



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 21 Márta 2017

Tuesday, 21 March 2017

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for Justice and Equality to commence the Legal Services Act 2015 which will enable structures to be established for the adjudication of legal costs as there is currently only one taxing master available to do this work.

I have also received notice from Senator Gerard P. Craughwell of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Justice and Equality to outline her plans for the introduction and implementation of electronic monitoring.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to take action in relation to the lack of GPs across the country, resulting in individuals being unable to obtain appointments, particularly in Cavan-Monaghan.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to inform the Seanad of the ongoing situation in relation to Harold's Cross greyhound stadium, the steps he is taking to protect the permanent and temporary staff who work there and at Shelbourne Park greyhound stadium and to ensure the local community is consulted about further developments on the Harold's Cross site.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to provide an update on the implementation of all of the recommendations of the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments.

I have also received notice from Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to provide assurances that additional funding will be available, if needed, to retain all existing courses on the Castlebar campus of Galway Mayo Institute of Technology.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to provide a statement on the status of the building projects at Ballinspittle national school, County Cork and when it is proposed to make a site visit to progress the building schedule.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to discuss the actions he is taking to address the serious and ongoing decline of health services in County Clare, with particular reference to the drastic curtailment of Shannondoc services throughout the county.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to investigate an issue (details supplied) which has resulted from the reorganisation in 2005 of the health service which abolished individual health boards.

I have also received notice from Senator Rose Conway-Walsh of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to put the Irish Coast Guard on a statutory footing with stand-alone status, properly resourced and with a chain of command structure, especially in the light of the tragedy at Blacksod Bay.

I regard the matters raised by Senators Colm Burke, Craughwell, Gallagher, Humphreys, Boyhan, Ó Domhnaill, Lombard and Gavan as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Colm Burke, Craughwell, Gallagher and Humphreys and they will be taken now. Senators Boyhan, Ó Domhnaill, Lombard and Gavan may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

I regret that I have had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator Conway-Walsh as it is a repeat of a similar matter raised on 15 February 2017. The matter raised by Senator Paddy Burke has been ruled out of order on the grounds that it is *sub judice*.

Commencement Matters

Legal Costs

Senator Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, for coming to the House to deal with this matter. The issue I am raising relates to the legislation passed by both Houses on the restructuring of the adjudication system for the taxation of costs where agreement cannot be reached between a party which has succeeded in a case and a party which has lost.

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There were two Taxing Masters in the High Court. My understanding is that one of those Taxing Masters has not been reappointed as her contract was for a period of five years. There is now only one Taxing Master dealing with the adjudication of High Court and Supreme Court costs for the entire country. That is not adequate.

Will the appropriate commencement notice be put in place to ensure the structure for the adjudication of costs is established and they are dealt with in a speedy manner? Several legal colleagues dealing with Departments on the other side of cases have come to me because they are finding substantial delays in dealing with the issues of costs. I am disappointed by this when one considers we insist private sector bills are paid within a timeframe of not more than 60 days, yet these issues with Departments are dragging on for 12 months and 18 months. There is no procedure for dealing with it other than we now have only one Taxing Master.

That is the reason I have been asked by colleagues to raise this matter. It is an important matter that we should deal with at the earliest possible date.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): The Legal Services Regulation Act 2015 provides for independent regulation of the legal profession to improve access and competition, make legal costs more transparent and ensure adequate procedures for addressing consumer complaints. The 2015 Act makes extensive provision in Part 10 for a new and enhanced legal costs regime which will bring greater transparency to how legal costs are charged, along with a better balance between the interests of legal practitioners and those of their clients. As part of this structural reform, under section 139(1) of the Act, the existing Office of the Taxing Master, which is an office of the High Court, is to become the Office of the Legal Costs Adjudicators.

The need to bring the Office of the Taxing Master to full working capacity is something of which the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, and the Department, are acutely aware. Officials are actively working with their colleagues in the Courts Service to deal with this in preparation for the changeover to the new office. The new office will come into effect with the commencement of the relevant provisions of Part 10 of the 2015 Act which they expect to happen later this year. The changeover to the new office, therefore, not only enables the introduction of key structural reforms for dealing with disputed legal costs but also enables them to reconfigure that function in a way which will better meet work demand. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality assures the Senator this detailed preparation is already being undertaken by a specifically tasked joint working group chaired at assistant secretary level by the Department of Justice and Equality which is working in close co-operation with its colleagues in the Courts Service. The working group, which has been meeting regularly, is mandated to map out and oversee the various practical steps to be taken to get the new Office of the Legal Costs Adjudicators up and running. This work is also intended to ensure the relevant new legal costs adjudication processes, documentation, rules of court and IT systems can be put in place in a legally robust manner. By the same token, it is intended that the resourcing of the new office will reflect its enhanced statutory mandate.

These preparations are being actively supported with the expertise and experienced inputs of the current Taxing Master whose term of office has recently been extended for transitional purposes under an enabling provision which the Minister introduced specifically for that purpose under the Courts Act 2016. That Act also included a number of other measures to facilitate the timely winding down of the existing caseload of referrals before the Office of the Taxing Master.

Senators will appreciate that the transition to the new legal costs adjudicators regime is a very fundamental reform, one that requires planning and management, with careful management of potential risks, in particular. Under this working strategy, it is also anticipated that a second taxing master will be appointed shortly whose services, with those of the existing Taxing Master, will be available to transition to the new legal costs adjudicators regime and deal effectively with the existing and ongoing Taxing Master caseload.

Senator Colm Burke: I note that the Minister of State is saying a second taxing master is to be appointed shortly. Will this be in a very short timeframe such as within the next three to four weeks, or will it be within the next six months? There is a backlog and it is unfair. There was a period during which the current Taxing Master was out on sick leave, for very genuine reasons, and there was no one at all available to deal with adjudication. I ask that the second person be appointed and that the new structures be set up at the earliest possible date. We have debated this matter. The legislation dates from 2015. We really need to move on. Where people are entitled to recover costs for work that they have done, on being successful in their case, they should not have to wait for two to three years to do so.

Deputy David Stanton: I do not have the exact dates requested by the Senator. I will ask that they be communicated to him as soon as possible. I assure him again that the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality and her Department are fully apprised of the current issues concerning the Office of the Taxing Master and working to achieve a very early solution in that regard.

Electronic Tagging

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, for coming to the House to outline his plans for the introduction and implementation of electronic monitoring. As he knows, section 102 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 provides for the electronic monitoring of the restrictions of an offender's movements imposed by a court under section 101 of the same Act. To date, the section has not been commenced, but I understand electronic monitoring has been used by the Irish Prison Service to monitor offenders who have been granted temporary release from prison - for example, those who need to attend hospital as inpatients. I understand that approximately 50 prisoners were electronically monitored, with good success, under the pilot scheme. I am also aware that the electronic monitoring of offenders out of bail or post-conviction is a controversial issue that requires the balancing of society's need to reduce reoffending with the serious implications of removing or restricting a citizen's liberty.

I agree with the view of the Irish Penal Reform Trust that any interference with the rights of someone facing trial must be proportionate and justified. While I can appreciate these concerns, my research indicates that Ireland is very far behind the rest of Europe when it comes to electronic monitoring. Our approach has been extremely conservative and, at worst, completely behind the curve. Electronic monitoring has been used successfully for over 20 years in the United Kingdom and for over 30 years in Australia.

Last year the Criminal Justice (Burglary of Dwellings) Act 2015 was introduced. It targets repeat offenders with consecutive sentences and the option for bail to be denied. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, said she wholeheartedly agreed with this and that the burglary of a person's home was a heinous crime and traumatic

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for every victim. Furthermore, the high rates of recidivism and limited resources are causing havoc in communities. We know from statistics raised from An Garda Síochána's analysis service that 75% of burglaries are committed by 25% of burglars or offenders. I am joined in the Visitors Gallery today by Councillor Lynsey McGovern from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown who is extremely concerned about the number of burglaries in Dublin's eastern Garda division which covers most of the southside. In 2016 the biggest increase was in the Dundrum area which saw a 25% rise. It is mirrored in other areas where highly organised gangs have replaced the casual opportunist burglar.

While the 2015 Act is bound to be effective and to be welcomed as a disincentive to committing multiple burglaries, it relies entirely on the punishment model. While I agree with the importance of keeping burglars off the streets, the rehabilitative aspect of a custodial sentence must not be ignored. The Tánaiste, Deputy Fitzgerald, is on record as stating: "Monitoring of a convicted offender's movements, whether by electronic means or otherwise, does not provide a focus on rehabilitation in the same way that supervision does nor does it provide the security of a prison sentence in preventing further offences."

I believe it does not have to be an either-or scenario and that the combination of the electronic monitoring of burglars and habitual offenders while out on bail and post-conviction, with strong support services, offers a viable solution. Research shows that where electronic monitoring is developed with high levels of support from probation and other services, the rate of re-offending can be greatly reduced.

I acknowledge that electronic monitoring is an expensive process but technology is developing at speed. When I walked down Grafton Street at lunch time today, I received several notices on my mobile phone informing me of the various retail outlets and what they had on offer. We are all being monitored at some level and surveillance systems now can greatly strengthen the system of bail and streamline the monitoring of those awaiting trial.

Electronic monitoring has been described as a force multiplier. In times of greatly reduced Garda numbers and the closure of Garda stations, this is to be welcomed. I ask the Minister of State to ask the Department, the Tánaiste, Deputy Fitzgerald, and in terms of his own influence, to give serious consideration to widespread use of electronic monitoring as a disincentive and rehabilitative measure in the case of burglaries, sex offences and other serious crimes. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Deputy David Stanton: I am here on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald, who sends her apologies as she cannot be present. I thank the Senator for raising this issue and for his thoughtful and well-researched presentation.

As the Senator will be aware, the programme for Government gives a commitment to the preparation and fast-tracking of new bail legislation. The new Bail (Amendment) Bill, which recently completed Second Stage in the Dáil, will expand the factors a court may take into account in refusing bail, will increase the range of conditions that may be attached to bail, will enable victim evidence to be heard in certain circumstances and will require the court to give reasons for its decisions.

In addition, the Bill will make provision for electronic monitoring of persons on bail based on existing but uncommenced provisions in the Bail Act 1997. Unlike the existing provisions, the new Bill provides that electronic monitoring may be imposed as a bail condition only if the

prosecution applies to the court for such a condition. This will ensure that the use of electronic monitoring can be targeted at those cases where it is most likely to be effective.

In parallel with the progress of the Bill, the Department of Justice and Equality has established a working group to examine issues surrounding electronic monitoring. The group is comprised of officials from the Department of Justice and Equality, the Irish Prison Service, the Probation Service, the Courts Service, An Garda Síochána and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The working group has been tasked with examining the suitability of the category of offences that should be focused on, examining the suitability of the category of alleged offenders that should be focused on, examining similar best practice examples from neighbouring jurisdictions, examining how any new electronic monitoring system will interact with other existing supervisory schemes, examining the arrangements to be put in place for contracting out this type of monitoring service and examining the resource implications for the implementation of any new system.

