the motivation of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Dermot Ahern, in regard to the allocations to these two bodies. I believe the Minister is acting in a *mala fides* manner with these disproportionate cutbacks.

The work of these bodies has been touched upon in this House. Both have a very important function. The Irish Human Rights Commission acts in respect of the Good Friday Agreement. The president of that body has a particular standing in law to ensure compliance with constitutional rights and freedoms and with rights and freedoms guaranteed by any international agreement, treaty or convention. This body has a very important role to play in implementing conventions from the United Nations and the Irish Council of Europe and rights derived from the EU treaties.

The Government was embarrassed by the report of that body in respect of extraordinary rendition and the manner in which the Government has operated in that arena has not reflected well on this country. It is important and self-evident that this body has an important role to play in ensuring oversight of the Government's activities in this area. The Equality Authority is the designated body under EU law which ensures that principles of equality are respected in many areas.

The Minister came to the House yesterday and suggested that a Fianna Fáil-led Government had established the Criminal Assets Bureau. He was corrected and told it was a Fine Gael-led coalition Government, from 1994 to 1997, that established that body. In response to a request that assets confiscated by the CAB would be ring-fenced to help the communities most affected by the scourge of drug addiction, the Minister made the excuse that there is a variability in the

value of the assets confiscated and that this would be somehow troubling to the voluntary bodies involved in drug treatment. That is an entirely fallacious excuse.

The Minister's excuse for the cutbacks in the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority is that——

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator should not get into that now.

Senator Eugene Regan: ——he has prioritised the fight against crime. The Minister cannot slide so easily out of this. He cannot undermine entirely the effectiveness of these bodies by making these disproportionate cutbacks. We have obligations under the Constitution, EU law and international conventions, and these are the bodies that ensure that the State and State bodies uphold the principles to which it has signed up.

I think that it does not go unnoticed by the Minister that the president of the Irish Human Rights Commission is a former Fine Gael Senator. I believe that is why the Minister is not acting in good faith with respect to the cutbacks for these bodies.

Senator David Norris: It is far more sinister than that.

Senator Eugene Regan: It is more partisan——

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Regan has made his point and must not make a speech.

Senator Eugene Regan: I ask the Deputy Leader——

Senator David Norris: Senator Regan is weakening our case by making that silly partisan point.

Senator Eugene Regan: ——if he agrees with that analysis and with the cutbacks in those two bodies.

Senator Mark Daly: On a point of order, the campaign for plain English prompts me to ask my learned colleague if, while we can understand all the university colleagues, some of the words——

An Cathaoirleach: That is not a point of order.

Senator Mark Daly: ——he has used so far——

An Cathaoirleach: It is not a point of order. The Senator is only making a point.

Senator Paudie Coffey: That is a Kerryman.

(Interruptions).

Senator Liam Twomey: They are not that foolish down in Kerry.

A Senator: Senator Daly should have thought of that one.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Mary White, without interruption.

Senator Mary M. White: Will the Deputy Leader request the presence of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Mary Coughlan, to bring the House up to date on the national strategy for improving our competitiveness? Last week I said that our industrial electricity costs are the highest in Europe, at 34.4% above the EU average. I

[Senator Mary M. White.]

tried to decode where these costs arise other than in the price of oil and the inputs into creating electricity, but I am not satisfied with the answer I got. I may have to submit a freedom of information request concerning the reason our electricity costs are so high.

According to Mark Fielding of the Irish Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, in the past two months its helpline has had a 900% increase in calls from struggling businesses. Many of the calls are from companies inquiring how they can make people redundant or temporarily redundant, or how they can put workers on shorter weeks. These are three of the main issues affecting small and medium-sized companies at present — this does not include the matter of weak sterling, to which I drew attention before, which never gets on the radar. We do not ask the Government to get us out of the corner of weak sterling and strong euro, but we need help in areas in which the Government can interfere.

Senator Quinn has often spoken in the past about companies being run by accountants. I have heard him say that many times in 25 years. Companies run by big businesses or by accountants are now pushing out the boat on payment to smaller companies. The period has increased from 40 to 65 days, putting pressure on small and medium-sized companies in respect of cash flow. I want the Government to get energised on this by putting heat under the banks. The whole country knows there is a proposed bail-out for the banks, if that is required in the next few years. I want to see the Government coming forward with a proposal to put the heat on the banks——

Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Liam Twomey: We are with Senator White there.

Senator Mary M. White: ——to open up cashflow. Even very reputable companies are being asked for this and pressure is being put on them. The country was invigorated and engaged with what the Government did for the banks to save the economy. I am talking about saving employment in our country, so that companies will not have to let people go. I want the Government to come out forcibly and put pressure on the banks to increase the cashflow for companies.

Senator David Norris: I support what Senator O'Toole said about the absence of serious business in the House. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. About one third of Members are present for the Order of Business. The numbers have been dwindling every day for the past two weeks, which shows that our membership feels we are increasingly irrelevant.

There was a good debate last night on the CAB. It is very important that we continue to look at the issue of gangland warfare. We should also pay tribute to Deputy Tony Gregory who first came up with the idea of linking social welfare, inland revenue and the police. That was resisted but the suggestion was eventually taken on board by the Government in establishing the CAB.

I was initially very heartened when I heard that this person, Gerard Dundon, was in jail, but I understand — I am prepared to be corrected — that he surrendered himself by turning up in an armour-plated vehicle. He summoned his cohort of supporters with a public address system and marched in triumph to the jail. That kind of vanity must be put down.

I support Senator Hannigan on the water issue. I put down motion 11 on that issue and perhaps the Leader will consider taking it at an early date. It is worrying that one third of our rivers are heavily polluted and that 50% of the ground water is contaminated by animal and human sewage. This is partly because of the policy of once-off housing that was very widely supported by rural Members. That must be examined.

The principal issue is that of cervical cancer and I strongly support Senator Fitzgerald on this. It is extraordinary that we are not prepared to pay a fraction of what we wasted on e-voting machines to save the lives of young women, which that vaccination undoubtedly will accomplish. I salute Deputy Jim McDaid for acting in concert with his Hippocratic oath and abstaining in a division in the other House yesterday. I have every respect for Deputy Rory O'Hanlon who is an amiable, decent man, and I know from reports that he is a good and caring general practitioner. However, I do not believe he can stand in the lists against a Nobel prize-winning scientist on the matter of the human papilloma virus.

11 o'clock

Having heard a senior figure from the Bank of Ireland use the word "optionality" on the news this morning, I am really worried. As one who knows little about economics, I start to worry when I hear people such as this retreat into that type of jargon.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: While I realise the issue I raise was discussed yesterday, the future of the fishing industry is a matter of great importance. This morning, we awoke to learn that the European Commission is calling for the north west fishing grounds to be closed to the whitefish fleet. Will the Deputy Leader ask the Minister to come to the House to discuss this specific issue?

In response to a serious problem with our ageing fleet 12 years ago, the current Administration proceeded with a renewal of the whitefish fleet. Of the 37 new vessels, 16 operate from Greencastle. We have had the Cawley report and decommissioning schemes and the industry endured significant pain in an effort to become competitive and safeguard its future. Despite many fishermen being unable to join the decommissioning scheme, the European Commission is asking them to start paying for their new vessels while refusing to allow them to fish to secure the income they need. This is a serious issue.

An Cathaoirleach: We had a long debate on the fishing industry yesterday.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: The only reason I raise the matter again is that a new and serious issue has arisen. While Killybegs is mentioned most often in connection with the fishing industry in County Donegal, the largest whitefish fleet in Ireland is based in Greencastle, three miles from where I live. In that regard, I declare an interest.

I call for this issue to be revisited before the beginning of December when talks on the fishing industry are due to commence at European Union level. The Commission's proposal is unacceptable and I do not believe it reflects environmental circumstances. Fishermen need to be able to earn a living and pay for their boats. If they are not allowed to remain at sea, we will have to close down the fishing industry.

The second issue I raise is the report on water quality issued by the Environmental Protection Agency. Speaking on the Adjournment several months ago, I asked for funding for the group sewerage scheme to be increased to the same level as funding for the group water scheme.

An Cathaoirleach: As the Senator is due to raise this matter on the Adjournment, it is not useful to raise it on the Order of Business.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: While I appreciate that is in the case, I assume the House will have a more detailed debate on water quality, which is a serious issue for people in Galway and the population in general.

Senator Paul Coughlan: I strongly support the points made by Senators Fitzgerald and O'Toole on the urgent need for the House to be seen to debate current topical issues of

[Senator Paul Coghlan.]

national importance, not only the issue of gangland crime but also the economy. As Senator Norris noted, the House had a useful debate on the Criminal Assets Bureau yesterday. I acknowledge the valiant efforts of Deputy Tony Gregory and the former Ministers for Justice, Ms Nora Owen and Deputy John O'Donoghue, in dealing with this important issue. In that regard, we all wore the same green jersey and a good day's work was done on behalf of the State.

The House urgently needs to get to grips with the important issues of the day. I suggest that the Committee on Procedure and Privileges urgently re-examine the arrangements governing the Order of Business. Subject to the discretion of the Cathaoirleach, the Order of Business should, where necessary, be allowed to run to at least one hour.

One of today's newspapers features a disturbing report on Government finances which indicates that debt levels are spiralling out of control. An eminent economist alleges that gross domestic product will shrink by 2%, if not 3%, next year, whereas the forecast on which the budget was based was that GDP would shrink by only 1%. In such circumstances, borrowing would have to increase to €19 billion next year, €6 billion more than the Government anticipates. In light of this information, does the Deputy Leader anticipate that further corrective action will be taken through short-term financial measures, as appears to be necessary based on the frightening report published today?

Senator Ivor Callely: I concur with colleagues on the importance of having discussion and debate in the Chamber on matters of national importance. I also wholeheartedly support the views expressed on gangland crime. I congratulate the Garda on some of its actions in the past 24 hours and its success in putting one of Limerick's serious criminals behind bars, where I hope he will remain for a long time. I also hope his brother will follow him.

I ask that, rather than trying to score political points, the leaders of the political parties and Independent group agree a procedure to allow regular discussions to take place on matters of national importance. I fear that if the House were to agree to hold a debate on gangland crime or the economy today, a Minister or Minister or State who comes to the House because the relevant Minister is not available will be slagged off, as it were. We cannot expect Ministers to wait for the House to order its business before arranging their diaries for the day. If we are genuine and sincere on this issue, we should ask the leaders to enter into meaningful discussions to try to alter the current arrangements for taking the Order of Business with a view to accommodating a specific period for holding debates agreed by the House.

I have raised two important issues in the past two weeks. I asked the Leader to enter into negotiations and discussions with other party leaders, groups and individual Senators to wear the green jersey and support Irish small and medium size enterprises and buy Irish goods. I will not ask the Deputy Leader to respond as I made the request to the Leader and he should provide a progress report on what action has been taken in this regard. This is an important issue on which the Seanad can set and drive forward the agenda.

The second issue I raised was the availability of bank credit to businesses and households. I am concerned about the impact of the credit squeeze on the economy. While I welcome the recent interest rate reductions, including the cut in the European Central Bank's interest rate, and await with interest the outcome of the Irish banks' efforts to raise money in the international markets in the coming weeks, the issue of fundamental importance is the availability of credit. I ask that the Leader report Senators' comments on this issue to the Minister for Finance.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I support and will, if necessary, second the amendment proposed to the Order of Business by Senator Fitzgerald on the need for a debate on the Government U-turn on the cervical cancer vaccination programme. The impressive and inspiring Nobel prize-winning scientist who spoke on “Morning Ireland” today concluded that the vaccination programme would save lives. This makes clear what the Government’s reversal of policy means for women and young girls. Women, anyone with an interest in public health promotion and all those who have young daughters should be supportive of the need for a reversal of the Government’s reversal and a return to the Minister for Health and Children’s original position of three months ago that the programme would be rolled out next year. A debate is needed.

I am pleased to announce I will speak at a feminist open forum protest at 2 p.m. on Saturday at the spire on O’Connell Street. We ask people to come forward and express their opposition to the Government’s reversal.