I can inform the Senator that the working group has already met three times since its inception in December 2016 and will continue to work in a focused way on this issue. The working group intends to make its recommendations for consideration as soon as possible in line with the progress of the legislation through the Oireachtas.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister of State. Like Councillor McGovern, I live in the area we are talking about. The week before last, while a man suffering from motor neurone disease was being helped into his family car to go for medical treatment, burglars literally walked through the front door, took anything that was of value, went out the back door, climbed over my garden wall and got away. My garden wall is the best part of 10 ft. high on that person's side.

We were promised that Stepside Garda station would reopen. At a recent public meeting, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport stated it was not a question of "if" but of "when". That would help to some degree in our area but I agree with Councillor McGovern, who has put a huge amount of work into the electronic tagging issue, that it is probably the best solution overall. At least we will know where these people are and we can identify them post crime. They can do an entire estate now in one evening. The issue is becoming very serious.

Deputy David Stanton: I again thank the Senator for his input. The working group intends to make its recommendation as soon as possible in line with the progress of the legislation going through the Oireachtas. It has been established, it will continue its important work in this area and it will report its findings very soon. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality will then be in a position to consider the proposals in full and will report to the House at that stage.

General Practitioner Services

Senator Robbie Gallagher: General practitioner services have been declining in recent years and, as a result, there is a chronic shortage of GPs throughout the country. It is impossible to get GPs to locate in rural Ireland and the people in towns and villages throughout the country are left with very few services or none at all. A recent report, commissioned by the HSE, highlighted the fact that the GP shortage would probably get worse before it got better.

A combination of factors are involved. First, a large number of GPs are due to retire in the

next ten years and their posts may not be filled, with many young doctors planning to emigrate rather than stay in this country. Last week, I took two calls from families in County Monaghan, one in Carrickmacross and one in Monaghan town. Both had moved to the area recently and they went to every GP in both towns but no one would take them on. Where are such people meant to go in such a situation? The local GP is, for many people, the first port of call when they are sick and in need of medical care. If there are not enough GPs, where are these families supposed to go? They have no choice but to go to an overcrowded emergency department in Cavan or Drogheda, making the problems in these departments worse. It is a vicious circle and patients are going to suffer. Doctors are not to blame. They are under increasing pressure with more patients and longer hours. Some work on call at weekends and they cannot do any more. They are not getting a fair deal from the HSE and I want to see a GP service with primary care centres that are properly resourced. GP numbers must be increased and doctors incentivised to come to rural towns and villages. Until that happens our health services will deteriorate further.

Ireland is facing an estimated shortage of 1,380 GPs by 2025 unless urgent steps are taken to address this issue. A recent HSE report recommends 138 training places per year just to keep up with current demand. The report also recommends the introduction of a number of recruitment and retention strategies, including incentives to GPs to work up to the age of 70 if they wish, measures aimed at rural Ireland to encourage GPs to locate there and more trainees and graduates. Further research into areas such as the expansion of nurse-led care should also be carried out and there needs to be a proper ring-fencing of primary care, especially in respect of GP practices. A properly functioning GP practice leads to the best health outcomes and the best value for money.

Urgent action is required on this issue before the crisis gets worse and I look forward to hearing what plans the Minister brings to this House today to address it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Senator and apologise on behalf of the Minister, who cannot be here. I assure the Senator that the Government is committed to enhancing primary health care services, including GP services. The development of primary care is central to the Government's objective to deliver a high-quality, integrated and cost-effective health service. The Government is committed to ensuring that patients throughout the country continue to have access to GP services, especially in remote rural areas and in disadvantaged urban areas, and that general practice is sustainable in all areas into the future. It is imperative that existing GP services in these areas are retained and that general practice remains an attractive career option for newly-qualified GPs.

A Programme for a Partnership Government contains a commitment in respect of increasing the number of GP training places to 259 places annually. In July 2016, the GP training intake increased from 157 to 172 places and the HSE's 2017 national service plan envisages a further increase to 187 places this year. Of course, the Minister is anxious to achieve further increases in future years in order to ensure that the future manpower needs of general practice can be met. The Senator rightly outlined the figures that we need to reach for that to happen. There are currently 34 GMS GPs in Cavan covering 37 panels and 25 GMS GPs in Monaghan covering 28 panels. Obviously, there are three vacancies in each county. It should be noted, however, that all these panels with vacancies are covered by locum arrangements and that no panel is without a GP. The HSE is working to fill these locum panels on a permanent basis as quickly as possible.

It is acknowledged that there have been some difficulties in finding GP cover, both locum

and permanent, for some rural areas. This includes Cavan-Monaghan. The HSE is working on a continuous basis with GPs to find solutions to this problem. In this regard, the Dublin north east training area increased the number of GP trainees by four last year, bringing the total number of trainees to 18. The number will increase to 19 this year, making the area one of the largest training centres in the country. This increase in trainee numbers should hopefully benefit the north east in the coming years.

Further efforts undertaken in recent years to increase the number of practising GPs include changes to the entry provisions to the GMS scheme to accommodate more flexible and shared GMS GP contracts and changes to the retirement provisions for GPs under the GMS scheme. This allows GPs to hold GMS contracts until their 72nd birthday, if that is what they want to do. An enhanced supports package for rural GP practices has also been introduced. Some 252 practice units are in receipt of supports under the rural practice support framework, which equates to 313 individual GPs currently benefiting under the new scheme. This is a significant increase in the number of GPs benefiting from rural supports, which stood at 167 before the introduction of this scheme.

These steps should help to address the future demand by enticing GPs who may have ceased practising for family or other reasons back into the workforce, facilitating GPs to work past the standard retirement age and encouraging more GPs to work in more rural areas. In addition, the Minister and I are cognisant of the need for a new GP services contract which will help modernise our health service and develop a strengthened primary care sector. Health service management have already progressed a number of significant measures through engagement with GP representatives.

Discussions on a new GP contract are under way. The aim is to develop a new modern GP services contract, which we have not had in a number of years, that will incorporate a range of standard and enhanced services to be delivered. The GP contract review process will also seek to introduce further measures aimed at making general practice a fulfilling and rewarding career option into the future. I obviously hope that our young doctors will not leave the country to pursue careers elsewhere.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for her extensive response to my question. To get back to the two people who contacted me last week about the lack of GPs, I wonder if there is anything in the Minister of State's response that will give them comfort. I sincerely hope there is. I welcome the fact that more places are going to be made available for training. The problem is, like in many other sectors such as nursing, teaching or whatever, we seem to be training our nurses and doctors to emigrate and find better packages and deals elsewhere. That is a big factor. It is something we are going to have to challenge. We need some creative thinking in order to do that. I thank the Minister of State for her response.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I do acknowledge the difficulties that we are facing. There are currently 23 overall vacancies, six of which are in Cavan-Monaghan alone. Obviously, the HSE must put a lot of its effort into ensuring that those places are filled. I also recognise - and I believe the Department recognises - that the ratio of GPs to the population in the Senator's own area may be slightly lower. That is because of the difficulty in attracting GPs to rural areas. GPs are private practices. It is up to the individual to come to an area. Where it has not been successful, the HSE is obviously looking to bring people into those areas, but it is difficult. The changes to the retirement age, the opening up of access to the GMS panel, the changing of work hours for young mothers who may also want to raise families and the new rural contract linked

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in with the GP contract itself will hopefully start to see changes and encourage GPs to work in these areas in which they are not currently working.

Greyhound Industry

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Andrew Doyle, and also acknowledge the presence of Deputy Michael D'Arcy in the Visitors Gallery with his students who I assume are from County Wexford, not County Wicklow. I thank him for coming into the Chamber as it is good to see former Members coming back to show respect for it.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I, too, welcome the children from County Wexford to the Visitors Gallery.

The Minister of State is well aware of the shock and upset caused by the sudden closure of Harold's Cross greyhound stadium and the lack of consultation with dog owners on the issue. That issue must be dealt with over a period of time. A number of part-time workers have been in contact with me to say they are losing significant earnings because of the reduced crowds as a result of the protests at Shelbourne Park. We must resolve the issue of Harold's Cross greyhound stadium because if the protests continue, the jobs of permanent, part-time and temporary staff will be at risk because of the loss of income at Shelbourne Park. I ask the Minister of State to exert some pressure to ensure the issue is resolved. It can only be resolved through discussion and negotiations and anything that could be done in that regard would be much appreciated. This is particularly relevant for part-time staff who are greatly out of pocket. The permanent staff are still in employment and not seeing a loss of income.

The other element of this issue is that the site in Harold's Cross, close to the centre of the city, is six and a half acres in size. If the stadium is not to be reopened, it is very important that the local community be consulted. This area of the city will see its population grow by approximately one third in the next decade. I ask the Minister of State to consider this. The area will experience huge population growth, yet it does not currently contain a field in which a child could kick a football or a second level college could be built for students. There is a shortage of secondary schools in the area. A proportion of the site, if the greyhound stadium is not to be reopened, could be used to serve that need. It is currently designated as a Z9 zone, which means that the development of only 5% of the site is permissible, which means that it is not in the interests of the taxpayer or the Irish Greyhound Board to put it on the market at this stage. What is required is a local area plan. I ask the Minister of State to get involved in that process. When the population of an area grows by one third and a six and a half acre site becomes available, we have to make sure there is sustainable planning. I ask the Minister of State to look at entering into consultation with the local community before any long-term decision is made about the track.

I highlight again the possible loss of the stadium. The Irish Greyhound Board has sought consultation on the sale of the site. It could represent a significant loss to the taxpayer if the site is sold at below market value, as currently configured. We need to take a step back and ask what is in the best interests of the city and the taxpayer. My fear is that a developer will purchase the site and sit on it for five to ten years. We would then have an unoccupied six and a half acre site in the city, not being used for the purposes of recreation, education or housing.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank the Senator for raising this issue which has occupied a lot of my time. I have an official line but may be able to expand on that in the supplementary contribution.

Bord na gCon is responsible for the control, promotion and operation of greyhound racing, including the operation of totalisator betting, the making of grants for prize money, the allocation of grants to improve amenities at tracks and the licensing of tracks. In that context, it runs commercial operations in a number of greyhound stadia, including Harold's Cross. There are 17 greyhound tracks licensed by Bord na gCon which owns Shelbourne Park, Harold's Cross, Cork, Tralee, Waterford, Youghal, Limerick and Galway, and also has a 51% share in the Mullingar track.

In an economic report by Jim Power in 2010 it was estimated that the greyhound racing industry is responsible for sustaining in excess of 10,000 full and part-time jobs directly and indirectly, many in rural communities, and injects an estimated €500 million into local economies. While this work may be somewhat outdated at this point, the fact remains that the greyhound sector makes a significant contribution to the rural economy. The greyhound breeding industry is also very export oriented with over 75% of greyhounds now running in the UK being Irish bred.