An Cathaoirleach: The purpose of the Order of Business is to ask questions of the Leader. Senators should not use the forum of the Seanad to advertise protests of any type. If they choose to do so, I will not call them to speak on the Order of Business.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I accept that and I want to ask the Deputy Leader whether he will support the protest in opposition to the postponement of the roll-out of the vaccination programme.

Will the Deputy Leader clarify something the Leader said in the House on Tuesday in response to my question about the Climate Protection Bill which, as Members know, is before the House? Its resumed debate is extremely topical, particularly in light of the recent shocking report on pollution levels in Ireland by the Environmental Protection Agency. I want to ask the Deputy Leader for clarification as to when precisely in the spring the Leader proposes to resume the debate on this Bill. The Leader said on Tuesday that early in the next session, in the spring, he would have the Bill come back to the House. I want to ask the Deputy Leader to confirm also that Government time will be given to debate the Climate Protection Bill, to resume Second Stage and move it on, because that was what had originally been agreed in October last year when the Bill was first debated before the House. Clearly the need for its debate has become more pressing and urgent in the light of recent reports.

Senator Ann Ormonde: I want to raise the matter of the attitude of the banks and their behaviour at the present time. It is significant that many speakers have said we should be discussing issues that are of major importance at the moment.

Senator Joe O’Toole: Hear, hear. Vote for the amendment.

Senator Ann Ormonde: The action of the banks is one area we must keep on the Seanad agenda. It is absolutely appalling that after being bailed out, they are making no effort to help small and medium businesses get the economy off the ground. The moment they were bailed out, some €25 billion in deposits were paid into the banks.

Listening to the radio this morning, I was very disappointed with the Bank of Ireland, and we should have an ongoing debate in the House in this regard. The public are unaware of what is going on. I found it difficult to understand what the head of the Bank of Ireland was saying this morning in his presentation on radio. The public needs to know exactly the attitude of the banks at the moment. It is only six months since they were throwing money around, so to speak. Mortgages for more than 100% were being handed out, and yet when people seek to extend their overdrafts or term loans, they are being given the thumbs down. I do not like the attitude of the banks at the moment, and this House has a duty to let the public know how we

[Senator Ann Ormonde.]

feel about this. The banks have done very well out of this country over the years. It is time they helped the economy out now. I am laying it on the line that the banks have a very big responsibility and I would like them to honour that.

Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I also want to express my deep concern and disgust at the devastation caused in Limerick with the brutal slaying of a model citizen, young Shane Geoghegan. Speakers on all sides of the House have said we need to exercise relevance in Seanad Éireann. This is one of the biggest concerns among ordinary law abiding people, namely, the future and security of our citizens. What happened this week is having a seriously negative effect on society and on the confidence of our people that they are being protected in their homes. I can recall former Ministers not so long ago talking about zero tolerance. Where is zero tolerance today when we see these people driving around in bullet-proof cars and giving two fingers to the law and the country's authorities? It is a serious matter that we need to be concerned about in the Seanad and should debate urgently, namely, the whole future regarding crime, especially gangland crime, and citizens' safety. It is an area in which Senators should have an interest and I ask the Deputy Leader to provide time soon for a debate on all this.

I have raised on a number of occasions the issue of the national waste management strategy, and I am aware the Deputy Leader, Senator Boyle, has an interest in this area. I see in today's newspapers that Indaver Ireland is again proposing more incinerators for Cork Harbour. Other communities throughout the country are being divided by proposals for incinerators. No clear strategy or co-ordination is being shown by Government in the area of waste management. Last week and the week before we heard about the waste management crisis that is looming because of the lack of markets for recyclable materials. At the same time, *ad hoc* decisions are being taken by both the public and private sectors with proposals for incinerators. If they are all built, I do not know how they will keep going. Will they burn one another? That number of incinerators is unsustainable. Regardless of whether one is for incineration, a clear strategy is needed from the Government on waste management. I call on the Deputy Leader to ask the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to come to the Seanad, inform Members of the strategy and talk to them about the co-ordination of waste management services in this country before it is too late.

Senator Geraldine Feeney: I, too, support the call for a debate on the cervical cancer vaccine. I would like to see a wider debate on the whole cancer area, although I know we have had such debates. If resources were available, the provision of the vaccine programme would be going ahead. I hate to hear provocative language being used on the Opposition side, such as "U-turns". I would much prefer the word "postponement".

Senator Ivana Bacik: What else can it be called?

Senator Geraldine Feeney: It is a postponement; that is all it is.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator should just stop. It is a flip-flop.

Senator Geraldine Feeney: If the Senator listened, she would know it is a postponement.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: It is a U-turn.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is a flip-flop.

Senator Geraldine Feeney: The Government is committed to the treatment and prevention of all cancers, and we have had that debate many times in this House. One only has to look at the appointment of Professor Tom Keane and the extra €55 million that has been allocated in the budget for the centres of excellence. If the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, had money, the provision of the vaccine would be going ahead. At the moment, the way forward is the national screening programme which will cover 1.1 million women in this country. It will cut cancer by 80% and it is owing only to financial restraints that the vaccine is not being introduced at this time.

I was very impressed when I heard the eminent scientist, the Nobel prize winner, this morning on “Morning Ireland”. I listened with interest to what he had to say and was surprised to hear that the duration of the vaccine is five to seven years. Given that it is only two to three years old, I do not believe there is any need to be jumping up and down about it, as it were, at this stage. We are going to spend €35 million on a national screening programme, which will cover 1.1 million women. If that is not an estimation of how the Government is committed to the treatment of cancer, I do not know what is.

Senator Ivana Bacik: On a point of information, if the Minister makes an announcement in August and backs down three months later, is that not a U-turn?

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Bacik has spoken on the Order of Business. The Senator is out of order.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is what I call a flip-flop.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Buttimer, please. I call on Senator Quinn, without interruption.

Senator Feargal Quinn: About three or four weeks ago, in response to a demand for a debate on the economy, finance and banking, the Leader promised that such a debate would take place on a regular basis, at least once a month. I am not sure how long ago that was but it seems to be four or five weeks ago. Today is a typical example of an occasion when we should have such a debate, given all the news that is emerging. Instead, we are debating radon protection measures. While this is important, it is not as important as finance, the economy and banking. We have heard many on both sides of the House speak about that today. I do not understand why something as important as this debate on finance and the economy is being delayed. Those who have spoken today about the use of this House perhaps being diminished because of the Government’s attitude towards it must merit some support for their position.

The crisis is not just in Ireland. I was telling Senator Ross that I read this morning that the British Minister in charge of finance said that had they known the situation was going to be as it is, they would not have bid for the Olympic Games in 2012. The situation has changed so dramatically there, I do not know whether they will back out.

There is a problem for small businesses in particular. With the credit squeeze, there is very definitely a cash flow problem and there are various solutions. It is interesting that Senator Mary White said one the solutions should be to call on the banks to release more cash. Another solution being advanced is that smaller businesses should be allowed to extend the length of time they have to pay, from 30 to 60 days. That will cause problems to their creditors, so it is not as easy as that. However, I mention this because it seems to me that today is a typical day when we might have used our time to concentrate on that motion. I support the amendment tabled by Fine Gael that we should have that other debate as well, because today provides a good opportunity for that.

[Senator Feargal Quinn.]

We referred earlier to gangland crime and a culprit driving into a Limerick Garda station in his bullet-proof vehicle to hand himself up. That was interesting. What stunned me is that there are 32 offences against him and he was still out in the open. Whatever legislation we have that controls and constrains the gardaí from being able to apprehend someone like that and put him in jail rather than have him come in voluntarily is another debate we should have today. We should be debating not just the economy but also gangland crime.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: On Senator Quinn's point, one report today suggests that the person who has been lodged in Limerick Prison handed himself up to the courts office and the gardaí were notified. If this is correct, it suggests that the intensity of the public outrage is having a psychological effect on these people. I very much empathise with the views put forward today that there should be some accommodation to have an urgent discussion, an ongoing debate, on a profound item of this nature.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: There should be an amendment to the Order of Business.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: There have been some very courageous people in Limerick who have gone before the television cameras and spoke their hearts and minds, representing the terrible trauma that exists in Limerick. To do that is courageous because these gangland members are absolutely brutal — there should be no doubt about that. If the debate is diluted or diminished in any way, they will return to their old ways.

I have a feeling from this latest episode that there is a crack coming in the gangland cohesion in Limerick, and that can be a powerful weapon if properly used and fuelled by the Members of these Houses. I agree with Senator Callely that the leaders here should have a meeting to find some mechanism whereby issues of that nature, which are of major national emergency, can be discussed. There is always a danger on the Order of Business when we are working against the clock that good ideas are not developed, and they could be developed with a more elongated debate here. I listened on the Order of Business to some points put forward and they are well worth expanding on and putting forward to Government for consideration.

The Garda Commissioner made it clear that it is exceptionally difficult for the Garda Síochána to handle these cases because of the intimidation of witnesses and people are afraid to come forward. In this atmosphere people have come forward, have come before the camera, and we need to come behind them now, not in a week's time but immediately.

Senator Liam Twomey: On Senator Feeney's point, the reason we use words like "U-turn" is that some Senators on the Government side have admitted they do not understand big words, so we are trying to keep it simple when we are explaining things.

An Cathaoirleach: That is not relevant. The time is up and other Senators want to make points. We are dealing with questions to the Leader. People who move like that will not be called on the Order of Business and I will call the next speaker. Senator Twomey, without interruption.

Senator Liam Twomey: I hope some of the comments made in the House this morning do not receive a wider audience because the idea that we cannot have debates that might become political and upset a sensitive Minister of State is ridiculous, when we see that exactly the same debate is happening today in the Lower House. Let us get real about this. The Leader should ignore those comments. We should have debates in real time and not worry about them getting political. That is the nature of our political system.

At a time when organised crime is growing out of control in Limerick, there are a huge number of distressing crimes being committed across the country. Will the Leader ask the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Dermot Ahern, to come here and present his solutions to what is happening with crime? I was distressed to hear that the Minister and the Garda Commissioner say that they have the resources and the ability to fight serious crime when clearly they do not. We are being made aware they are throwing open the doors of prisons across the country. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform should be brought in here to should explain what is going on.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I add my words to those of previous Senators who referred to the current banking situation and the pressure that is bringing to bear on smaller businesses. I received two phone calls this morning from two small businesses in west Donegal, one in the tourism sector and one in the construction-manufacturing sector. They have been in business for a long number of years and the banks are putting increasing pressure on them regarding overdrafts and other financial incentives that would have been available a short few years ago.

We need to review the current position of the banks. These are the same banks that inflicted huge hardship on many Irish pensioners, who had small savings a few years ago, by giving the names of those pensioners to the Revenue Commissioners. I refer to the so-called offshore accounts where names were signed by bank managers. Individuals did not sign up to these accounts, the bank managers signed up to them on behalf of very vulnerable people. This House should lead by example by having a very serious and constructive debate on where the banks are at present and let us review the position in light of the guarantees given by the Government. With those guarantees there should be a responsibility and the banks should fulfil that responsibility. I call on the Leader to have an emergency debate on banking in this country. Let us review the present position because it appears to be changing by the day. The banks appear to be changing the guidelines and raising the bar, and that is affecting jobs. We must support our indigenous employers. I want to make that point with some force because it is a cause of concern. The two companies I referred to in Donegal are in danger of laying workers off as a result cashflow, and that is determined by the banks.

An Cathaoirleach: Unfortunately, there are a number of Senators who will lose out.

Senator Maurice Cummins: I join my colleagues in calling for relevant debates on topical issues that concern the public. Both sides of the House this morning requested debates on gangland crime, education cuts, which we have asked for on this side of the House for the past five or six weeks, and, as Senator Quinn said, the economy. We were assured by the Leader of the House five or six weeks ago that we would have rolling debates on the economy. The wheels must have fallen off the wagon because we have had no rolling debate. We have had no debate whatsoever on the economy since he announced that.

Were it not for Members of this House using their Private Members' time to deal with topical issues, we would not deal with them. I hope after today the Deputy Leader will tell the Leader that Members on the Government side, with Members on this side, seek debates on relevant issues and we hope to see them on next week's Order of Business.

Senator Dan Boyle: Senators Fitzgerald, O'Toole, Norris, Coghlan, Cummins and Quinn spoke about the quality of Seanad business. There has been a slow response in receiving legislation from the Dáil. The current situation is that there are two Bills before us on Committee Stage, the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2008, which will return next week, and the Harbours (Amendment) Bill 2008, which is ongoing.

[Senator Dan Boyle.]

The Dáil has completed all Stages of the Charities Bill 2007, which will come to this House, and is dealing with Final Stages of the Electoral (Amendment) Bill and the Cluster Munitions and Anti-Personnel Mines Bill 2008, which will come before this House in the next two or three weeks. In addition, we will have the standard legislation that follows the budget, the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2008 and the Finance Bill 2008. With that programme of activity in legislation, Senators will not have much about which to complain until the end of this session. There are at least half a dozen Bills we must parse and analyse and to which we must respond.

The statements with which we have been dealing this week and last arose from requests in the House. One thing that can be said about Standing Orders in this House is that they are more responsive than Standing Orders in the other House. It is not only the tolerance of the Chair that allows Members of this House to raise issues of the day in ways they cannot be raised in other Chambers. Senators make good use of that facility.

A debate has been requested on gangland crime. We had a very good debate yesterday on the annual report of the Criminal Assets Bureau. While it only indirectly involved this area, contributions from the Minister and many Members referred to the general situation, in particular the appalling murder of Shane Geoghegan and the need for a particular response. This was on the record and responded to yesterday. However, I hear what Senators are saying about the need for a more wide-ranging debate and their hope that this can be provided as soon as possible. Their request for immediacy has been heard and, hopefully, this debate can be accommodated next week.

The other issue in terms of the Business of the Seanad — it helps that many Members have expressed their dissatisfaction in this regard — is the need for the House to make clear to those organising the Government's business the requirement to initiate more legislation in the House. We initiated some Bills in the most recent session, but there is a capacity to initiate far more. The message from today's proceedings will be made known to relevant Ministers to ensure such Bills come before the House.

With regard to the call for a debate on the cervical cancer vaccine programme, the debate during Private Members' Time in the other House was a last-minute change from the motion on agriculture debated in this House. I am unsure why the Opposition party in the Dáil decided to have a debate on cervical cancer in that House, but did not choose to do so here. The last-minute change was the facility whereby the Dáil discussed the issue yesterday. If the issue were to be discussed here, that was a missed opportunity.

Senator Maurice Cummins: The point is the Government is leaving it to the Members of the House.

An Cathaoirleach: The Deputy Leader, without interruption.

Senator Dan Boyle: The previous decision on the cervical vaccine was made in August. Members are aware that since then the returns for August and September, in the run-up to the budget of 14 October, showed deteriorating public finances. On that account, one of the first decisions in trying to get a level of control on public finances is not to proceed with additional expenditure that had not happened in the previous financial year.

Senator Maurice Cummins: It was only announced in August.

Senator Dan Boyle: It was a difficult decision to make, but in terms of financial control, it was one of the easier and more necessary decisions to make. It would be ideal if a vaccination could be put in place——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Government is not putting the people first.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Put a cent on a litre of petrol.

Senator Dan Boyle: The main measure towards controlling cervical cancer here, reducing its incidence and dealing with its occurrence is the screening programme. The Government is spending €35 million on that.

Senator Maurice Cummins: That is being short-sighted. It is not a case of either-or.

An Cathaoirleach: Members should respect the Deputy Leader and allow him reply to the questions raised.

Senator Dan Boyle: In the sense of some of the contributions, one would think it was a case of either-or.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: That is the impression one gets from the Government side, not this side.

An Cathaoirleach: The Deputy Leader, without interruption please.

Senator Dan Boyle: The situation is as it is with regard to the matter. I am sure opportunities will be taken and if there is a need for a particular debate, we will address that with the Minister.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Does Senator Boyle support the measure?

Senator Dan Boyle: I would prefer if it did not happen, but I understand the circumstances in which it is happening.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Does the Senator accept it is a u-turn?

An Cathaoirleach: No interruptions please. Anybody who is going to interrupt the Deputy Leader should leave the Chamber.

Senator Liam Twomey: What does that mean?

Senator Dan Boyle: Senators Hannigan, Norris, Ormonde and Ó Domhnaill raised the issue of the banks, in particular, their effect on small businesses. Today, a spokesperson for one of the two largest banks — a second of such banks — said he does not see an immediate need for recapitalisation in terms of its profitability. We heard such comments before the introduction of the guarantee scheme and we are in a fluid situation. However, that a bank can declare profits of such a level indicates there is some buoyancy in the financial sector. There is a need to use this in a responsible way.

There is no doubt, as Senator Mary White said, that the engine of economic recovery and growth will be small businesses. We know too that in order to restart economic activity here, financial institutions must lend more. The traditional and dangerous way they have lent to date has been to concentrate most of their lending on property. The most effective way they can lend is to lend to small and start-up businesses and regenerate economic activity that way. The role of the Government in encouraging that is partly through the guarantee scheme and partly through the appointment of two people to the board of each financial institution, through the legislation that has been passed in the Houses. I am confident those measures will be taken and that the criticisms that are being voiced by all the political parties here, which are shared by the public in general, will be acted upon.

[Senator Dan Boyle.]

Senators Hannigan and Bacik mentioned the EPA report on water quality. The Government is all too aware of the situation with regard to water quality. This is one of the few areas in the budget of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government that received a significant increase in a climate of budget reductions. The budget for water services increased by 19% in this year's Estimates. This is a serious statement of intent and acknowledgment that there are difficulties and that we have a significant amount of catch-up to do so that we have public confidence in our drinking water and our water system. I am confident the additional resources will be put to good use.

Senator Regan raised the question of the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority. I understand — we must wait to see how effective this is — that most of the savings are as a result of a shared secretariat between the two. I share the concerns of many that having a shared secretariat in two different locations will be difficult to implement. If the rest of the decentralisation programme has been put in cold storage, this area should be also examined.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Dan Boyle: If the Government is to effect savings in this area and ensure both bodies can operate properly, they must be located near each other if they are to share such secretariat facilities. It should be put to the Minister to consider whether that is possible and whether it would effect other savings at the same time.

Senator Keaveney raised the question of the white fish fleet restrictions in the north west. We had a debate on fishing yesterday. The Senator made the point that this was a European Commission proposal that arose subsequent to our debate. Her concern will be passed on to the Ministers.

Senator Coghlan raised the issue of increasing debt levels and the possible need for corrective actions. The Government is not shy of corrective actions, as we have seen already this year. We had a series of Estimate adjustments prior to the introduction of the budget in October. If the global economic situation deteriorates further and if the assessment of what the retraction in growth is likely to be demands it, corrective measures will have to be taken. It is a responsible role of Government to do that. However, the Government's figures are that the economy will retract by 1.5% in 2008 and by a further 0.75% in 2009. As of now, the figures seem to be on track, with the hope for a recovery in the economy by 2010.

Senator Bacik asked about the climate protection Bill, which is due to be taken in the next session. That is predicated on the effect of the early negotiations towards a replacement for the Kyoto protocol, which will take place in the first instance in Poznan in Poland early in the year and will be followed by a subsequent meeting in Copenhagen. Once we have a clearer idea of what is happening internationally, it is our intention to return to the Bill. The promise to use Government time will be met in the context of the Minister reserving to himself the right to introduce a Bill if he feels he can do so.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Can we be given a time?

An Cathaoirleach: Allow the Deputy Leader to continue without interruption.

Senator Dan Boyle: If we are considering the spring, it will be between February and May.

Senator Joe O'Toole: That is the old fashioned spring.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It is a different idea of spring from the one I had in mind, which starts in January.

An Cathaoirleach: The Deputy Leader should reply to the Order of Business without interruption.

Senator Dan Boyle: Senator Coffey asked about the waste management strategy. I share many of his reservations and, on a personal note, I have always felt some discomfort regarding the carbon footprint caused by sending recycled material as far afield as China. If recycling requires the existence of markets, dealing with waste under the proximity principle means that recycled materials should be used close to where they were collected. Value can be added by expanding the country's recycling industry and the waste management strategy is predicated on that.

The Minister has already stated that if we introduce incineration, which the Green Party opposes, the capacity will be no greater than 200,000 tonnes.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Projects are being proceeded with all over the country as we speak.

Senator Dan Boyle: I am responding to Senator Coffey's question.

Senator Paudie Coffey: You are not.

Senator Dan Boyle: If you let me finish, I will.

An Cathaoirleach: Allow the Deputy Leader to respond.

Senator Dan Boyle: The capacity for incineration in this country is 200,000 tonnes, which is no more than two average sized incinerators. The Senator is correct in noting that proposals have been made for upwards of a dozen incinerators but these cannot be viable because the waste for them does not exist. The only way to make them viable is to create more waste, which is not sustainable, or import waste from other countries, which we want to avoid. This is why the Government is dedicated to using other forms of waste management, such as mechanical and biological treatment, and a strategy based on international best practice will be published early next year.

Senator Paudie Coffey: It is too late.

Senator Dan Boyle: I think I have responded to all the issues raised by Senators. If I have missed any points, I apologise and will endeavour to respond to the Senator concerned on a personal basis on the conclusion of the Order of Business.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Fitzgerald has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That statements on the withdrawal of the cervical vaccine scheme be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Yes.

Amendment put.

The Seanad divided: Tá, 15; Níl, 23.

Tá

Bacik, Ivana.
Bradford, Paul.
Buttimer, Jerry.
Coffey, Paudie.
Coghlan, Paul.
Cummins, Maurice.
Fitzgerald, Frances.
Hannigan, Dominic.

Norris, David.
O'Toole, Joe.
Quinn, Fergal.
Regan, Eugene.
Ross, Shane.
Ryan, Brendan.
Twomey, Liam.

Nil

Boyle, Dan.
 Brady, Martin.
 Butler, Larry.
 Callely, Ivor.
 Corrigan, Maria.
 Daly, Mark.
 de Búrca, Déirdre.
 Ellis, John.
 Feeney, Geraldine.
 Glynn, Camillus.
 Hanafin, John.
 Keaveney, Cecilia.

Leyden, Terry.
 MacSharry, Marc.
 Ó Domhnaill, Brian.
 Ó Murchú, Labhrás.
 O'Donovan, Denis.
 O'Malley, Fiona.
 O'Sullivan, Ned.
 Ormonde, Ann.
 Walsh, Jim.
 White, Mary M.
 Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Jerry Buttimer and Maurice Cummins; Níl, Senators Déirdre de Búrca and Diarmuid Wilson.

Amendment declared lost.

Order of Business agreed to.

Radon Protection Measures: Statements.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael P. Kitt): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the current situation with respect to radon. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Members of Seanad Éireann as I highly value the role and expertise of this House in policy development. It is timely, too, to hear Members' opinions, given the publication earlier this year of the latest data on radiation exposure by the Irish public. Last week Ireland's sixth national radon forum brought together representatives from a wide variety of agencies with a mutual interest in radon. It is always important to view our existing policy in the context of the most recent scientific data available and to take into account the views of other key stakeholders.

In July 2008 the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, RPII, published the results of a landmark study, *Radiation Doses Received by the Irish Population*. This report summarised the findings of a three-year baseline study and collection of relevant data on the exposure of the Irish population to ionising radiation. This study brought together data on exposures from natural sources, such as radon as well as artificial sources such as medical exposures and discharges from nuclear power stations abroad. Inclusion of all such exposure pathways make this study the most comprehensive assessment of radiation exposure ever undertaken in this country.

The report found that natural radiation sources account for almost 86% of all radiation exposure received by the Irish population. Radon alone accounts for 56% of total exposure. By comparison artificial radiation sources, such as overseas nuclear energy facilities, account for a mere 0.4% of the total radiation dosage we receive. The report concluded that, in terms of reducing our exposure to radiation, radon is the area where the greatest impact is possible.