Greyhound racing attracts thousands of tourists to Ireland from many countries, particularly France, Germany and the UK, and Bord na gCon works closely with Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the various tour operators. Ireland is regarded as a world-class player in greyhound breeding and there is considerable potential for further development in this area. The Irish Greyhound Derby, run in Shelbourne Park, is one of the richest greyhound races in the world. However, Bord na gCon has been operating in a very difficult financial environment for several years and in particular since 2011 when it took on considerable debt as a result of the development of Limerick stadium. In 2014, against the background of reducing income for the organisation through the recession, and the significant debt burden, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine commissioned an independent report into certain matters relating to Bord na gCon, including its financial performance and prospects. That report, known as the Indecon report, provided a roadmap for the sustainable development of the greyhound sector, and recommended several asset disposals, including Harold's Cross, in order to reduce the debt burden.

I understand that Bord na gCon, having considered the matter and having regard to the recommendations in the Indecon report, has decided to put Harold's Cross stadium on the market in order to reduce its debt levels and increase its capacity to provide support and assistance to the industry. The directors of the Dublin Greyhound and Sports Association Limited approved the sale of the Harold's Cross property at a meeting held on 16 March 2017.

While the sale of Harold's Cross is very regrettable, Bord na gCon's view is that there is no other option if the burden of debt on the organisation is to be reduced in any meaningful way. I understand that its intention is to transfer the Harold's Cross racing schedule to Shelbourne Park and Bord na gCon continues to accommodate racing at Shelbourne Park on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, albeit that is suspended at the moment because of ongoing pickets. Bord na gCon has informed me that all permanent and temporary staff who had been employed at Harold's Cross have now been transferred to Shelbourne Park with no breaks in their employment records. I understand that the closure of Harold's Cross has led to concern among supporters of the stadium and an effort at mediation between Dublin Greyhound Breeders and Owners Association, GOBA, and Bord na gCon is under way. Bord na gCon has

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informed me that Kieran Mulvey has agreed to chair this mediation process. There has been significant Government commitment to this sector in recent years, with the contribution of the taxpayer, through the horse and greyhound fund, having increased from €10.8 million in 2014 to €16 million in 2017.

I remain committed to continuing to support this vitally important sector. However, it is clear that if it is to have a sustainable future, the burden of debt on Bord na gCon must be reduced. In this regard the board has its own responsibilities to discharge, and this may involve very difficult decisions. I can appreciate that the local community will have a view on the further uses to which the site may be put, if sold. Any proposal for its development will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process. Any sale of the Harold's Cross stadium - and I refer to the Senator's point - will require my consent and that of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I will consider any specific proposal for its sale having regard to the Indecon report's recommendations around the need to avoid further debt burden on the taxpayer and the need to reduce the significant burden of debt of Bord na gCon.

An Cathaoirleach: We are over time, so I ask the Senator to be brief.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I ask that he looks at the plight of the part-time workers in Shelbourne Park to see if something can be done to alleviate the pressures and the concerns of the staff for the viability of the sector. The longer the protest goes on the more chance that everybody will lose out. I welcome the mediation efforts. I know the Minister of State has concerns but would he meet with the Harold's Cross community council in order that the latter could have an opportunity to look at a vision for the area if the stadium is to be sold? The Minister of State mentioned the full rigours of the planning process. In respect of the planning process, there was an unsuccessful attempt by Bord na gCon to have the zoning changed in the last development plan. The feeling from the local community is that there should be a statutory local area plan before any such proposal should ever be considered.

An Cathaoirleach: We are way over time.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I should say that earlier today I met representatives of the Dublin Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association. The mediation process is starting tomorrow. I met them on foot of a commitment I gave that I would do so after publication of the draft legislation for a greyhound breeders racing (amendment) Bill. It will be referred to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine for pre-legislative scrutiny. I welcome that engagement but I cannot get involved.

With regard to meeting with the community I do not want to pre-empt a decision. If I agree to that request here then I will be accused of having circumvented the process that is taking place around the sale. I do not want to be seen as interfering with that process in any hand or part, except to encourage everybody to engage. I suggested to the Dublin Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association this morning that they should engage in the pre-legislative scrutiny process, where their opinions and their points of view will be a matter of public record and will get a fair hearing at that committee.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State and the Senator.

Sitting suspended at 3.15 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

Seanad Éireann
Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the referral to committee of the Companies Act 2014 regulations, to be taken without debate on the conclusion of the Order of Business; No. 2, statements on the Rebuilding Ireland second quarterly progress report, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude not later than 6.45 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, the contributions of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each and the Minister to reply not later than 6.35 p.m.; and No. 3, statements on JobPath, to be taken at 6.45 p.m. and to conclude not later than 8.15 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, the contributions of other Senators not to exceed five minutes each and the Minister to reply not later than 8.05 p.m. Following the requests of some Members there will be expressions of sympathy on the death of Mr. Martin McGuinness, former Northern Ireland deputy First Minister, at the end of today's business at 8.15 p.m., or earlier if business finishes earlier than scheduled. The Fine Gael Party will put forward one speaker and I suggest that each group does likewise.

An Cathaoirleach: Obviously the Order of Business must be agreed to. In view of the fact that the Leader has acceded to a request that a special time be set aside later this evening for tributes to the late Martin McGuinness, it would be futile to allow everybody to do the same at this stage. It is up to Senators to decide, but there is no point in duplicating tributes. The Leader has made the magnanimous decision to set aside time later today and Members can speak then, if they so wish. I do not wish to stymie anybody as the passing of Martin McGuinness is an important event to be marked.

Senator Keith Swanick: Ba mhaith liom ar son Fhianna Fáil agus ar mo shon féin comhbhrón a dhéanamh le clann agus le cairde Martin McGuinness agus lena pháirtí, Sinn Féin. Polaiteoir den scoth ab ea é. Bhí ról an-tábhachtach aige i bpróiseas na síochána. Cuimhním go maith ar an lá stairiúil deich mbliana ó shin nuair a bhí sé i Stormont le Ian Paisley, Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern agus Peter Hain. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Ba mhaith liom freisin cúpla focal a rá mar gheall ar an dtubaiste i gceantar Iorras i gContae Mhaigh Eo. Blacksod Lighthouse is situated at the very tip of the Erris Peninsula. It remains the centre of the search operation under way around Blackrock for Irish Coast Guard helicopter Rescue 116. Mr. Vincent Sweeney is the keeper of the lighthouse and it was he who was on duty awaiting the return of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick and her colleagues to refuel. Sadly, they never returned. As we all know, weather and sea conditions have played havoc with the search operation for Mark Duffy, Ciarán Smith and Paul Ormsby.

It is somewhat prophetic that a weather forecast from the same lighthouse, relayed by Mr. Ted Sweeney who was Vincent's father, just after 2 a.m. on 3 June 1944 contained a warning about a force 6 wind and a rapidly falling barometer at Blacksod. On receipt of this information, General Dwight D. Eisenhower postponed by one day the planned invasion of Normandy by allied forces. The actions of one man in Blacksod, County Mayo helped to avert a military catastrophe and changed the course of the Second World War and eventually led to the fall of Nazi Germany. Despite immense technological advancements since that day in 1944, the perils of the north Atlantic Ocean and the unpredictability of the weather remain the same.

There are around 300 people, mostly volunteers, involved in the massive operation to find the helicopter and the remaining members of the crew. Unfortunately, weather conditions and the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean pose an immense challenge. All of us who have been

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involved with the volunteers - I include my colleague, Rose, in this - want to see the families reunited with their loved ones. There is a quiet resolve on the Erris Peninsula to complete the task in hand. The response of the local community has been truly incredible. They are responsible for three distinct aspects of the mission. The first involves the provision of local knowledge from fishermen neighbours and friends who have been instrumental in the search. The second is the land search by local volunteers that has yielded important parts of the wreckage. The third is the welfare of the searchers and members of the emergency services. Food has been provided for 250 people each day.

What is unique about the operation is the collaboration between the air accident investigation unit, the Garda, the Irish Naval Service, the Air Corps, Civil Defence, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, RNLI, Mayo County Council and the Irish Lights vessel *Granuaile*. They have all worked together under the direction of the Irish Coast Guard.

As I have said previously in the House, on every single call-out members of the Irish Coast Guard are exposed to dangers, with which no other workers, apart from members of the emergency services, are faced. There are many people alive today in Ireland who owe their lives to the bravery and skill of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick and her fine colleagues. It has been touching to hear so many such stories as the nation has expressed its gratitude to these brave heroes. It was striking to listen to the brave words spoken by the family of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick: "We feel like the lucky ones now because we have her. We can kiss her. We can hold her."

Over the weekend I was in Blacksod Lighthouse with Mr. Vincent Sweeney and some of the immediate family members of the three missing crew members. Another D-Day is being planned. I know that I speak for every person involved in the search operation in County Mayo and the nation when I say we all hope the families of Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith will have their own D-Day when their loved ones are discovered.

Senator Billy Lawless: As the first speaker on behalf of the Independent group of Senators, I express our deep sympathy to the family of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick on their tragic loss and our warm support for the other families still awaiting news of loved ones also on the helicopter. I also express our condolences on the sudden and tragic loss of Derry footballer, Ryan McBride. I want also to express my personal condolences to the family of Martin McGuinness who played a major role in the Good Friday Agreement which led Sinn Féin to embrace the democratic process, thus ensuring that peace has prevailed on our island ever since. I express my sincere gratitude to Martin who died very tragically and suddenly.

On a more uplifting note, I warmly welcome the Taoiseach's announcement of plans for a referendum to allow millions of Irish citizens living abroad to vote in Irish presidential elections, which is something that I have personally campaigned for over a number of years, along with most of the immigrant community groups in the United States and United Kingdom. I recognise that there are many citizens residing in this State who are fearful of allowing such a large number of persons abroad to vote for a President of the country they love but do not live in. I call on those people and any other party that is not intending to support this referendum to give the Irish diaspora a chance. Second only to ensuring the undocumented Irish receive regularised status within the United States, this initiative means so much to the US diaspora with whom I spent the last number of days as part of the St. Patrick's week festivities, as in previous years. When the Taoiseach asked me if I would accept his nomination as a Member of this esteemed Seanad, he promised this referendum and he has delivered on that promise. I can think of no better way to bring tangible meaning to Article 2 of the Constitution, which

recognises that the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage. The Irish love being Irish abroad. We love the Irish when they return home. Like any other Irish man or woman residing in this State, they are entitled to a vote in regard to who should be the next Uachtarán na hÉireann. My only regret in respect of the Taoiseach's proposal is that the referendum will not take place in advance of the next presidential election.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Hear, hear.

Senator Billy Lawless: This is disappointing. I ask the Government to reconsider holding the referendum at a much earlier stage.