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas found in variable amounts in rocks and soil. When it surfaces in the open air, it is quickly diluted. However, where it enters an enclosed space, such as an ordinary building, it can, under certain circumstances accumulate to reach unacceptably high concentration levels. Ireland's unique geology, while providing us with a beautiful and rich landscape, gives rise to radon levels that are above the international average. Ireland has the sixth highest radon levels in the world. The average indoor radon concentration

in Ireland, is 89 Becquerels per cubic metre, Bq/m³, compared to just 20 Bq/m³ in the UK and a European average of 59 Bq/m³.

Radon is a known carcinogen. Long-term exposure to high radon levels presents a direct risk to human health. This makes radon a public health issue. Naturally occurring radon gas concentrations have been found to contribute to the incidence of lung cancer. The RPII estimates that 150-200 annual lung cancer deaths in Ireland are linked to radon, around 10% to 15% of all such deaths. Epidemiological studies tells us that for smokers, or former smokers, the risk from radon can be up to 25 times greater than for people who never smoked.

Everybody needs to be aware of the risks from radon and of the potential health consequences if they are exposed to high radon concentrations. This is especially true in those areas designated as high radon areas where the risk of such exposure is greater. In particular, the RPII concerns itself with hazards to health associated with ionising radiation and with radioactive contamination in the environment from natural and artificial sources.

The national survey of radon in Irish dwellings was conducted by the RPII between 1992 and 1999. This survey quantified comprehensively the likely scale of the radon problem in Irish dwellings and identified those parts of the country where high indoor radon levels are more likely to be found. Approximately 28% of the country is designated as a high radon area, where more than 10% of households are predicted to have radon concentrations above the national reference level of 200 Bq/m³. This is the threshold defined by the RPII above which it is recommended that remediation works are carried out. High radon areas are found in almost every county but are mainly concentrated in the south east and the west. From the results of the national radon survey it was estimated that approximately 7% of our total housing stock has radon levels above the national reference level.

The RPII recommends that every householder has his or her home tested for radon. The RPII as well as a number of private companies offer a radon measurement service to householders. The cost of this service varies from €40 to €90. Radon measurement is non-intrusive, involving the placing of two small, palm-sized radon detectors in the home, and it takes three months to complete.

Part C of the Building Regulations 1997, Site Preparation and Moisture Resistance, require all new buildings, including new houses, constructed on or after 1 July 1998 to incorporate radon protection measures at the time of construction. The measures are as follows, for high radon areas, the installation of a radon proof membrane and stand-by radon sump in the foundations and for other areas, the installation of a stand-by radon sump only. It is recognised internationally that a radon barrier will not always be effective in preventing radon concentrations in new buildings above the national reference level. That is why new dwellings in high radon areas must also be fitted with a stand-by sump. Those radon prevention measures were in advance of building code requirements in many EU member states.

In October 2004, my Department published enhanced technical guidance on radon prevention in new buildings commencing construction on or after 1 April 2005 aimed at strengthening the 1997 provisions. This enhanced guidance strongly recommends that the householder measures radon soon after occupying the house. Such a measurement is the best way of ensuring that the required preventative measures are working correctly. Since 1998 more than half a million new homes have been constructed. It is most encouraging that these homes have radon protective measures in place from the outset.

Since May 2000, exposure to natural radiation sources in the workplace has been governed by the Radiological Protection Act 1991 (Ionising Radiation) Order 2000. This order sets a national reference level for radon gas in the workplace of 400 Bq/m³. In accordance with the

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order, an employer or self-employed person is required to measure radon levels in his or her workplace on being directed to do so by the RPII. To assess the risk from radon, the Health and Safety Authority has stated that all indoor workplaces in high radon areas must have radon measurements carried out.

In 1998 the Department of Education and Science commissioned the RPII to conduct a survey of radon levels in all primary and post-primary schools. In addition, in June 2001 a circular issued to all boards of management informing them of the Department's initiative and advising schools on the course of action necessary for radon mitigation. Schools with levels above 400 Bq/m³ were advised to secure the services of a suitably qualified consultant architect-engineer to carry out all necessary remedial works which are fully funded by the Department of Education and Science. Radon barriers are included in the design of all new school building projects. It was also recommended that a copy of the results be filed in each school's health and safety manual for future reference.

In 2004 the State Claims Agency, SCA, wrote to each Department to request that they undertake radon measurements in their premises. Up to 1 March 2006 measurements were made in 241 premises throughout the country. That is the majority of the workplaces measured on foot of the recommendation made by the SCA. Remediation measures have been undertaken where appropriate.

Proven, effective remediation techniques exist to reduce indoor radon concentrations at reasonable cost. The most common remediation techniques include under-floor ventilation, positive pressurisation, increased indoor ventilation and the sealing of cracks and gaps in the floor and around service entry points. The RPII can provide advice to householders and employers on the need for radon remediation and can give information on commonly used radon remediation techniques. There is nothing complex about these techniques and the majority involve relatively simple building work.

The scheme of housing aid for older people is already available to assist older people, generally over 60 years of age, to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out to their homes. Where a suite of works is being grant-aided under this scheme, local authorities may also, as part of the package of works, assist with the provision of radon remediation works, where applicable.

Last week, on Thursday, 6 November, I had the privilege of opening Ireland's Sixth National Radon Forum in the Royal College of Physicians. The theme of the forum was "How agencies can work together to assess, communicate and fix radon problems." The aim of the forum, in addition to raising public awareness, was to provide the opportunity for those with an interest in radon to meet and discuss issues of mutual interest. These included radon measurement companies, remediation companies, researchers, legislators, representatives of national agencies with responsibility for building standards, health and safety experts and the public. The centre-piece of the forum was a case study presentation by speakers from the RPII, Cork County Council and the Health Service Executive based upon a successful exercise earlier this year in north Cork. These three separate agencies came together to identify homes at risk from radon in north Cork and to take corrective action.

In September 2007 an office in the premises of *The Corkman* newspaper was found to have the second highest level of radon gas ever found in Ireland and the highest ever found in a workplace. The level detected was over 60 times higher than the acceptable limit and it is estimated that working eight hours a day in the office would be equivalent to receiving 39 chest X-rays per day or nearly 10,000 chest X-rays in a working year. In this case, the office in question was largely unoccupied and, on that basis, the employees would not have received

such high radiation doses. On being told by the RPII of the high levels present in the office, the employer took immediate action to fix the problem.

The RPII subsequently organised a meeting of relevant organisations, including my Department, the HSE and Cork County Council, to discuss this incident and to explore the possibility of having a defined response to such incidents in the future. At this meeting Cork County Council announced its intention of measuring local authority homes around north Cork for radon. Subsequent meetings were held between the RPII, the HSE and Cork County Council which came together to share information and to assess and communicate radon risks to tenants. This co-operation was vital in reassuring those affected and in ensuring that all relevant information was made available to tenants.

The 600 homes identified as being most at risk from radon, located mostly around Mallow and Fermoy, have been tested. Remediation works have been completed in the 26 homes worst affected where radon levels exceed 800 Bq/m³. Additional remediation works are ongoing in remaining homes that were found to have radon levels above the national reference level.

The issue of high radon concentrations in local authority houses continues to be a matter of concern for my Department and a working group involving officials from my Department, local authorities and the RPII has recently been set up to provide clear guidance for local authorities on addressing this issue. It should be noted that a number of authorities are already taking action in this regard and it is our intention to build on their, and the RPII's, experience in this area. I understand that the group intends to finalise the guidance in the coming months.

The World Health Organisation reports that radon is linked to up to 170,000 lung cancer cases in the world each year. In 2005 the WHO established the international radon project, the aim of which is to identify effective strategies for reducing the health impact of radon. This project comprised a network of key partner agencies brought together by the WHO in 40 member states to examine the public health aspects of radon exposure. This project enjoys high priority within the WHO's Department of Public Health and Environment and is part-funded by the Irish Government. The international radon project raises awareness among the public, as well as among politicians, of the hazards of radon and promotes the development of co-ordinated programmes at national level to reduce the health impact from exposure to radon in WHO member states. Ireland plays a leading role in the international radon project, contributing both important scientific and practical input.

Dr. Ferid Shannoun, co-ordinator of the international radon project, addressed Ireland's national radon forum last week and endorsed the multi-agency approach to radon being adopted by Ireland. The WHO is expected to publish its international radon handbook in early 2009. This important publication, the culmination of many years' work and international co-operation, will provide guidelines for future radon remediation efforts in WHO member states. I am proud of the constructive contribution Ireland has made in its development.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government plays a key role, and will continue to play a key role, in implementing national policy on radon, not only as the parent Department of the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland but also through its role in drafting building regulations and providing technical guidance on radon remediation solutions. Reducing radon health effects requires long-term commitment at local, national and global level. This can best be achieved by concentrating resources through an inter-agency approach and my Department will continue to work with other key stakeholders in this regard.

It is worth reiterating the key conclusion of the report, Radiation Doses Received by the Irish Population. In reducing our exposure to radiation, radon is the area where the greatest impact is possible. I look forward to hearing the contributions of individual Senators and,

[Deputy Michael P. Kitt.]

once again, I thank you, a Chathaoirleach, for the opportunity of addressing the House on this important subject.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the Minister of State to the House to debate this important item. We need to prioritise it at every level, not only at Parliament, but also in every agency with a role in raising the public awareness of the challenges posed by radon gas. Last week I attended the forum hosted by the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland at the Royal College of Physicians. It was very informative and helped to improve public awareness and the response by agencies in areas where high levels of radon are identified. It is well known at this stage that Ireland has one of the highest levels of radon gas in the world, which is of concern. Higher levels have been identified in specific areas. The Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland has done considerable groundwork in this regard. Its website contains very helpful maps of areas suspected to have high levels of radon.

The World Health Organisation acknowledges that radon gas is essentially a public health issue. The Health Service Executive also acknowledges this fact. People who smoke are 25% more likely to get lung cancer if exposed to radon gas, which presents a serious challenge that needs to be addressed.

I understand that the first reference level was set in 1990 at 200 Bq/m³, becquerels per cubic metre, for households. That was set before a household survey was carried out. Is that reference level adequate? Has it been scientifically proven that 200 Bq/m³ is the correct maximum level of radon to protect people's health and welfare?

While I mentioned the maps on the RPII website, they are not very detailed. They give large squares of coloured areas where it is suspected radon levels are high. With the modern measurement techniques that are available it is the responsibility of the institute to provide more accurate information to us. It might just be the first point of contact and give people an initial level of measurement. I know measurements are now being taken on a daily basis in many areas. These should be made available to the public so that people are aware of areas with high radon levels in their locality. The maps on the website indicate that east County Waterford, where I live, has very high levels of radon. Where tests were carried out by the local authority and by individuals, the levels were found not to be quite as high as indicated on the map. While I accept it may be hard to pin it down very accurately, we need to work in that regard. If we are to have adequate responses in areas where high radon levels are identified, it is essential to have very accurate and efficient databases showing those high levels. If we are to respond in an adequate fashion and put the resources where they are needed in a focused and specific way, we need factual evidence of high radon levels rather than the broad-brush indications on the maps before me.

It is quite simple to measure levels of radon, requiring the placement of a pocket-sized module. Over a period of three months it measures the radon gas levels. The Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland recommends that households should be tested. However, there is no obligation and it is left up to private individuals' awareness of the issue. The public need to be educated. I know some efforts have been made, about which I will talk later. However, there is not a great awareness of the dangers of radon gas. If people were aware, they would certainly take more notice.

Some people will recall the scares of the 1960s and 1970s regarding the problem of asbestos. It was used regularly in schools and other buildings here and in other countries. We eventually realised the dangers of asbestos and how it can contribute to lung cancer. Along with smoking it is one of the highest contributory causes of lung cancer. Radon should be put in that category if we want people to engage with the issue and be aware of it. After smoking, radon is one of

the highest contributory causes of lung cancer. We do not hear as much talk about asbestos as we heard in the past 20 or 30 years. However, radon should be considered as the new challenge regarding lung cancer. If it achieves that kind of prominence, people will engage with it, as will authorities.

The reference level is set at 200 Bq/m³ for households and 400 Bq/m³ for workplaces. I am not a scientist and am unsure of the reason for the differential. I presume it is expected that an average person would spend twice as much time in the home as in the workplace. However, that may not be an accurate reflection of how people live and work nowadays. There are long shifts and workplaces that are constantly open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This matter needs to be reviewed to ensure we are using the appropriate reference levels. I would like the Minister of State to respond to that matter.

Employers have legal obligations to test their premises for radon, which is acknowledged in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act. The Minister of State mentioned that schools are also obliged to test. In referring to schools and other public buildings he stated:

Up to 1 March 2006 measurements were made in 241 premises throughout the country. That is the majority of the workplaces measured on foot of the recommendation made by the SCA.

I wonder whether a majority is acceptable. I would have thought that all public buildings and schools would need to be tested. That was in 2006 and we are now in 2008. If testing has not been carried out in public buildings and schools, it is essential for the Department to issue directions that all obligations for testing under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act be complied with. It is not sufficient to test only the majority. If people are being exposed in those circumstances, they have as much of a right as everybody else to be protected. That should be considered and the position should be improved.

I spoke briefly about public awareness earlier and the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland has played a major role in trying to raise awareness in this country. I commend its efforts as it has made contact with people through various agencies to raise public awareness, which is very important. I query the role of local authorities in the public awareness campaign, although at the radon forum last week a good example was given regarding a collaboration in north Cork. The Minister of State mentioned this in his speech. In Mallow, Fermoy and other places in the area, the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, the HSE, the elected members of the local authority and the public worked in collaboration to raise awareness and define a systematic response to how they would address the radon levels identified.

Unfortunately, that is only one local authority area and many others around the country have no defined response mechanisms. I spoke to some senior officials in a number of local authorities when researching the matter. I asked them the role of the local authority in dealing with radon gas and I got a blunt but disappointing answer. They told me it has no role other than to ensure building regulations are complied with and the local authority housing stock has been tested and is being monitored for radon. There is significant potential for the local authority to play a much better role as it is a local government agency at the coalface.

I also asked if somebody rang a local authority inquiring about radon protection measures, would there be a contact to deal with such a request. There is not, although such a person would be referred to the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland. Any elected Member, councillor or member of the public will call to a council office first if he or she has a concern or a query. Some system or resource must be put into local authorities so they can have a mechanism to respond to queries raised by the public. It is essential and the process should not be left in an *ad hoc* fashion, for local authorities to prioritise as they see fit. A guideline

[Senator Paudie Coffey.]

should be issued from the Department giving radon protection measures a high priority and the local authorities a role, either through guidelines or a statutory function. Something must be done to ensure there is prioritisation of radon protection measures in local authorities other than building regulations.

I am aware that since 1998, radon barriers are obligatory in new buildings. I question the quality of those radon barriers, although I know certificates are meant to be submitted to local authorities indicating the barriers are in compliance with regulations. I wonder how many are inspected. I suspect very few are. I also suspect very few radon barriers are up to the required standard. Even after radon barriers are installed, there is no requirement to test for radon in a particular household afterwards to determine the efficiency of those radon barriers. Action could be taken, even if it is only one test a year after a radon barrier was installed in a newly-built house. That would ensure the barrier is doing the job it is meant to do.

I could continue forever speaking about remedial and preventative measures. The problems from radon gas are easy to remedy so there is hope where high levels are identified. There are techniques, either through circulation of airflow or sumps and pumps in sub-floors, which can address the problem where high levels of the gas are identified.

I welcome the debate. We all have a role to play in raising public awareness of the threats of radon and the damage it can do to our health. The Government should, through guidelines, bring all the agencies under its umbrella and that of the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland and perhaps use the example of Mallow and north Cork as a case study of a best practice model for other local authorities. That would bring about a responsive system to high levels of radon.

It is essential that such a system is put in place and continued resources and grant aid remains for areas where high levels of radon are identified. It is not good enough to put the same resources into every local authority. We should focus on the areas where high levels are clearly identified on the database and they should get the resources to respond adequately.

Senator Camillus Glynn: Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an t-Aire Stáit atá sa Teach. We rightly hear much talk about health and safety at work but when we speak about radon gas, health and safety within the home should certainly come centre stage. A free local paper in Mullingar and Westmeath in general, the *Westmeath Advertiser*, indicated Westmeath has very high levels of radon, which is something about which to be concerned.

The Minister of State gave a very comprehensive report on the position pertaining to radon levels. If I touch on what he said, it is merely to emphasise the importance of the issue. Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that originates from the decay of uranium in rocks and soils. It is colourless, odourless and tasteless and can only be measured using special equipment. That makes radon a silent killer.

When radon surfaces in the open air, it is quickly diluted to harmless concentrations but when it enters an enclosed space, such as a house or other building, it can sometimes accumulate to unacceptably high concentrations. Radon decays to form tiny radioactive particles, some of which remain suspended in the air. When inhaled into the lungs these particles give a radiation dose that may damage cells in the lung and eventually lead to lung cancer. I will touch on that issue later.

On the basis of a nationwide survey of radon in domestic dwellings, the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, RPII, has estimated there are 91,000 houses in Ireland with radon concentrations in excess of 200 Bq/m³. This is the reference level above which the Government recommends that householders should consider carrying out remediation measures. Since July

1998, all new dwellings and long-stay buildings are required to incorporate some degree of radon preventative measures at the time of construction in accordance with the revised building regulations. The degree of protection required is dependent upon whether the site is located within a high or low radon area. The RPII, as well as a number of private contractors, provides radon measurement services for homes.

Workplaces have a reference level of 400 Bq/m³ and where they exceed this, employers must evaluate whether remedial action to reduce the radon concentration is justified. The question arises of how many workplace managers and proprietors test for radon; I suggest very few do so. I ask the Minister of State to focus on that issue. It is incumbent on all of us who are householders, either owners or lodgers, to ensure the environment we live in has safe levels of radon. A failure by those managers or proprietors to comply with a direction to take remedial action is an offence and can lead to prosecution, which is correct.

The RPII is the national organisation with regulatory, monitoring and advisory responsibilities in matters pertaining to ionising radiation. In particular the RPII concerns itself with hazards to health associated with ionising radiation and with radioactive contamination in the environment. The RPII was established in 1992 under the Radiological Protection Act 1991. The 12 members of the board are appointed by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, six of them having been nominated by organisations with interests in various aspects of the RPII's work. It cannot be said this was just jobs for the boys as people with expertise are there, coming from a background as outlined earlier in my statement.

The RPII is financed by grant-aid from the Exchequer and by income from dosimetry, product certification and other services, licence charges and research and consultancy contracts. The RPII's principal objectives are to provide advice to the Government, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and other Ministers on matters relating to radiological safety; to provide information to the public on any matters relating to radiological safety which the institute deems fit; to maintain and develop a national laboratory for the measurement of levels of radioactivity in the environment and to assess the significance of these levels for the Irish population; to provide a personnel dosimetry and instrument calibration service for those who work with ionising radiation; to regulate by licence the custody, use, manufacture, importation, transportation, distribution, exportation and disposal of radioactive substances, irradiating apparatus and other sources of ionising radiation; to assist in the development of national plans for emergencies arising from nuclear accidents and to act in support of such plans; to provide a radioactivity measurement and certification service; to prepare codes and regulations for the safe use of ionising radiation; to carry out or promote research in relevant fields; to monitor developments abroad relating to nuclear installations and radiological safety generally, and to keep the Government informed of their implications for Ireland; to co-operate with the relevant authorities in other states and with appropriate international organisations; to represent the State on international bodies; and to be the competent authority under international conventions on nuclear matters.

I hope those objectives are being realised because of their importance to public health. I worked with the director of public health in the Health Service Executive in the then Midland Health Board. He was an excellent fellow. I exhort the department of public health in the HSE and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to ensure the responsibilities of the organisations to which I referred are being carried out diligently and effectively because of their importance to public health.

Radon decays to form tiny radioactive particles, some of which remain suspended in the air. When inhaled into the lungs those particles give a radiation dose, which may damage cells in the lung and eventually lead to lung cancer. Radon levels are measured in the manner outlined

[Senator Camillus Glynn.]

in the Minister of State's speech. The reference level for long-term exposure to radon in a house, above which the need for remedial action should be considered, is 200 Bq/m³. That is determined in accordance with the RPII's standard protocol.

Since 1998, every new house is required to incorporate some degree of radon preventive measures at the time of construction in accordance with the revised building regulations. The degree of protection required is dependent upon whether the site is located within a high radon area. It is important to bring to centre stage the importance of radon levels. I would like it to go out from this House today through our friends in the media that all householders should have their homes tested and that employers should test their premises for radon levels. That is imperative.

There is a range of radon concentrations over which some common remediation techniques are likely to be effective. It can be seen that at radon concentrations of 300 Bq/m³, any type of remediation is likely to be effective in reducing radon concentrations to below the reference level. Addressing the problem does not have to cost an arm and a leg, as taking even basic measures can significantly reduce the level of radon. For radon concentrations greater than 1,000 Bq/m³, installation of an active sump is always the preferred remediation option.

Some householders opt to undertake radon remediation on a phased basis. That means the simplest, least expensive solution which offers reasonable potential for achieving the desired reduction is undertaken first. Following that, the house is retested and if the radon concentrations have not been lowered sufficiently, then other measures are installed progressively until the required radon reduction is achieved. Alternatively, more extensive and therefore more expensive radon remediation measures may be undertaken to begin with to ensure the radon concentrations will be reduced sufficiently on the first attempt.

The Minister referred to a high concentration of radon gas in an office premises that was little used. However, as everybody knows, that situation can change at short notice. The radon levels in that location were equivalent to having a four figure sum of X-rays in any one year. Such a situation gives rise to a high degree of concern. Radon is invisible and odourless, which makes it a silent killer. This debate is very important. We all have a responsibility for our own health and as a consequence, it is incumbent on us, as legislators, to ensure effective legislation is enacted, followed by regulation and enforcement to ensure homes and workplaces are radon free and safe.

Senator Feargal Quinn: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Haughey. He knows where I live, which is not far from his constituency. I did not know anything about radon, until some years ago when a new apartment block, which was built on the road not far from where I lived at the time had to be evacuated because of a radon scare. People were out of their homes for at least two years. I agree entirely with what I heard of the Minister of State's speech and what was said by Senator Glynn. There is a responsibility on all of us to ensure we protect our own health. I hope the purpose of today's debate will be to spread the message much wider because many people are unaware of the dangers of radon gas.

Radon, which can cause lung cancer, is a colourless, odourless, tasteless gas, and occurs naturally from the decay of radioactive uranium in rocks and soils. What happened in the case to which I referred is that a dump had been located on the site previously and whatever was in it caused the problem with high radon emissions. At least 100,000 Irish homes have unacceptably high levels of radon. Radon occurs naturally in the ground in many parts of Ireland and frequently gets trapped in buildings. The Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, RPII, warned last year that certain areas in Cork were worst affected. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Kitt, referred to that point. Radon is the second biggest cause of lung cancer in Ireland

and causes up to 200 deaths per year. Irish people are still being exposed to levels of radiation that are 40% higher than the world average. I was unaware of that information, which is based on research carried out by the RPII and published in July 2008.

We have a big problem with radon in this country. Irish people are exposed to levels of radiation that are 40% higher than the world average. That is equivalent to an average of 200 chest X-rays per year. Recently, a family living in a house in County Waterford was found to be receiving radiation doses equivalent to 33 chest X-rays per day because of radon levels at their home. When one has a chest X-ray everybody who works there has to leave the room for the duration of the X-ray because of the dangers of repeated exposure. It is difficult to imagine a family receiving radiation does equivalent to 33 chest X-rays per day in their home.