On Sunday last, along with a number of organisations, I attended a rally in Daley Plaza in Chicago to protest in solidarity with the Muslim immigrant community that has been unfairly targeted by President Trump's unconstitutional executive order. Speaking at that rally Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois said: "Whether they come from Damascus, Syria or Ireland or from Colombia or South America, immigrants who work hard and love this nation ought to have a way to earn their citizenship." This is the immigrant community that I know; the diaspora that I represent. They care not just about the sum of their own parts but also of others. These are the voices that will be reflected in future presidential elections in Ireland if the referendum passes. I ask that the Government give these people their voices sooner rather than later.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: This morning was like no other morning in that we woke up to the realisation that our friend and comrade, Martin McGuinness, had passed away during the night. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the Leader for making provision for statements at a later date but I do not think Members should be curtailed from making their own personal contributions in regard to the passing of Martin McGuinness. I express my heartfelt sympathy to Bernie and his children. Martin was not only a political leader for us in Sinn Féin, he was an inspiration for peace and freedom around the world.

We had already had a horrific week in Belmullet and Blacksod, as Senator Swanick has already said, with the tragic accident that has taken the lives of Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith. On behalf of the whole community of Erris and the wider Mayo area and my party, I extend our sympathy to the families of the crew of R116. They will forever remain in the hearts of the people of Erris and the people of Mayo. All we want at this stage is for Mark, Paul and Ciarán to be reunited with their families. I commend the work of the Irish Coast Guard, all those involved in the search in Blacksod and all the people in the local community, including the local fishermen, all of whom have done everything they could over the past week to support the families and help with the search. If there is one positive action to come from this horror, it must be that we now put the Irish Coast Guard on a statutory footing, and we must do so as a matter of urgency.

The area of the search in Blacksod Bay was one with which Martin McGuinness was very familiar, having been to the Inishkea islands and Inishglora. I thank all the previous speakers from all political persuasions and none for the deluge of messages and expressions of sympathy I have received from them this morning. Republicans across Ireland will mourn Martin's passing because he is recognised across Ireland and internationally as a statesman and peacemaker. Martin was a regular visitor to the west, particularly to Mayo, in both a personal and political capacity. He joined me on many occasions on the election trail and had a genuine connection and affinity with all those he met. He came to Mayo during his presidential campaign in 2011

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and was received with great warmth. He was also a regular visitor to the west in a personal capacity and believed strongly in the potential of the region and its need for investment. He had a keen sense of the importance of rural Ireland to the republican project. Although we have lost a great leader today, a wonderful legacy of peace has been left with us. We must now continue and achieve what Martin started. The aims of Irish freedom and unity were central to his life, and we owe it to him to make these his legacy.

I also extend my sympathy - I know Martin would want to do likewise - to the families of Ryan McBride and Maureen Haughey, who passed away during the week. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. I understand it has been a difficult week for her in more ways than one. In case people took me up wrong, I just did not want a rehash of matters. However, if Senators wish to pass comments of sympathy on the death of Martin McGuinness, I will not stymie that. I call Senator Black.

Senator Frances Black: I offer my condolences to Captain Dara Fitzpatrick's family. I can only imagine what it has been like for them. I pay tribute to her and to Mark Duffy, Ciarán Smith and Paul Ormsby on the great work they have done down through the years and I hope and pray that Mark, Ciarán and Paul are found soon. I also pay tribute to all the volunteers and crew who are out there looking for them at this time.

I am also deeply saddened to hear of the passing of the great man, Martin McGuinness. My thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends and party colleagues today. I was privileged to meet Martin on many occasions due to the fact that my father comes from a small island off north Antrim. Martin went there many's the time to meet the islanders, and I met him myself on many occasions. I also met him through my music. He was a great leader. He was a very warm and charismatic man. He was a gentleman. His work on bringing peace to this wonderful country of ours will be a lasting legacy, and he was instrumental in delivering that peace. His desire for equality and justice was a driving force in all he did, and I think it is generally recognised that without Martin McGuinness there would not be a peace process. There is now an onus on all of us to complete the work about which he was so passionate and to strive ever harder for an Ireland in which everybody is treated equally, irrespective of background or tradition. I would also like to say he was a great poet. When I was doing a gig in the Creggan at one time, he gave me one of his poems. He was a great fan of Seamus Heaney. I am very saddened today to hear of his passing. He was a young man and he will be sorely missed. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Listening to colleagues, I am conscious of what a sad day it is, with so many condolences being offered. On behalf of the Labour Party group, I would like to join with others in offering condolences to the family of Martin McGuinness and to his Sinn Féin colleagues here in the Chamber and elsewhere on their sad loss. As others have said, his legacy as a key negotiator and facilitator of the peace process will live on. For any of us who had the pleasure of meeting him, he was a very warm, pleasant and, indeed, humorous individual. It is fitting that the Leader has added time today for condolences to be offered. I am also glad we have the opportunity to offer condolences on the floor of the House during the Order of Business, which is important on the day his death has been announced. I want to express my own sincere sympathies to his family, friends, colleagues and comrades.

On behalf of the Labour Party group, I also want to offer condolences to the family of Ryan

McBride, the Derry City footballer who died so tragically and so young. I want to note those terrible losses in Derry this week.

Along with others, I offer condolences to the family of the crew of rescue helicopter R116, Captain Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Mark Ormsby and Ciarán Smith. We offer our sincere condolences to their families, noting that the search for the three missing crewmen still continues. Others have spoken very eloquently of the immense bravery that has been shown over many years by the personnel of the Coast Guard and the rescue services, like Captain Fitzpatrick and her crew. I want to say how much we are all thinking of them at this sad time.

On more mundane business, I join with Senator Lawless in welcoming the announcement by the Taoiseach that a referendum will be held on giving voting rights to the diaspora in future presidential elections. I was part of the Constitutional Convention that made that recommendation. It is an important one and I hope we will see it take effect very quickly, even if the concern is that this is just an aspirational comment by the Taoiseach and not a real commitment. I am glad to hear Senator Lawless say he was made a promise, so I hope we will see that promise kept and see that referendum delivered in early course.

I commend our colleague, Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, on his initiative in organising an Irish Stand event in New York last Friday to make a stand against some of the narrow values espoused by President Trump. I believe it was an important occasion to mark.

I ask the Leader for an indication as to whether the Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2017, scheduled for tomorrow, will be taken through Committee and Remaining Stages, given five amendments have been put down for this Bill. There is some controversy over it and the Cathaoirleach was kind enough to facilitate us in separating Committee Stage from Second Stage. Given only one hour is allocated on the schedule, I ask that either it be adjourned tomorrow if the Bill does not conclude, or that Committee Stage and Report Stage are separated, which I believe would be preferable, given the number of amendments from different colleagues, including Senator Nash.

On another matter for tomorrow's business, I am glad to hear the Government will not be opposing the Pensions (Equal Treatment in Occupational Benefit Scheme)(Amendment) Bill 2016 that I and my Labour Party colleagues are proposing on Second Stage in Private Members' time. I will circulate colleagues with a briefing on that Bill before Private Members' time tomorrow. I very much welcome the support in principle from the Government for the Bill.

I welcome the fact a settlement has been agreed between the Clerys workers and Natrium.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It is great to see that after 20 months of campaigning for justice. Many of us stood on the protest with the Clerys workers, who were treated so abominably by Natrium. I am glad to see a settlement has been reached to the satisfaction of the workers. I ask that we would have a debate in early course on the need for legislation to ensure this sort of thing does not happen again to workers in the future. This settlement does not obviate the need for legal change to ensure companies cannot leave workers high and dry in the way Clerys workers were left so shamefully 20 months ago.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Given I have an unavoidable long-standing prior commitment to-night, I would like to join with colleagues in expressing sympathy to the family and friends of

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Martin McGuinness and to the Sinn Féin Party. It is a reasonable definition of leadership to say that a leader should be fit to embrace change, identify the need for new directions when appropriate and bring people with him or her in doing that. Martin McGuinness exemplified that in an enormous way. To be fit to adapt to change and interpret the environment according to changed circumstances is a particular ability and the capacity to bring others along when doing it is a great facility. I am of the view that he had that and he was a man of peace.

When he embraced the peace process, he engaged in an extraordinary set of personal initiatives during that time in order to reinforce the process. They were all very courageous and not easy, and some of them were politically risky for him, I am sure. He merits our sympathy and I commend the Leader on setting aside time to discuss that tonight. I live in the Border area. As I think I said to Senator Conway-Walsh earlier, a fitting tribute to Martin McGuinness would be a continuation of the peace process, a building of peace on our island, a strengthening of peace at community level and the abolition of sectarianism wherever possible by interchange between North and South, etc. I offer my sincere sympathies to all Martin's colleagues.

I join colleagues in paying tribute to the late Captain Dara Fitzpatrick. She was a woman of exemplary courage and was an exemplary giver all her life. She had a strong family connection in my area. Her family on the Fitzpatrick side come from Cootehill, County Cavan, and its hinterland. A number of her aunts and uncles are neighbours of mine. The former Ceannt Comhairle, Tom Fitzpatrick, was a granduncle of hers. I offer my sympathy to her family.

May I finally-----

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is way over the limit.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I will leave it at that. I had wanted to address another public issue but I will wait until tomorrow.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I join Senator Swanick and others who have expressed sincere sympathy to the families of the crew of the rescue helicopter R116. It was an horrific accident to happen to people serving the State and caring for other people. It is really hard to take when something like this happens.

The death of Martin McGuinness signals another very sad day in Irish history. He changed the ground and the rules in the context of Northern Ireland. Nobody could dispute the great work he did. I pass my sympathy to his wife and family.

On behalf of myself, Senator Swanick and the Fianna Fáil Party, I offer condolences to the family of the late Maureen Haughey, who was laid to rest this morning.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Aidan Davitt: She was a formidable lady steeped in Irish political history.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Like most of my colleagues, I look back over the past ten or 15 days as very black days in Ireland. My condolences go to all. I will have more to say tomorrow on an article in one of today's newspapers by Ger Aherne, a former general in the Irish Army.

A week after I was elected to the Seanad, I got a letter from a garda recounting for me the events that led to me leaving the British Army in 1974. My mother and father were put through

an horrendous time with phone calls at 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. telling them I had been shot or was going to be shot. There were all sorts of threats. They are a matter of public record.

When I was elected, the media made a big deal of the fact that 11 Sinn Féin votes elected me.

Looking back over those 40 years, I note how far we have come, how far Martin McGuinness brought this country; how close he brought this country to full peace. I cannot let Martin McGuinness be passed over as an irrelevancy by anybody and nobody in this room or in politics has done that, thank God. There have been one or two serious attacks on him. Martin McGuinness brought us to a level of peace that many of us in this room could never have imagined. I sometimes wonder if we have been brought as far down the peace route in the Republic as they have in the North of Ireland.

I cannot begin to understand what it took for Martin McGuinness to cross the road and shake the hand of one of the most vile people who ever walked this planet, that is, Ian Paisley, but Ian Paisley also crossed that road, and between the two of them, they brought peace to Northern Ireland.