Radon effects can sometimes be relieved by something as simple as improving ventilation in the house or by installing a wall or window vent. However, the RPII says that if radon levels are very high, the commonest measure is to have a radon sump installed beneath the property to divert the gas away from the building. The cost of installing a radon sump is approximately €1,500. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has confirmed that the Government has no specific budget to combat radon gas emissions and no specific grants scheme is available to private householders to retrofit radon barriers to existing homes, although in certain circumstances the work could be covered by the housing aid for the elderly grant scheme. Why is that the case and is there any intention to change the situation?

In light of the effect of the radon gas problem, that is, 200 deaths per year, the Government should provide a grant or tax relief to assist people in installing what is clearly a preventative mechanism, although not a cure. A test kit is available to monitor radon levels in homes and workplaces in hotspots. The kits are available from the RPII but there are no grants available to the private householder for their purchase. A grant for the purchase of radon monitors should be partly funded by the Government. Although the Government has other high priorities in respect of spending at present, will the Minister of State give some attention to this? We must use the media to promote recognition of the problem and then find a way to encourage people to do something about it.

While the Department of Education and Science is addressing the problem of radon in schools, we must redouble our efforts to ensure all buildings are checked for radon. In particular we need to do more to keep it out of homes and, as stated by other Senators, out of offices. Radon testing should be carried out during the house sale process and should be part of the procedure of buying a new house. We really must address the problem, which is the second biggest cause of lung cancer in the country. It causes 200 deaths per year.

Of the 600 homes surveyed by the RPII in Mallow last year, one in four had radon levels of radon equivalent to the level of radiation delivered by 12 to 15 X-rays per day. The World Health Organisation has called for a multi-agency approach involving the HSE, local authorities and the RPII in areas with a known radon gas emission problem. The successful scheme in Mallow in Cork involved these authorities working together to tackle the problem. The problem in Mallow involved the detection of radon by the RPII, a risk assessment by the RPII and the health services and corrective measures on the part of Cork County Council in property owned by the council itself. Private householders were given advice on the best course of action.

In conjunction with offering a grant for radon detectors, the Government should use the programme to relieve the effects of radon gas in Mallow as a model for the rest of the country. In this way, I hope we can prevent the many needless deaths caused by this secret and not well-known killer. The vast majority of citizens are not aware of radon gas and most of us have not done anything to protect ourselves. Government initiative is required and it will involve publicity. This debate will help in this regard. However, it is not just a question of publicity

[Senator Feargal Quinn.]

but of the Government telling citizens they can do something about the problem with the encouragement and financial assistance of the State. In this way, we will save lives.

Senator Paul Bradford: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, to the House. I am glad of the opportunity to say a few words on the severe problem of radon gas. The comments of Senator Quinn and the Minister of State suggest the experience in Mallow and north Cork is now widely regarded as an example of how to investigate and, I hope, resolve the problem of radon gas.

I raised the issue of radon gas on a few occasions in the House because north Cork, including Mallow, which is very well known to me, is one of the areas where radon gas levels have been found to be excessively and dangerously high. As has been said by Senator Quinn, Cork County Council, in conjunction with Mallow Town Council and the RPII, has done extensive work over recent months to investigate radon gas levels and advise householders on the extent of the problem. I certainly welcome the initiative of the local authorities in this regard. That project in Mallow should be replicated in each local authority area. The statistics gleaned by Cork County Council and Mallow Town Council pertain to towns such as Mallow, Doneraile, Buttevant, Mitchelstown and Fermoy, all of which come within the parameters of the survey. The work was done on local authority housing stock.

We should encourage and instruct every private householder to obtain a radon testing kit and conduct a test on his own home. I believe the kits are relatively expensive. The householder can carry out the test himself once the kit is purchased. We aspire to have tests carried out throughout the country.

On planning ahead, I suggest to the Minister of State that every planning permission application should require the local authority in question to have knowledge of the radon level at the site in question. This would at least ensure the problem would be tackled. Radon poses a severe problem and unfortunately causes deaths. Unlike some cancer-causing agents, the radon problem can be resolved inexpensively. There are a number of systems in place to detect radon gas and resolve the problem it poses. At least there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Those carrying out tests on their properties can at least be consoled by the fact that detected problems can be resolved. Future housing projects, irrespective of whether they comprise apartment blocks or individual houses, should involve radon testing as a matter of planning policy, such that any radon problem that arises can be tackled.

The work of the RPII must be lauded, as must that of the local authorities that have taken the initiative, such as Mallow Town Council and Cork County Council. Their project was certainly positive and proactive.

Affected householders, when they receive letters from the local authority outlining the scale of the problem, can be frightened and concerned. They are concerned that, in some cases, the solution is not offered immediately. It can take months or even a full year. We have received commitments from Cork County Council, in particular, that the houses with the most severe radon gas levels will be subject to remediation immediately. Houses with severe but less dangerous levels are to be subject to remediation over the next 12 months or so. I welcome this but we need to reflect on and continue to remind people that the houses in question are simply those of local authorities. Thousands of private houses not only in north Cork but also in the rest of the country need to be tested also. We must try to encourage their owners to carry out the tests.

I thank the Minister of State for attending and my colleagues for organising this debate. It is part of the information campaign required to advise people on the radon gas problem.

Significantly more could be done through television and newspaper advertising. By advertising the dangers of radon gas and the likelihood of it existing in certain parts of the country, we could simultaneously let people know that there is a relatively inexpensive solution whereby they can test their own properties, install this equipment and get results quickly. If a problem is found, there is a method to resolve it. We must work to encourage more people to have their houses tested and must insist that local authorities carry out a wide audit and check of their estates across the known black spots in the country.

Senator Dominic Hannigan: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and the fact that we have taken time to debate this very important issue.

The Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, RPII, estimates that more than 100,000 houses have unacceptably high levels of radon but the general public and the media do not seem to be aware of the dangers. Last year the institute warned that some radon gas pockets exhibit detectable levels that are 60 times greater than the acceptable level. These pockets can exist in rural households, in apartment blocks and estates, in basements and attics, almost anywhere where people live. Radon gas is a silent, odourless invisible killer and is the second highest cause of lung cancer after smoking. To put that in perspective, 200 people every year can be predicted to die from radon poisoning, more or less the same number of people killed in road accidents. In County Meath, one would expect approximately eight people to die every year from the effects of radon gas. That figure might be too low because, according to the RPII website, some parts of the county, such as Ashbourne, Dunshaughlin, Ratoath and Stamullen, have extremely high levels of radon. One out of every five houses is expected to be exposed to above acceptable levels and to require remedial action. However, there are no visible campaigns, no media outrage, no billboards and no general awareness of this situation.

Radon occurs naturally from the decay of radioactive uranium in rocks and soils. This natural basis of occurrence, combined with the fact that we cannot smell, taste, touch or see radon gas, appears to have nurtured inappropriate levels of apathy on the part of the public at large. That radon occurs naturally makes it no less dangerous or damaging than a by-product from a manufacturing process. The RPII estimates that one third of the country is classified as having high radon gas levels. It is worrying that the recent World Health Organisation, WHO, survey on radon gas suggests we have the sixth highest radon gas levels in the world. At current levels, the equivalence is of everybody having an x-ray once a day. When a person has an x-ray in hospital bystanders are shielded from the impact of radiation. One can imagine what it means to have every person exposed to one x-ray a day. That is the prevalence and impact of radon gas in this country.

Dwellings constructed in the past ten years are at a lower risk of radon exposure because regulations since 1997 have determined that new dwellings constructed in radon areas must have in place a permanent sealed membrane. Senator Coffey pointed out that there have been instances in which these membranes have not been put in place comprehensively in the new buildings. It is vital that the effectiveness of radon testing is promoted with respect to buildings more than ten years old. The RPII has devised a very simple efficient and cheap test for householders to test the existence of radon gas. We must all make sure our constituents and people at large are aware of this service.

Ten years ago the RPII conducted a survey in primary and post-primary schools to establish the levels of radon gas. The wide ranging study took six years to complete and covered approximately 95% of schools across the country. As a result of that survey, the Department of Education and Science carried out remedial works on those schools and is to be commended on doing this. Given that this study is at least five years old, further surveys should be carried out to establish whether things have changed. While not as many as we would like, significant

[Senator Dominic Hannigan.]

numbers of new schools have been built since then. It would be sensible to test those for radon gas levels.

Interesting research is being carried out in some parts of the world. In the United States, for example, *The New York Times* reported recently on a study that suggested that granite worktops in kitchens might be responsible for emitting high levels of radon gas. The article suggested that when kitchens have granite worktops the incidence of radon gas might be ten times higher than levels found elsewhere in the house. The Minister might examine this.

The last time this issue was debated in the Dáil, the then Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Dick Roche, informed the House that there had been a disappointing uptake of radon detection schemes offered by the RPII. I suspect the take up is still quite low. Although the institute has carried out extensive and excellent work on the subject, it would make sense to have a communication campaign to raise awareness, as other Senators, including Senator Bradford mentioned. The Government does not currently provide grants for radon remediation. When questioned on this in the Dáil, the then Minister, Deputy Roche, stated, “The awareness of the public is considered to be a more effective approach than the provision of State financial assistance schemes to householders for radon testing of their homes or for radon remediation works.”

That statement is open to debate. Senator Quinn suggested it might be time to reconsider the provision of grants. The value of the average Irish life is probably worth at least €1.5 million. Assuming we are witnessing the deaths, due to radon gas, of 200 people a year, that is equivalent to the loss to society of approximately €300 million a year. Perhaps grants might be justifiable. However, in the absence of Government grants, we need an effective information campaign. The RPII found recently that 75% of survey respondents were very much aware of the dangers of radon gas but there is little information to determine how many households have taken the necessary steps to alleviate the presence of this gas. In 2006, the total expenditure allocated to the RPII for information awareness campaigns was only €190,000. Such an allocation is not sufficient to raise the level of awareness nationally. One must also consider a possible saving of €300 million in respect of value to the economy if the number of deaths due to exposure to radon could be reduced.

A random survey of radon levels in Irish dwellings was carried out twice, in 1992 and in 1999. Since then, a significant number of houses have been built across the country and, as mentioned, there have been instances where the radon membranes put in place have not been comprehensive. Is it time to carry out another random survey to establish, particularly in new houses in the commuter belt, the levels and presence of radon gas? The previous survey may be out of date. I ask the Minister of State to take on board those points.

Senator Martin Brady: I wish to share my time with Senator O’Donovan. I welcome the Minister of State as we discuss this very important subject.

There is a very low level of awareness of radon gas levels, as previous speakers noted. I knew very little of it until I read up on it yesterday evening. We must zone in on this and ensure the level of awareness is increased. There are many ways of doing this. In workplaces nowadays, for instance, there are health and safety committees and officers. They should be fully briefed on the problems and a level of awareness might be increased in that way. If one used that vehicle, the RPII or the Health and Safety Authority could brief those people. Most health and safety committees in the workplace run courses about general workplace health and safety issues. They should also provide information on radon gas. It is alarming that Ireland has among the highest levels of this killer gas in the

I o'clock

world. The health and safety statements employers are required to publish in the workplace should also include information on radon. This would also create awareness in homes.

Few people are aware that it is possible to have one's home tested for radon gas. I only learned this was possible when the Minister of State spoke. This information should be made more widely available in the public domain.

In 2004, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government published technical guidance on radon prevention in new buildings which commenced construction after 1 April 2005. The guidance was aimed at strengthening the 1997 provisions. Few people, even among those involved in health and safety issues, are aware of this guidance.

The degree of radon protection required is independent of whether a site is located in a high radon area. Such areas are identified by the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland as areas where in excess of 10% of houses are expected to have radon gas levels above the national reference level. Under the Building Control Act 1990, compliance with the building regulations is primarily the responsibility of the designers, builders and owners of buildings. Local building control authorities are empowered to monitor buildings for compliance and take enforcement action if necessary. Are the regulations being enforced? Are the local authorities monitoring compliance and taking enforcement action? It is important to ascertain whether all the relevant parties are rowing in and playing their part.