I am deeply grateful that this world had a Martin McGuinness, I am deeply grateful that he commenced the peace process. I pray to God he rests in peace alongside Ian Paisley but I pray to God more that the people who are left behind will continue on the legacy. We must move to a point of constitutional legality for everybody and one should remember the people who founded this State also were once regarded as terrorists.

Senator Frank Feighan: I join in the tributes to Martin McGuinness, who made a huge contribution to building peace in Northern Ireland. It is probably true to say that without Martin McGuinness, the peace process may not have happened. He was one of the driving forces behind the Good Friday Agreement and that will be his lasting legacy.

I had the opportunity to get to know Martin very well in my role as Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and as Co-Chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I found him very personable and engaging. The evidence is clear of a man who showed great character to do what was needed to advance the cause of peace.

I believe *The Irish Times* obituary today captured the man perfectly when it stated:

Ireland came to know two Martin McGuinnesses. One was, for much of his life, a man of war and conflict, dedicated to fighting, as hard as he could, the British authorities, police, army and intelligence services.

The second McGuinness was a man of peace and reconciliation, who for a decade worked hard at building bridges with both London and unionism, from fighting the British state to negotiating with it, from being denounced by the Rev Ian Paisley and ascribing bigotry to him, to chuckling with him.

His contribution to building peace was without doubt one of his great qualities and today, without doubt, we lost a chief architect of the peace process. I would like to extend my deepest sympathies to his wife, Bernie, and their four children and to his colleagues and members of Sinn Féin.

Senator Paul Gavan: It has been an awful week. Like all of my colleagues, I extend our sympathies to the families of the crew of Helicopter Rescue 116, to the family of Ryan McBride, to the Haughey family and, of course, to the family of our comrade Martin McGuinness. I will speak on Martin later and I appreciate the time given by the Leader in that respect.

I acknowledge the tremendous victory of the SIPTU members, to which my colleague, Senator Bacik alluded. It was a 21-month campaign, a campaign by a fighting union, and I want to pay tribute to my colleague Ms Ethel Buckley, in particular, who is head of SIPTU's services division. She gave a commitment at the last SIPTU conference that the union would never give up on the Clerys workers and it has been as good as its word. It is a good day for working people to get that settlement.

Finally, I propose that leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 to provide for additional protections for employees in the service sector to ensure they receive tips or gratuities paid by customers and to provide for related matters. This Bill is No. 16 on the Supplementary Order Paper and I move that it be taken in Private Members' time.

An Cathaoirleach: There is a proposal that No. 16 be taken before No. 1.

Senator Paul Gavan: Yes.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I second that.

An Cathaoirleach: We do not need to do that at the moment. We can do it later and the Senator is down to speak.

Senator David Norris: As I am afraid I will not be able to be here at 8 p.m., with the Cathaoirleach's indulgence, I would like to say a few words about the late Martin McGuinness. The following quote came into my mind: "Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee". Death is always a sad event. I have no difficulty whatsoever in sending my heartfelt condolences to Mr. McGuinness's family. It is always sad for the family. In recent weeks I thought to myself how terribly frail and pathetic he looked on television. It was moving to hear him talk about the decision forced on him to have to leave politics. However, he did have a dark past. He was involved in the murder of Lord Louis Mountbatten. For that reason, it is remarkably gracious of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to send a personal note to his family. He was involved in the Warrenpoint massacre. He was also involved in persuading a former IRA informer to come back to the North by talking to his mother. Within hours of his arrival, the informer was murdered. In the presidential campaign I said to Mr. McGuinness: "Martin, you did not get that luxurious fleet of buses on the average industrial wage." He laughed. The most important and significant part of his career, however, was the second half - his political and military career when he courageously turned towards the path of peace. Without his intervention, the peace process might not have happened. For that reason, I salute him.

I am also glad to be reminded of the passing of Maureen Haughey who was a remarkably gracious and decent person. She held her dignity throughout a series of assaults on her husband and her family. She stood by him with remarkable fortitude. We are lucky to have such people, not in public life but in supporting public figures. I am happy to add my voice of support in sending a message of sympathy, mine in particular, to her son, Deputy Seán Haughey, who was

a decent Member of this House for a while.

Senator James Reilly: Like everybody else, one can only be saddened by events in the past two weeks. Certainly, the loss of the Irish Coast Guard helicopter, R116, and its crew reminds us in a real way of the dangers so many servicemen and women face when they go to help others and us. I saw the helicopter frequently passing over the beach at Rush. I offer my sympathy to the families of Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Ciarán Smith and Paul Ormsby. Senator Joe O'Reilly mentioned Captain Dara Fitzpatrick's grand-uncle. Her dad was the sheriff to whom we all had to submit our election forms for many years. I express my particular sympathy to him and also to the family of Ciarán Smith from Oldtown, County Dublin. His dad still works and gives service in one of our schools in Donabate.

I also express my sympathy to Sinn Féin and the family of the late Martin McGuinness. I would not profess to have known him as well as many others. However, when I did get to know him, I was struck immediately by his warm personality. He led a remarkable life for somebody who had turned to violence early on, presumably through frustration. He turned to the path of peace and became a key figure in achieving a peace we all now enjoy but one which we must always remember is fragile and one we will have to continue to work hard to maintain. To Martin's family, I extend my deepest sympathy.

Senator Victor Boyhan: The Irish Cancer Society is holding its 30th national fundraising Daffodil Day event on Friday. One might ask what its relevance is. Several national newspapers over the weekend reported that a senior consultant in oncology had expressed serious concerns about the shortage of beds and lack of consultants to deal with patients with cancer. It is an absolute disgrace. According to this eminent surgeon, cancer patients are now having their surgeries cancelled in significant numbers as hospitals struggle to cope with the lack and shortage of beds. I believe this message was conveyed to the Minister for Health by a delegation of top doctors from the Irish Hospital Consultants Association at a meeting in recent days. It issued a stark warning to him and I presume he is taking on board its concerns. The doctors are seriously concerned and will now have to step up a campaign to bring the public with them to make this a major political issue. In a week when we are rightly out fundraising to support the work of the Irish Cancer Society, which most people are happy to do, consultants in oncology face desperate circumstances in the treatment of their patients.

Will the Minister for Health be brought to the House as soon as possible to address a number of key issues? How does he intend to reduce the number of patients waiting for hospital admissions? How will he open additional hospital beds, as agreed in the programme for Government? How will he address the issues of staffing and resources, particularly in the area of oncology, in respect of which the consultants have expressed serious concern and about which they have written to a number of parliamentarians? How will he deal with the shortage of staff?

Having discussed this with a number of consultants today, I am reliably informed that there were 400 full-time hospital consultant posts unfilled. The Minister needs to address that. We have a crisis in the health services. I am not in the business of knocking people and I want to hear how we are going to have answers and solutions to address this. It is very important to have the Minister in the House as soon as practicable and possible to discuss this specific issue.

Senator Máire Devine: I will not be around later because of another issue arising in the Dáil. I extend my sympathy on the death of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick and the three missing crew of Rescue 116. God speed to the Irish Coast Guard and the local community in their de-

termination to bring home the three missing crew members.

This morning we are mourning the deaths of two of Derry's proud sons, Ryan McBride, who died young and suddenly, and the Sinn Féin leader, Martin McGuinness, who was not yet old. Martin's legacy will be etched in our collective mind. I refer to his courage, conscience, integrity, honour and his love for his native Derry and this island. Through his leadership, initially in the civil rights movement and then as a proud IRA volunteer defending his community, as a Member of Parliament and Assembly Member, as Minister for Education and as deputy First Minister at Stormont, he displayed nobility of spirit, as befits an extraordinary statesman. We in Sinn Féin and others across this island and beyond bathed in his easy, warm and relaxed personality that embraced everyone. I offer my deepest condolences to his family and those in his home town of Derry. Farewell Martin. Your watch is ended. We will sorely miss you.

I second Senator Paul Gavan's proposal.

Senator Tim Lombard: I join others regarding the sympathies offered in recent weeks. The reference to Derry losing two sons in recent weeks is very true. The loss of the soccer player, a fantastic player, was an awful tragedy. We learned today about the death of Mr. Martin McGuinness. It has been an awful few days, to say the very least. Obviously, the loss of Rescue 116 in Mayo was an awful tragedy for Ireland. That has to be noted also.

Today I wish to raise the issue of the incinerator in Ringaskiddy. For the fourth time, An Bord Pleanála has refused to make a decision on the planning permission. The matter has dragged on for nearly 17 years. We are through our third application and the people at the lower harbour are waiting anxiously for a decision. To have postponed this decision again, for which we have been waiting, has been very disheartening for the public connected to the lower harbour. The 240,000 tonne toxic waste incinerator has been opposed religiously by the entire community over recent years. It has been a major issue and a major thorn in the side of the Cork community. We need to do something to ensure that An Bord Pleanála makes a decision as soon as possible. An oral hearing was held, which I attended, in July 2016 yet still we have not got the result from the board. I hope we can get this decision from An Bord Pleanála. To postpone it for a fourth time is totally inappropriate. We need to move forward and make a decision so that the people of the lower harbour, and County Cork, can get on with their lives.

Senator John Dolan: My condolences to the McGuinness family. It has been a bad weekend in general terms for the people of Derry. I should also mention, although it has been well mentioned already, the tragedy that occurred off the Mayo coast.

Today is World Down Syndrome Day. Every week, two to three women give birth to lovely little babies with Down's syndrome. Much has been done over the years to improve the supports for families but I do not believe that anyone can turn to those parents at that point - it is not always two parents - with hand on heart and say we are able to give all the supports that are needed. As that is still a stretch for Ireland, I draw that to people's attention on a day like today. Families are trying to find money for assessments. Organisations such as Down Syndrome Ireland and others are trying to support them with practical measures such as speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and whatever.

The other point that must be made is that many children with Down's syndrome can have other complications such as heart conditions and arthritis. In their later years, many of them will face the onset of dementia of one kind or another. Thankfully, the longevity of children

with Down's syndrome in the past 30 or 40 years has increased from 30 to 35 years. In the past, parents were told that if they got 30 or 35 years out of life with their child they were doing well. They now live into their 50s and beyond. That is a compliment to the improvement in services but we are not keeping pace in that regard.

This is an occasion to applaud parents, families and communities that do their best and to remind ourselves, those in the other House and the Government that real issues arise for people. For two or three families this week, that challenge will arise out of nowhere. That is the reason ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is important. Also, real issues arise now for parents who are becoming elderly in respect of how their son or daughter will be provided for when they pass way. I pay tribute to those parents and express my condolences to all those who have been bereaved so sadly in the past week.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I echo to the word what Senator Dolan has just said and the way he said it.