Events such as the national radon forum opened by the Minister of State in the Royal College of Physicians create awareness of radon. Information is crucial because one cannot do much about something if one does not know about it. We should pursue this track and ensure awareness is increased in an efficient manner. I reiterate that this could be done by local health and safety committees.

Senator Denis O'Donovan: I thank Senator Brady for allowing me to say a few words and welcome the Minister of State to the House. I would prefer to discuss issues such as fishing, farming and tourism because I do not know a great deal about radon gas. I confess, however, that the woman with whom I share a home has two devices for measuring radon gas, one suspended from a light fixture and another in the bedroom. She has much greater knowledge of the issue than I have. I await the results of the measurements which will become available after three months.

Radon gas is odourless, colourless and tasteless, which is alarming and a monkey on our back. As one who has never smoked, it is frightening to learn that long-term exposure to radon gas can damage health and cause cancer. The dangers of radiation from the masts being erected throughout the country to facilitate mobile telephone use and so forth are the subject of an ongoing debate in west Cork. This is not a parochial issue as the dangers of overhead power lines are also a major issue in the Meath-Cavan area. I speak as a layperson who does not have knowledge of the sciences but I am informed that these power lines emit radiation and some experts argue they can cause cancer. In my area, we had public meetings and a hue and cry about the possibility that these masts cause radiation. Is that the case?

Senator Brady referred to building regulations. Have these been enforced and has the Construction Industry Federation come on board? Has monitoring been done on the many houses built recently? If so, what were the results? Are health and safety officers trained to deal with this issue or is their role confined to dealing with the physical safety and security of workers? Does the Department have inspectors who are able to visit new housing estates to ensure radon protection devices are installed in homes? If not, the Department should ensure such inspections take place.

[Senator Denis O'Donovan.]

The €56 charge for installing radon protectors in the home is a wonderful idea, especially in blackspots such as Mallow. Local authorities such as Mallow Town Council, perhaps assisted by a departmental pilot scheme, should provide these devices at a reduced rate or free of charge to old age pensioners or people on social welfare. There are probably no more than 700 householders in the Mallow area who cannot afford the devices. Perhaps a pilot scheme has already been put in place.

Has the householder's guide to radon gas been distributed to all households? I remember, as a child of about ten, a booklet arriving at my home informing my family that we would have to board up windows and doors and use a cellar, if we had one, as a bunker in the event of a nuclear attack. According to the American propaganda of the time, we were at war with Russia and it could be necessary to hide, whether under a haystack or somewhere else. The booklet distributed to all households in the mid-1960s frightened the life out of me because I had not heard about the issue previously.

I am glad to contribute to this debate. Given that radon gas is a source of concern, perhaps we are not doing enough to address the problem. I ask the Minister of State to respond to the couple of points I raise, that is if they make sense because I confess that my knowledge of the issue is limited.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael P. Kitt): I thank Senators who contributed to this productive and thought-provoking debate on the hazards posed by radon gas. We discussed the protection measures implemented to date and future strategies to further remediate Ireland's radon problem. I will consider fully the views and opinions expressed by Senators which my officials have noted carefully. Their contributions reflect the importance of this subject as a public health issue and they will be noted as we develop future policy.

In concluding the debate, it is appropriate that I address areas in which it is proposed to focus our efforts to tackle the problems posed by radon. I referred to a report, entitled Radiation Doses Received by the Irish Population, which identified three areas where further studies could prove useful.

On radon in homes, the present estimates of radon in our national housing stock are based on measurements taken between 1992 and 1997 and national statistics of the housing stock in 2000. Since then, the housing stock has increased from 1.3 million to 1.7 million units. Ireland's building regulations have been revised and radon prevention measures are now required in all new homes built since July 1998. The influence of both these factors on the distribution of radon in homes should be assessed and revised and individual and collective dose estimates derived therefrom.

On the issue of radon in above ground workplaces, Ireland is one of the few countries worldwide to have undertaken a detailed assessment of the importance of radon exposure in the workplace and its contribution to total dose. The RPII is to be acknowledged for its pioneering work in this area. It is estimated that radon accounts for almost 98% of the total occupational radiation dose received in the workplace. Revised Estimates should be prepared as more information becomes available. Whether statistically significant differences in radon concentrations exist between different building types should also be explored. A very extensive body of data now exists on radon concentrations as well as the costs and effectiveness of radon remediation in Irish schools. Cost-benefit analyses should be undertaken to compare different remediation strategies in homes and schools, to identify the optimum approach towards reducing radon exposures. Any radon study should be carried out in close co-operation with existing

radon remediation companies and the building industry. My Department will work in close partnership with the RPII to further develop these suggested areas of study.

The RPII has submitted a discussion document to my Department, which contains a number of suggestions aimed at increasing the rate at which homes with high radon concentrations are identified and subsequently remediated. The plan identifies the following initiatives for consideration: high profile information and media campaign to be managed jointly by the RPII, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Health and Children; a study to be commissioned on the feasibility of including radon measurement and remediation in the house conveyancing process; improved implementation of the building regulations to further reduce radon concentrations on newly built homes; the number of such homes and radon concentrations above the reference level; the home bond scheme to be extended to include the installation of radon barriers and sumps; a programme for free radon measurements in high radon areas; and some financial assistance for householders where there are reductions of radon concentrations above the national reference level.

The RPII recommendations are broad in scope and go beyond the responsibilities of any one organisation. It is clear that inter-agency co-ordination and co-operation will be required to make progress on these issues and my Department will be engaging with other key stakeholders in this regard. I will comment on some of the points raised.

Senator Coffey talked about the map on the website. By January 2009 there will, hopefully, be a new map, updated by the RPII. I fully agree with his comments about the role of local authorities and the need for a contact point there. Senator Glynn again raised the issue of inter-agency co-operation. This is very important. The HSE, my Department and the RPII are very much involved in dealing with those issues. I also agree with Senator Quinn who talked about the need to spread the message. I have answered some of the issues relating to funding which will be looked at in the future.

As regards Senator Bradford's point on radon testing and remediation services to local authorities — I am aware of his interest in the north Cork area — a departmental working group was formed in 2008 with representatives from the RPII and the social housing, environmental radiation policy and building standards sections. The purpose of the working group was to develop guidance and support for local authorities on addressing the risk from radon in social housing. The aim of such guidance was to minimise the risk posed by radon on social housing through agreed, co-ordinated and cost-effective measures, drawing on the successful inter-agency approach employed in north Cork as well as the experience of other local authorities and the expertise of the RPII. There is ongoing dialogue on those issues.

An issue was raised by Senator Hannigan in relation to radon protection schemes. I would like to promote such schemes and to improve the communications on those issues. Senator Martin Brady raised a very good point of the message in the workplace, which we are very keen to promote. He said the message was also being brought home by those workers who had experience of this type of study. Senator O'Donovan made a point about the radiation from power lines. Power lines, I understand, produce non-ionising radiation. The RPII is responsible for ionising radiation and we have not, as yet, availed of its expertise on non-ionising radiation. However, the RPII's mandate is to be expanded to include non-ionising radiation, which will be phased in, and I hope to have further information on that. He also raised the building regulations for newer houses, which I have dealt with.

On the other point he made about the radiation booklet, that is available free on the RPII website. It is important to put that message out loud and clear. The majority of public buildings have been evaluated. We have identified significant areas in the radiation doses report as

[Deputy Michael P. Kitt.]

regards evaluating the effective building regulations and radon levels as an area for future study. I hope we will have more information on that in the future.

I have every confidence that the studies undertaken and the data accumulated, together with the partnership approach we are adopting, will serve us well in facing up to the challenges posed by radon and ultimately reduce the exposure levels of the public to the damaging effects of radiation. I am very glad to have had the opportunity to have this debate in the House.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: At 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 18 November 2008.

Adjournment Matters.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Almost a year ago to the day I raised this issue, on St. Cecilia's Day, 22 November. I had raised it a few years previously in the Dáil and a few years before that in the Dáil also. It relates to bringing the grant for the group sewerage scheme up to the same level as the group water scheme. I am very familiar with the group water scheme's success. Its aim was to increase water quality and enhance water conservation, all the issues that are pertinent to drinking water. When I raise the issue of group sewerage schemes, people tend to say that no one wants them and there is no pressure to have them. However, there is no pressure for group sewerage scheme grants for individuals because the grant is not at a level that would encourage people to get involved in it.

I have been raising this matter since former Deputy Bobby Molloy, a colleague whom the Minister of State knows well, was Minister of State at the then Department of the Environment. At that stage, the Minister said that a pilot scheme would be introduced to examine the whole issue of group sewerage schemes. When that was done, the funding element would be considered. I am raising this now because, as of last year, construction work on the pilot project was completed. Commissioning was undertaken and monitoring of the performance of the new infrastructure commenced. Preliminary results were made available to the national rural water monitoring committee, presumably before Christmas last year. The lessons learned then with regard to the technologies and the costs associated with the treatment and collection system of the pilot project would have informed policy in determining the potential role for group sewerage schemes in the provision of waste water collection systems.

The Minister asked the national rural water monitoring committee to report to him on the results of the pilot projects, and to include the role of group sewerage schemes into the future in the provision of waste water collection systems. The Minister at that time said he was committed to reviewing the level of grant aid for group sewerage schemes when the report and the recommendations of the national water monitoring committee became available to him, and he felt this would happen in the short term.

My issue at this point is that, a year later, the short period of time envisaged this time last year may have been met. We are all aware of the desperate situation, particularly in Galway, where again people have been drinking bottled water. I lived in Nigeria for a year and I know the concept of boiling, straining, re-boiling and freezing water. Many of us take it for granted that water from the tap is safe.

One pollutant, which may not be the major one, must be the proliferation of septic tanks. We are geared towards the concept of every half an acre having a septic tank. This is one way of dealing with this. We also talked about environmental protections and the fact that tanks will have to be emptied more regularly and overseen more often. It is a win-win situation for everyone if we can move to group provision of sewerage schemes. This will happen, and we can bring people along with us, only if the level of grant aid is commensurate with that of the group water scheme. As evident from the recent water quality report for Ireland, there are many problems with which we must deal, but there is no doubt septic tanks is one of them. Until we embrace that we will go nowhere.

We in Donegal feel the pilot schemes introduced there can be often of the negative variety. We would have loved one of the positive pilot projects but we are beyond that discussion now. The pilot project has taken place, monitoring is taking place and I would like to think we can give the matter the urgent attention it deserves, particularly having regard to the recent report on water quality. I hope the Minister of State has good news for me today on driving the allocation for group sewerage schemes up to the same level as group water schemes, and embracing the wishes and needs of county councils around the country to improve water quality.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Kitt): I thank Senator Keaveney for raising this issue. Forming a group sewerage scheme to construct a communal sewage collection system can provide some communities with an opportunity to connect their homes to a local authority sewerage scheme at an affordable cost. While grants are available for group sewerage schemes, the number of such schemes is small by comparison to group water schemes. The current rate of grant for a household under the group sewerage scheme programme is 75% of capital cost, or €2,031 per house, whichever is the lesser.

The corresponding grant for group water schemes, as the Senator said, is substantially higher. However, the level of grant aid is not necessarily the key issue where group sewerage schemes are concerned. Interest in forming new group sewerage schemes comes mainly from clusters of houses currently depending on septic tanks and situated close to towns or villages with public sewerage services. In some cases, septic tank owners, particularly in sensitive areas or locations with poor ground conditions, are experiencing difficulties with the disposal of septic tank effluent. Where the houses are close to a public sewer it may be possible for them to connect to the sewer at a reasonable cost, provided there is capacity for the additional effluent load. Waste water collection needs of small villages without any sewerage facilities are mainly looked after by local authorities under the small public schemes measure of my Department's rural water programme. This year I have allocated €23.2 million for this measure and local authorities have full discretion about where they decide to invest the money.

Issues associated with the location, siting, ownership and management of communal waste water treatment systems militate against community ownership of sewage treatment works. Operational failure could result in serious public health or environmental consequences and there is the ongoing issue of disposing of treated effluent and the sludge from the treatment process. Senator Keaveney is aware that my Department has funded a pilot programme — she referred to it earlier — to test a range of new, small-scale waste water collection and treatment systems under Irish conditions.

The objective is to evaluate new approaches to meeting the waste water collection and treatment needs of rural communities. As part of this pilot programme the potential role for group sewerage schemes in extending collection systems to households outside the catchment of new or existing public sewerage networks is also being assessed. The construction phase of the pilot

[Deputy Michael Kitt.]

programme is now finished and operational, and monitoring is ongoing. A report is being compiled on the technologies and costs associated with both the treatment and collection elements. This will inform policy development as to the potential role for group sewerage schemes in the provision of collection systems and the appropriate level of grant aid that should be made available to assist such groups. I have asked the national rural water monitoring committee to have the report on the pilot programme forwarded to me as soon as possible. I will review the grants for group sewerage schemes in light of the report and the recommendations it contains.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: I have one short supplementary point. The Minister of State will be aware that the last two paragraphs I read into the record on 22 November 2007 and the last two paragraphs of what I said today are almost identical. I ask the Minister of State to take on board, particularly in the context of the recent report, that it is time to stop thinking about what we are going to do and decide what we are doing. We have the right Minister of State at the helm to drive that. I am glad to bring it to his attention today that a year on, we are no further on in decision making and I urge the Minister of State to embrace my thoughts on that.

Regional Airports.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank the Minister of State for hearing the Adjournment matter. This issue refers to regional airports, specifically Waterford regional airport and the southeast region.

Waterford regional airport has increased its passenger numbers each year, it has developed new European destinations and routes and a huge effort has been put into increasing and developing accessibility to the region, and improving connectivity to other cities and regions in Europe. The airport undertook a proposed runway extension and widening plan, which is needed to develop its full potential. Under capital projects announced under Transport 21, €22.3 million was allocated to Waterford, of which €13 million was allocated to the runway extension and widening programme. The airport has a €27 million investment plan that is dependent on the allocation from capital projects in Transport 21.

Waterford regional airport is a key part of regional infrastructure and there have been deficits up to now, due to accessibility issues in the region. In Government policy, balanced regional development and access to the regions is clearly prioritised. Waterford regional airport plays a huge role in improving access to the region and connectivity to other regions. It is in that context I framed my Adjournment motion, because the recent budget announcement said there were six airports and the grant aid was to be capped at €11 million in 2009. It also stated it was restricted to existing contractual commitments and the Department is to review the level and phasing of investment programmes in the long term.

I ask for clarification, and I hope the Minister of State can confirm today, that this budget announcement will not affect the allocation previously identified and given to Waterford Regional Airport under the capital projects of Transport 21. There is huge concern in the city and in the general southeast region that the proposed expansion plans for Waterford regional airport will be adversely affected and that this will have the knock-on effect of scuppering the major investment plans for the airport. This will have an impact across the business, public and other sectors. We are trying to develop the economy of the south-east region and the airport is a pivotal element of that economy. I am interested in hearing the Minister of State's response and thank him for coming to the House to hear the motion.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Noel Ahern): I thank the Senator for raising this matter. He appears to have a good feel of the situation judging by his figures.

The Department provides direct financial support for the six regional airports under two schemes, one relating to operational expenditure and the other to capital investments. In the case of operational expenditure, a new scheme introduced in 2006 provides for an annual subvention in respect of expenditure by the regional airports in providing core airports services. The amount of subvention payable in any one year is based on projected losses by the airports in providing those core services after taking account of any surpluses from commercial activities such as catering, car parking and any other sources of income available to the airports. This is in line with the view underlying the mandatory EU guidelines on state aid for the sector. As a general rule, airports should be self-financing and public money should be made available to them only in particular circumstances and subject to certain conditions.

For 2009, an allocation of €16.926 million has been made to the subhead which funds the operational expenditure scheme and the programme of public service obligation flights between Dublin and the regional airports. On account of limits on public spending, it is clear that for the immediate future, balancing priorities within and between these two programmes will be very challenging. Airports will need to be especially careful to minimise their dependence on Exchequer funds to meet day-to-day spending requirements.

With regard to capital expenditure, in February 2007 the Government approved an €86 million programme of grant aid under the Transport 21 umbrella for specific projects at these airports in the period to the end of 2010, consisting of €39 million at the 90% rate for safety and security improvements and €47 million at the 75% rate for developmental projects. All of the regional airports are engaged in the implementation of projects approved under the capital grant scheme.

Grants paid under the scheme so far, amounting to approximately €7.86 million, reflect the fact that for most airports, major projects have been at the preparatory stages and have been subject to delays arising from planning or procurement procedures. They are also a reminder that progress under the scheme, including the requirement for funding in any one year, depends in the first instance on the ability of the airports themselves to implement projects, to raise matching funds and then submit valid claims to the Department.

The provision in the Department's Vote to fund the capital expenditure grant scheme in 2009 is €11 million. On account of the current difficulties with the public finances, it has been decided that until the end of 2009, expenditure under the scheme should be focused on projects and project elements where the airports have already entered into contractual commitments. This means that, inevitably, full implementation of the approved capital programme will take longer than originally anticipated. The Department aims to establish priorities for grant aid from the funds available in 2009, having regard to these contractual commitments and a realistic assessment of the drawdown requirements for safety and security related projects likely to arise during the year.

Waterford Airport, with potential grants amounting to €22.33 million, is a major beneficiary under the capital grant scheme and has already received approximately €2.77 million to date. Projects earmarked for the airport include €9.2 million for safety related projects and €13.1 million for developmental projects, including the proposed runway extension costing €4.84 million. There are no existing contractual commitments in respect of this project. It is inevitable, therefore, in the current financial climate that its phasing and that of other projects at the airport that are likewise uncommitted must be carefully considered, especially in view of the large sums involved.

At a recent meeting with Waterford Airport the Minister received a detailed presentation on priority items the airport wants to move forward in 2009, which are mainly safety or security related. These will be considered by the Department in the context of its review of priorities

[Deputy Noel Ahern.]

for funding under the scheme next year, but it is not possible to give any commitments at this stage on the likely or eventual decisions.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank the Minister of State for his frank response to my query. My fears have more or less been confirmed. I agree that safety and security must be a priority in any airport and this should remain the case. I acknowledge there are no contractual commitments, but the airport has made serious progress on its planning and proposals to develop its runway and to extend and widen it to allow the full potential of the airport, and by extension the region, to develop.

We hear all the time about balanced regional development, accessibility and infrastructure. I am speaking about one of the key infrastructural deficits in the south-east region and I am saddened to hear there is a serious rowing back by the Government and no clear commitment of funding for the extension and widening of the runway. The tour of Transport 21 and the announcements of what it would do throughout the country brought great hope to the regions, but for Waterford and the south-east region that hope will not be carried through by Government action and resources for the airport. This makes a sad day for Waterford and the south-east region. I urge the Minister of State to ensure this is reconsidered at the earliest opportunity when the budget allows for it.

Deputy Noel Ahern: I hear what the Senator says, but I hope the airport board does not take such a negative view of the situation. There is a delay in what is likely to happen, but there is no rowing back or cancellation, although the Senator did not use that word.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I did not. I said “clear commitment”.

Deputy Noel Ahern: There is a delay in the process with regard to projects that were to get the go ahead next year. However, I hope that while there may be a delay, the airport board in Waterford will still progress its thinking and plans. I am trying to offer encouragement. I have heard what the Senator said about the potential of the airport and while there may be a delay, I hope people will remain optimistic and positive about their plans. It is to be hoped that, when the financial situation improves, their plans will be ready to get the go-ahead. I remain optimistic and am not as despondent as the Senator appears to be given the message he put across.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I wish to make a clarification with regard to the allegation of negativity. I took great care to have a very positive contribution on Waterford and I think the Minister of State has acknowledged that. Anybody who knows me and the representations I make on behalf of Waterford knows I always speak positively in any forum or debate. I acknowledge the detailed response of the Minister of State and ask that he ensures Waterford and its regional airport are kept as a high priority in the Department.

Schools Building Projects.

Senator Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Cathaoirleach for the opportunity to speak on this. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Haughey, to the House to discuss this matter.

I have raised the issue of Scoil Bharra on the Adjournment on a number of occasions over the past year and will not go through the full background again as I know the Minister and the Department are well aware of the situation. However, there are two points I wish to stress. The school is a thriving, successful school located in the heart of a community in my constituency. The school delivers this success despite that it has been located in prefabs and temporary buildings for almost all of its existence. These temporary buildings are located on the grounds of a GAA club.

Despite the exceptionally difficult circumstances in which the school has to operate, it has managed to deliver a successful experience for students, parents and the community. A recent visit to the school brought home to me the extent of this success as well as the difficult environment in which it must operate. I was brought to the room used to help students with special needs, which also acts as a store for cleaning equipment. It is obvious that teaching young people in a temporary and unsuitable environment is far removed from what we preach in terms of looking after them. Even though the school is in a deplorable situation, the teachers and pupils have done a wonderful job in creating a great environment.

As the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science is aware, the capital funding programme for schools will be revisited in the context of the current economic environment. It is essential that we do all we can for this school, which is successful despite its temporary location and poor environment, in terms of clarifying when it can expect a new building and presenting concrete plans on how it can realise its hopes. God only knows what level of success it could deliver if it got a fairer deal.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): I thank the Senator for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to outline to this House my Department's plans for long term accommodation for Gaelscoil Bharra in Cabra, Dublin 7.

Gaelscoil Bharra is a fully vertical co-educational primary school teaching through the medium of Irish. It has a current enrolment of 221 pupils and a staffing complement of a principal, eight mainstream class teachers and one learning support teacher. It is currently accommodated in temporary classrooms on a site owned by Naomh Fionnbarra GAA club. It receives rental grant aid for three classrooms, while the remainder are in the ownership of the Department. The Department intends providing the school with a new building comprising eight classrooms and ancillary accommodation appropriate to a school of this size. As the school is located in a built up area, the problems associated with acquiring a site for this development cannot be underestimated. However, the Department is examining the possibility of developing the existing site even though it is restricted in nature.

Once the site issue has been resolved, the development of a building project for the school will be considered in the context of the school building and modernisation programme. As the Senator will be aware, all applications for large-scale capital funding, including Gaelscoil Bharra, are assessed by the modernisation and policy unit of my Department. The assessment process determines the extent and type of need based on the demographics of an area, proposed housing developments, condition of buildings, site capacity etc. and leads ultimately to an appropriate accommodation solution. As part of this process, a project is assigned a band rating under the published prioritisation criteria for large-scale building projects. These criteria were devised following consultation with the education partners. Projects are selected for inclusion in the school building and modernisation programme on the basis of priority of need. This is reflected in the band rating assigned to a project. In other words, a proposed building project moves through the system commensurate with the band rating assigned to it.

There are four band ratings in total, of which band one is the highest and band four the lowest. Band one projects include the provision of buildings where none currently exists but where there is a high demand for pupil places, whereas a band four project makes provision for desirable but not necessarily urgent or essential facilities. Each band rating has a number of subcategories which more specifically describe the type of works needed and the urgency attaching to them.

The project for Gaelscoil Bharra has been assigned a band two rating, which is the second highest band rating possible. This positions the building project for the school to be advanced

[Deputy Seán Haughey.]

as soon as the site issue has been resolved and the requisite funding is made available. I assure the Senator that the Department acknowledges the need for a solution to Gaelscoil Bharra's accommodation needs and is committed to working to achieve a satisfactory solution at the earliest possible opportunity.

Senator Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Minister of State for his response. However, it is similar to other replies I have received regarding the school. I seek clarity on when the Department will be able to resolve the issue of the site in order to proceed with the building project. The school badly needs this help.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I appreciate the question but I am not in a position to give a definite answer to the Senator, other than to restate the Department's commitment to achieving a satisfactory solution. Much depends on factors such as funding and when the Minister intends to make new announcements. I will bring the Senator's comments to the attention of the Minister and the Department's building unit with a view to seeking a solution as soon as possible.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.45 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 18 November.