When I learned of the death of Mrs. Maureen Haughey, and I would like to be associated with messages of condolences to her family, I was struck by something that was said when her husband, Charles Haughey, died. At his funeral, RTE's John Bowman said that whatever one thought of his political views from all sides, there was no doubt about his greatness because greatness is about one's impact on events. The same words are relevant when we think of Martin McGuinness today. However, without in any way resiling from our disagreement with the path of violence towards a resolution of any human dispute, one can certainly say that there was greatness in the choice he made for peace when he came to make that choice, in the way that he led others, in the way he co-operated with past opponents and so on. On a personal note, having met him, he was a very gracious man.

There are others who we remember, including the families who are suffering who still have not found the remains of their loved ones as a result of last week's tragedy off the west coast. We think of Bishop Eamonn Casey who did so much in the area of social justice, which should never be forgotten.

Senator David Norris: Well said.

Senator Rónán Mullen: All those who have been bereaved or lost deserve to be remembered.

A few Mondays ago, the Capuchin day centre for homeless people hit a record high when it had 710 people for dinner. It normally hosts between 500 and 600 per day at its lunchtime meal. On the same day, 160 families received baby food, nappies and clothing from the centre, which is run by Br. Kevin Crowley, one of society's living heroes. Up to 1,600 food parcels are currently given out on Wednesday mornings and Br. Crowley said the people with whom he works live in constant fear of the unknown because they dread what might happen to them or their families in the future. Despite economic growth and rising disposable income levels, it is clear people in Dublin, and throughout the country, are left behind and are utterly reliant on charitable assistance. Last month's survey by the CSO on income and living conditions indicated that the consistent poverty rate showed little recent change, going from 8.8% in 2014 to 8.7% in 2015 and a recent report by the Samaritans claimed social and economic inequality was putting people at increased risk of suicide.

In recent weeks, in both Houses of the Oireachtas, there has been considerable and deserved

spotlight on things that happened in the past but the focus must also remain on the considerable number of our citizens who are being let down by the State now and who find themselves in various states of inequality. Children are bearing the brunt of the inequity, especially those in lone-parent households and in homeless families whose sense of dignity and self-respect is being eroded on a daily basis but yet there are no significant street demonstrations calling for a change to this.

Before Christmas, Br. Crowley said he met a mother of three who had been placed in emergency accommodation in Malahide, north Dublin. She had no money and nothing to eat. She had to leave her children alone in the accommodation because she had to go back to the Capuchin service in the city centre for food. Today, we welcome our Government Ministers back from around the world and I am mindful we often call for Ministers to come to this House to discuss various issues. They would do well to visit Br. Crowley's facility on Bow Street to see just how unequal Irish society remains in 2017.

Senator Colm Burke: I join with colleagues in offering my sympathies to the families of Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith on their tragic loss and the huge difficulties they have endured in the past week. I also sympathise with all the people who have worked with them through the years and I hope the search operation is successful and locates the bodies of the three missing persons. It brings home the dangers and the risks taken by people who provide back-up support services and we need to acknowledge it more often than just at the time of a tragedy such as this. I also convey my sympathies to the family of Martin McGuinness and to the Sinn Féin Party on their loss. It is appropriate that Members recognise his contribution to bringing about the peace process in Northern Ireland. It is important that the peace process continues and that we make further progress.

I support what Senator Boyhan said on the lack of consultants, something I have been highlighting for over five years. In 2012 I said we would face serious consequences for the way we were approaching the employment of junior doctors. There are 400 vacancies and we are not just competing for them within Ireland or in a UK or European market. We are competing for medical consultants in a world market and we have not responded appropriately so we now face major challenges. I agree with Senator Boyhan that we need to deal with this issue.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Gan dabht ar bith, tá ár gcoíthe ar fad trom inniu mar gheall ar chloisteáil faoi bhás Mhartin McGuinness. Táimid an-bhuíoch don Cheannaire as ucht an t-am a thabhairt dúinn tráthnóna le hómós mar is ceart a thabhairt dó. We welcome the opportunity to give a proper account of the graciousness and the wonder of Martin McGuinness later on. I am looking forward to that.

I also join in the condolences that have been conveyed in the House to the families of Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith. At a further time, it will be important to have a look at the really important role that the Coast Guard plays. We all hope that the speedy recovery of the missing bodies will happen. I would also like to be connected with the condolences and sympathies conveyed to the family of Ryan McBride and the Haughey family.

There was a very important legal hearing yesterday. Mr. Peter Mulryan, one of the people who suffered due the situation in the mother and baby homes, was granted leave for a full hearing to gain access to his records from Tusla. I believe that is a very important milestone. I hope that the State will fully co-operate in providing information to those people who are still looking for information on what exactly happened in those homes.

I would also like to be associated with the sentiments of Senator Lawless on the referendum on voting rights for the diaspora. I agree with him wholeheartedly. I do not see why we would be dragging our feet on this referendum. I call on the Government to publish the options paper around the voting rights as soon as possible and to look for the speedy passage of that legislation.

I would like to invite Senators to a briefing we have at 6 p.m. in the AV Room on the implementation of the International Protection Act and the ongoing situation in direct provision centres. There is a very serious situation there at the moment causing difficulties for people who are seeking asylum. I hope that some Members will come along to listen to the stories that will be told. There are serious legal implications and issues being brought to the fore. I hope that we could have another debate in the near future in the House on the implementation-----

Senator David Norris: I propose the reintroduction of my Bill.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The Senator can do that. I would be very grateful if the Leader could facilitate that debate on the International Protection Act and its implementation since it was brought in.

An Cathaoirleach: We are running out of time. I will allow Senator Mark Daly and Senator Warfield to contribute.

Senator Mark Daly: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I too would like to extend my sympathies to the families of the crew of R116, along with the Haughey family. Mrs. Haughey was a formidable lady, a daughter of a Taoiseach, a wife of a Taoiseach and in her own right made a contribution to Irish life and society. I extend my sympathies to the family, friends and colleagues of Martin McGuinness, who made an extraordinary journey in his time on this planet.

I ask the Leader to organise a debate about the ongoing scandal of Brazilian beef and the concern among Irish farmers around this issue that could affect them so directly.

I also raise with the Leader the civil rights issue for members of the deaf community and the Recognition of Irish Sign Language for the Deaf Community Bill that we have spoken about many times in this House. We have put the House on notice that we will amend the Order of Business for the last week of March, which is next week, and put the Bill through Committee and Remaining Stages. We asked the Government to provide its amendments by 15 March. Those amendments did not arrive on 15 March but I understand that the amendments are on the Minister's desk. He has them. I would be anxious to sit down with the Minister in advance of Committee Stage next week to make sure that the amendments are workable, make the Bill better and do not take away from the purpose of the Bill. We will give those members of the deaf community their rights.

According to the confidence and supply agreement, there is supposed to be ten weeks between Second Stage and Committee Stage. We have gone through all of the necessary processes and have been to the justice committee. The Bill has gone through pre-legislative scrutiny and we are now awaiting Committee Stage which, with the agreement of this House, will happen next week. I do not wish to have an amendment on the day and then have to take Committee Stage and put all of those amendments through the process in the one day. That is not the way we should do it. Working with the Minister and the Leader, I hope that we will be able to get this Bill through the House in this session.

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Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank Senator Dolan for his contribution and his awareness raising around World Down Syndrome Day. I have the pleasure of calling my uncle Seán one of my closest friends. He brought such wonderful joy to the Warfield family and everyone he met. My fondest memories with Seán are standing on the banks of the Camac in Inchicore watching St. Patrick's Athletic.

Before I mention Derry City, Senator Dolan's contribution reflects the need for a diversity of voices in this House. As a League of Ireland fan, I extend my sincere sympathy to the family of Ryan McBride, to Derry City football club, and to everyone who has called the randy Brandywell home.

I also convey my deepest sympathy to Bernadette and the broader republican family on the death of Martin McGuinness. Martin was a colossus of contemporary politics and a committed activist throughout his life. His political activism started in his youth. At 21 he witnessed the shooting of 26 unarmed civilians on the streets of his city, Derry, and from that period onwards Martin McGuinness spent his lifetime opposing occupation and fighting for self-determination. His pivotal role within Sinn Féin alongside Gerry Adams as a persuader for peace among republicans was truly remarkable. He had conversations which would lead to that peace being realised, to the Good Friday Agreement and to a legal and political pathway opening for the achievement of Irish reunification. That was Martin's vision. That was his *aisling*. In public life, Martin was one of the most kind and gentle figures I have ever had the pleasure to meet. Senator Black mentioned his poetry and his love for Seamus Heaney, and little did I know as I picked up a copy of *North* on Parnell Street yesterday that we would wake to such sad news today. Martin's love of the arts extended to music, and he was always extremely supportive on that front, including to musicians like Senator Black. I express my condolences to Bernie, Fiachra, Emmet, Fionnuala and Grainne. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

An Cathaoirleach: Before we continue I would like to be associated with the votes of sympathy to Martin McGuinness's wife and family. I have said here before on the record that it was a loss to this Chamber that he was unable to come and visit and speak to us here when invited to do so. I was looking forward to it. That did not happen and it cannot happen now. I cannot blame the previous Cathaoirleach because there were logistical issues. It was regrettable that it did not happen as it would have added to the gravitas of this Chamber.

As someone from a coastal community, I am no stranger to sea tragedies, particularly around west Cork and off our coastline. I convey my sympathy to all those concerned in the terrible tragedy off the Mayo coast. It is made more poignant by the fact these people give their time to try to rescue fishermen and sailors and people who are out at sea and get into difficulty through their own fault. It is a terrible tragedy, and I do hope that the three missing persons from the helicopter will be found. Searching for bodies is nothing new to me in the area where I live. I do hope there will be success in this regard.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the 21 Members of the House who contributed to the Order of Business. To begin, i dtús báire, ba mhaith liom ar mo shon féin agus ar son Fhine Gael mo chomhbhrón a bhronnadh ar mhuintir McGuinness agus ar pháirtí Shinn Féin ar bhás Martin McGuinness.

Death is always sad. It is a period of mourning and of loss for family and friends and those left behind. Since we last met our nation has been gripped by tragedy and by loss of life. Our nation has been affected by the dreadful news of the terrible accident involving the crew of

R116, the very sad passing today of Martin McGuinness, the very sudden and untimely death of young Ryan McBride in his prime, the very sad passing of Maureen Haughey and the passing of Bishop Eamon Casey.

Many of us woke up this morning to the sad news of the death of Martin McGuinness. As a person and as a politician, he made a contribution and a difference to the lives of all of us on our island, and it is fair that we should cast aside our political differences and pay tribute to him as somebody who played a key role in forging peace on our island. In his life, he will be rightly remembered as a peacemaker. He made the move from being a commander in the IRA to a person who recognised the importance of peace, reconciliation and the gesture of reaching out. He forged a relationship and friendship with the late Ian Paisley, which was a testimony to the man. In addition, he shook the hand of the Queen in welcoming her to the North. He made government and the institutions of the Northern Ireland Assembly work, which shows that he was a negotiator and a facilitator. I had the pleasure of meeting him in Boston Airport and also being next to him on a radio broadcast as I was about to be eliminated in the last general election and he wished me well. He was genuine and generous on the two occasions I met him. To his wife, Bernie, and family who have lost not just a father, a husband and a grandfather but also a friend and to the Sinn Féin Party which has lost a colleague and a friend, we extend our sympathy. His legacy will be one of peace and the abandonment of sectarianism.

The tragic accident that befell the crew of R116 numbed the nation. The loss of Dara Fitzpatrick, a captain and leader in her role, shows her courage and the preciousness of life. We extend our sympathy to her family. As a House and a nation, we pray that the bodies of the missing crew members, Paul Ormsby, Mark Duffy and Ciarán Smith, will be found and returned to their families in order that they can say one last goodbye to them. The events in the aftermath of the tragic accident, as outlined by so many Senators today, underline the importance of the work of the Irish Coast Guard and the bravery and courage of the men and women who go out in very dangerous conditions, often late at night, and put their own lives at risk. We thank all those involved for their work and bravery. We thank the community in Blacksod Bay, the 300 people to whom Senator Rose Conway-Walsh referred, who are involved in a voluntary capacity in helping to bring closure to allow the families grieve. We thank the professionals involved in the rescue effort. We hope they will soon be successful in order that the families can say goodbye.

The Haughey family are this afternoon burying their mother and grandmother, Maureen Haughey, who bore being the wife and daughter of a Taoiseach with great dignity. She was the daughter of Seán Lemass and the widow of Charles J. Haughey. She was also the mother of Sean Haughey, a former Member of this House and a sitting Member of the Dáil. We extend our deepest sympathy to all of the Haughey family on their sad loss. She gave to the nation the importance of civic life.

Senator Fintan Warfield very eloquently touched on the death of Ryan McBride. It is unbelievable that a young man could play soccer on a Saturday afternoon and be dead on the Sunday morning. That shows how precious life is. He was a young man who had assumed the captaincy of his club which he loved and for which he had played a leading role in the campaign this year. He was a great leader on the pitch. We extend our sympathy to his family on his untimely death.

Bishop Eamonn Casey was a pastoral leader and will be remembered for many things. As Senator Rónán Mullen said, he was a champion of social justice. As a seminarian in Maynooth, I had the pleasure of meeting him and recognised the importance of his work in Trócaire. When

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they were not very popular, he was a huge champion of the Irish in the United Kingdom. Many will recall his near-death experience at the funeral of Óscar Romero and his stance against the then President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, will be remembered. He will be remembered for other reasons also. We extend our deepest sympathy to his son, Peter, and the wider Casey family.

Senators Lawless, Bacik and Ó Clochartaigh raised the issue of the Government's decision, and the Taoiseach's announcement in Philadelphia, to extend the franchise in the Irish presidential election. As Senator Bacik has said, it comes on foot of the decision of the Constitutional Convention. In acknowledging the remarks of Senators Ó Clochartaigh, Lawless and Bacik, there is a lot of work yet to be done before a referendum comes to pass. I hope that the global Irish civic forum, which will take place in Dublin, will be the platform within which we can put detail to the announcement by Government. It will be an opportunity to have a debate on the future of presidential elections and the role of the diaspora and how they will be able to vote, if it is carried by the people. The caveat is that it will be a referendum of the people, which will happen in time. It is important to recognise that the Constitutional Convention, in its fifth report, made a very strong recommendation on this issue. I thank the members of the convention again. It is an important decision by Government to allow a referendum to be put to the people to amend the Constitution around Irish citizens who are resident outside the State having a vote in presidential elections. I hope we will be able to have that debate in a calm and timely manner.

Senators Bacik and Gavan raised the issue of the Clerys workers, and in particular I compliment Ethel Buckley. It has been a good day for the people in SIPTU, and for all of us, in that we will be able to see a development take place that recognises the workers' rights and recognises the way they have been so badly treated in the debacle that happened. I hope that whatever happens on the site will be fitting for O'Connell Street in our capital city. I also pay tribute to the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Councillor Brendan Carr, for the role he played.

I remind Senator Bacik that I am open to examination on the Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2017 tomorrow.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I thank the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I know that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, is anxious to get the Bill passed as soon as possible but I would be very happy to look at how we can accommodate some of the needs of Members. The Senator knows that I have always tried to do that and I will also endeavour to do that tomorrow.

Senator Craughwell made reference to tomorrow's agenda and the issues around the Army. We had hoped to have the debate on the Defence Forces. We recognised the importance of the issue for some Members and deferred the debate until after St. Patrick's Day. The Minister of State, Deputy Paul Kehoe, has returned only today from Lebanon and I am hoping to have a discussion with his office for the debate to be included in the coming weeks. It may not be this week or next week, but it will certainly be in the next couple of weeks.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: That is very much appreciated.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I have touched on the matter raised by Senator Gavan.

Senators Boyhan and Colm Burke raised the issues of oncology and consultant posts. Notwithstanding the remarks by Senator Boyhan, it is important to put on the record of the House

that national outcomes for cancer patients have improved. While we recognise that there are issues to be addressed, with an economy emerging from recession we will have more money to spend and we can invest wisely in our health system. I hope that part of the Future Health document will address the issues raised by Senators Boyhan and Colm Burke around oncology and consultant posts. This is a matter to which we need to refer back.

As a former member of a health committee, which I chaired, Senator Burke has had regular interventions with the HSE around staff recruitment, staff retention and the need to go to the international market. He has now been proved right. With respect to Senator Boyhan's contribution on cancer, I would say that the number of newly diagnosed cases is rising by 6% to 7% annually and it is projected to reach nearly 55,000 cases by 2030. As a nation we need to build on the success of the national cancer strategy we adopted in 2006 whereby we have eight centres of excellence. We need to look at how we can reduce the risk of cancer and also have a strategy that reflects upon the needs expressed by Senator Boyhan. I would be happy to have the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, come to the House in that regard.

Senator Lombard raised the subject of the proposed incinerator at Ringaskiddy in Cork. I believe it is absolutely unacceptable that a decision has been deferred for the fourth time. The process is elongated now by An Bord Pleanála, which I know is independent, but it is a huge imposition on the residents of Ringaskiddy and the adjoining areas of Monkstown and Passage West. This battle has been going on for nearly two decades. We had the oral hearing this time last year. It is understandable that people become cynical and frustrated when they see a board interjecting at this stage for more information. The Senator is right. We need more information.

Senators Dolan and Warfield raised the issue of national and World Down Syndrome Day. I join both Senators in recognising that there is a need to continue to support people with Down's syndrome. The Minister has made changes to the medical card scheme. There is a need to thank the staff of the many organisations who look after people with Down's syndrome, and also to thank their parents and their families, and companies which employ people with Down's syndrome. A number of friends of mine are gainfully employed. I know a young man who is working in a canteen in Cork and it is a great source of joy to him that he can go into work every day, do his job and be recognised as being equal. I know we have a road to travel in this regard and I hope that we can do it.

Senator Mullen raised the issue of the Capuchin day centre, homelessness and poverty. I am happy to have the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Varadkar, come to the House. The issue will be addressed today when the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, comes to the House to address the Rebuilding Ireland report.

Senator Ó Clochartaigh raised the issue of the court case yesterday of Mr. Peter Mulryan. I welcome again the fact he has been given access to his files through Tusla and the International Protection Act. I would be happy to have a debate on that issue.

Senator Mark Daly raised the issue of Brazilian beef. I would be happy to have the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, come to the House.

On the Recognition of Irish Sign Language for the Deaf Community Bill, while I think coming in here finger-wagging is not the way to do business, I am quite happy to take the-----

Senator Mark Daly: I gave plenty of warning. I am not finger-wagging.

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Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator did not let me finish. I am quite happy to come in here next week, pass the Bill as it is and not oppose it on any Stage next week. However, I do not think the Senator wants to do that, to be fair. I do not want to pass a flawed Bill which will fail to achieve what we both want to see happen, which is to uphold the rights of the deaf community. My office has been in touch with the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Justice and Equality and the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, and I believe the amendments are not quite ready yet. I do not think that coming in here finger-wagging and insisting that the Bill be taken next week is the way to go. It could cause a division in the ranks or create the wrong impression. I have not got the information yet, but there were some proposals to go to Cabinet today from the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath. I am not quite sure whether they are there yet. I am happy to work with the Senator to ensure the Bill is passed by Easter, if possible, rather than having a deadline of next week. The Bill has to be debated in the House. I do not want to pass a Bill which is flawed, but I will happily do it. I have the same interests as the Senator and the same motivation to have that Bill passed. I do not think the Senator wants to have a flawed Bill passed. However, I will pass it next week, no bother. I will not divide the House at all on it.

Senator Warfield is right. It is important that in this House we have a diversity of voices.

I am happy to accept Senator Gavan's amendment to the Order of Business.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader has indicated he is prepared to accept the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Senator Paul Gavan: "That No. 16 be taken before No. 1." Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

National Minimum Wage (Protection of Employee Tips) Bill 2017: First Stage

Senator Paul Gavan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the National Minimum Wage Act to provide for additional protections for employees in the service sector to ensure they receive tips or gratuities paid by customers and to provide for related matters.

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Bill seconded?

Senator Máire Devine: Yes. I second the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Second Stage?

Senator Paul Gavan: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 28 March 2017.

Companies Act 2014: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Companies Act 2014 (Section 1313) Regulations 2017,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 9th February, 2017, be referred to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, in accordance with Standing Order 70A(3)(k), which, not later than 13th April, 2017, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 74, and Standing Order 76(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Rebuilding Ireland: Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy English.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I am pleased to have this opportunity to update the House on the second quarterly progress report on the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. The report we are discussing was published on 7 February last. The Rebuilding Ireland document is over six months old at this stage, having been published in late July 2016. We received valuable input from Oireachtas colleagues during the development of the action plan and the fleshing out of the legislative and policy provisions arising from its commitments. The Joint Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in particular has dedicated much of its time and focus to housing and planning matters. This House has debated these issues at length including, for example, before Christmas in the context of the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Bill 2016.

The cross-party collaboration and support for addressing this most challenging issue demonstrates the collective desire to deliver on the core objectives of Rebuilding Ireland and secure real outcomes in areas like increased supply, enhanced supports and more innovative approaches. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and I appreciate the assistance and efforts of Members of the Oireachtas and members of local authorities. The Minister and I are in the process of visiting all the local authorities. I think this is the main priority for all parties and individuals across the board. Directly elected councillors, Deputies and Senators are trying to focus on housing and to address this overall problem. I will briefly outline on a pillar-by-pillar basis the key elements of the progress that was made during the final quarter of 2016.

The overriding objectives for the Government under Pillar 1, which deals with addressing homelessness, are to stem the flow of people into homelessness, to ensure sufficient quality emergency accommodation is available and to work to secure long-term sustainable homes for families and individuals experiencing homelessness. The new national mortgage arrears resolution service, Abhaile, and the associated scheme of aid and advice for borrowers in mortgage arrears were launched by the Tánaiste, Deputy Fitzgerald, and the Minister for Social Protec-

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tion, Deputy Varadkar, in the autumn to assist those at risk of homelessness through mortgage arrears. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, announced significant changes to the mortgage to rent scheme that are designed to lead to a major increase in the number of households benefitting from the scheme. The changes will make the scheme quicker, more transparent, easier to navigate for borrowers and, ultimately, more accessible to more households in mortgage distress.

During the last quarter of 2016, significant emphasis was placed on delivering additional emergency accommodation for homeless people who sleep rough. Over 200 additional beds were provided across a number of facilities in Dublin. Enhanced targeted supports were made available in response to the specific needs of people in emergency accommodation, particularly families. Some 2,700 sustainable exits from homelessness were achieved nationally during 2016. This represented an increase of 16% on the 2015 figure. A significant contributor to this, and to preventing individuals and families from entering homelessness in the first place, was the housing assistance payment homeless pilot scheme in Dublin. Under this scheme, 810 stable housing tenancies were put in place in 2016, exceeding the target by nearly 50%. Homelessness, particularly the number of homeless families and children in emergency accommodation, remains a significant challenge to be addressed. The increased funding provided for homeless services this year, and the range of homelessness measures to be delivered under Rebuilding Ireland, will ensure that securing further substantial progress in this area remains a top priority in 2017.

The key focus under Pillar 2, which deals with accelerating social housing, is on the delivery of an additional 47,000 social homes by local authorities and approved housing bodies through construction, refurbishment, acquisition and leasing. The national roll-out of the housing assistance payment scheme will see it providing an important social housing solution for significant numbers of households, including those currently in receipt of long-term rent supplement. The second quarterly report, which provides details of the social housing output in 2016, shows that almost 18,400 social housing supports were provided from a full housing budget spend of €935 million. This exceeded our ambitious target of providing 17,240 such supports. Nearly 5,300 homes were built, refurbished or acquired, approximately 12,000 housing assistance payment tenancies were facilitated and over 1,000 rental accommodation scheme placements were made. We are seeing real progress in the social housing construction programme. A full schedule of the pipeline of social housing projects, accompanied by a report setting out the position at the end of 2016, was published by the Department last month. It showed that 504 projects, involving the construction of over 8,400 units, were at various stages in the process at that time. This report will be updated on a quarterly basis in tandem with future quarterly progress reports under Rebuilding Ireland. This will enable all Members of the Oireachtas and members of local authorities to track the progress of social housing projects in various counties and to keep the pressure on at both a national and local level. We are endeavouring to ensure that we all play our part in terms of increasing activity levels across all sectors.

In terms of the approval process for social housing construction projects, the main objective within the Department is to get good projects that represent value for money and deliver quality homes approved and built as quickly as possible. We are building on the efficiencies gained from previous worthwhile reforms to the approval process in which my party colleague, Senator Paudie Coffey, played a major role, and adding to them. In that context, the Department has recently published a report setting out a number of additional steps that will further streamline and enhance the approval process. A timeline for the implementation of these additional actions has also been set out and the Department is actively engaging with the local government sector

on this issue.

Accelerating social housing under Pillar 2 is also crucial to delivering some of the key objectives in addressing homelessness under Pillar 1. Following the establishment of the rapid build procurement framework by the Office of Government Procurement, OGP, the Department has brought together all of the local authorities and the main approved housing bodies for a workshop on how the framework can help them in accelerating delivery. The Housing Agency has been active in utilising its €70 million rolling fund to purchase vacant properties from banks and investment companies, signing contracts for 238 houses and apartments, with the sale of 82 of these now closed. Bids have been made on a further 98 properties. In addition, the transfer of the acquired units to the approved housing bodies is being progressed which is crucial in terms of replenishing the revolving fund, thereby facilitating further purchases.

The roll-out of the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme to additional local authorities continued during quarter 4, with the scheme being activated successfully in nine additional local authority areas. Subsequently, in the current quarter, the nationwide roll-out of HAP has been completed, with its introduction last week to the administrative areas of Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. A full update on this will be included in the next quarterly report. Eligible households in all 31 local authority areas can now avail of the scheme, with €153 million being made available for its operation in 2017. Progress to date this year under the scheme indicates that it is well on track to achieve its 15,000 household target for the year.

Pillar 3 is focused on accelerating the delivery of housing in the wider housing market and provides for a suite of actions dealing with funding and financing infrastructural provision, active land management, planning reforms and construction and design innovation. A key area of work over the last few months has been the assessment of the more than 70 proposals submitted under the local infrastructure housing activation fund which is now almost complete. I expect that this will allow an announcement to be made by the end of this month on the successful infrastructural projects which will open up land capable of delivering many thousands of new homes.

In terms of State land management, the survey of State lands with housing development potential, focusing on Dublin and the main cities and urban areas, is progressing well. The first phase of the mapping will be completed and published online in the coming weeks. This phase will also include mapped details of residential land zonings across the country, as well as local authority owned lands available for housing. We will be adding further layers of land mapping information to the system over the course of the second quarter. As with many policy issues, information is key and this integration of different databases will enable us to assess and prioritise the release of centrally and strategically located lands that can deliver housing quickly.

As committed to under Rebuilding Ireland, we have developed a monthly housing activity report, the second edition of which was published last week. Planning permission was granted for a total of over 16,300 new homes in 2016, an increase of 26% on 2015. Commencement notices for 13,334 new homes were submitted in the 12-month period to the end of January 2017, which is an increase of over 44%, year-on-year. Completions for the 12-month period to end of January 2017 reached 15,256 homes, a year-on-year increase of 18%. At a broad level, the indicators confirm that housing construction activity is continuing to strengthen. Having regard to wider economic growth projections and the increasing levels of planning permissions and commencements, in particular, there is a growing level of optimism that higher levels of

output will be achieved in 2017 and beyond.

Under Pillar 4, which deals primarily with the rental sector, the key action during the period covered by the quarter 4 implementation report was the publication of the strategy for the rental sector in December 2016. Among the main measures arising from the strategy was the introduction of rent pressure zones, initially in the four Dublin local authority areas and Cork city, with a further 12 areas designated subsequently, on foot of a more granular analysis of rents data.

This means that rent increases are capped at 4% per annum for approximately 55% of tenancies nationally. Other legislative provisions that were introduced addressed issues of security of tenure and standards, and they were well debated in this House.

While building new homes is a key element of Rebuilding Ireland, we also have too many empty homes and buildings across the country that must be brought back into use. Preliminary results from the census in 2016 indicate there are just under 200,000 vacant dwellings nationwide, representing between 9% and 10% of the overall national housing stock. Under Pillar 5, tackling vacant dwellings will be the subject of a specific vacant housing re-use strategy which is being prepared at present by the Housing Agency, working with the Department and other stakeholders. Hopefully, that will be published in the second quarter of this year.

In the meantime, we have put in place a variety of schemes aimed at getting thousands of empty homes back into use. The repair and leasing scheme was launched with funding of €140 million over five years to allow local authorities and approved housing bodies to bring up to 3,500 vacant private houses into social housing use by 2021. An additional €26 million *5 o'clock* is being provided to fund the accelerated national roll-out of the scheme in 2017, which brings the total amount of investment available this year to €32 million. The pilot scheme in Carlow and Waterford was quite successful and I believe that scheme has great potential to reactivate houses that have been lying empty for over a year. This additional funding will mean that 800 vacant properties can be brought back into use as new homes for families on local authority waiting lists. A buy and renew scheme is also being introduced, with €25 million in funding for 2017, which will enable local authorities and approved housing bodies to purchase and remediate private housing units for social housing use. This is expected to enable 150 units to be secured for social housing purposes in 2017.

I have given a brief summary overview of progress under each of the pillars, with a particular focus on the fourth quarter of 2016, which is the period covered by the second progress report. Clearly, the two progress reports published to date and the other information we have published show that solid early progress on implementation was made during the first six months of the lifetime of the action plan. I am well aware that there is further significant work to be done in accordance with the timelines set out in Rebuilding Ireland and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, the Department and I remain fully focused on that, as are the local authorities. The next update, which will set out progress made on the actions for the first quarter of 2017, will provide an update on the position relating to the delayed actions from the fourth quarter of last year and will look forward to the main issues for delivery in the second quarter of this year. It will be published in late April or early May.

I accept that it will take time for the action plan to be implemented and to prove a success. What we are examining here are the trends and data which show that activity has increased. The result of that will be people in homes and we will be judged on that. I accept that Senators

will wish to raise many issues because it will take time for people to believe this is happening. We are happy that it is progressing but we will not be satisfied until everybody who needs and seeks a home has one. That is why work will continue. However, the financial and human resources are in place. Our teams have been strengthened, procedures have been changed and during 2017 we can crack on with this and implement all the changes we have introduced since last July. Hopefully, we will put a dent in the figures. Everybody agrees that the priority is to find a home for people who do not have one, be it through social or private housing. We must get them a place they can call home because we all agree it is unacceptable to have people living in hotels or other temporary accommodation. We have given a commitment that the use of commercial hotels will have ended by July 2017 and we are on track to achieve that. It will be difficult, but we are determined to do it. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has made it clear on numerous occasions that it will be achieved.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister for his address. As a rural Senator I have massive concerns about some of the pillars. They are all interlinked. We have a very dysfunctional housing market when one considers the long term. I have major concerns about some of the areas the Minister raised, even with regard to Pillar 1 and addressing homelessness. Building houses is the main issue that has not been addressed by this Government. The reason it has not been addressed, as I have said on several occasions, is that the Minister is still de-zoning land in local authorities. This is local authority land where the Government could build local authority social housing for people on the housing list. That is a major factor.

In every local authority there are State-owned lands where building can take place. I accept that things got bad, lands went to the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, and that there were other issues, but every local authority in the country has land. I blame the Department for not playing its role and for a lack of information flowing between local authorities and the Minister. Every local authority is different. I accept that Dublin, Limerick and Cork have a crisis, but the Minister is concentrating on the main cities rather than rural Ireland.

Deputy Damien English: That is not the case.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I firmly believe it, and I have said it to the Minister previously. The Minister can provide facts and figures but he must change the spatial strategy and not cap the population. If a builder in an area such as Carlow wishes to build social houses, the local authority must go to the Department and the first question the Department will ask is: "What is your cap on your population and what is your spatial strategy?". These are all the Minister's rules and regulations. The Minister will not solve the problems until he builds houses, and that is the area where the Minister is failing. The Department is not working with the local authorities. Every local authority is different and every local authority should be addressed on its own merits, but that is not happening.

Another pillar deals with HAP. The HAP has been introduced into the rental market and it is definitely making a difference. However, that difference is not balancing out the fact that there are no rental properties available. There is no building. I refer not only to my area but also other areas, because I have been dealing with other councils. People cannot find properties to rent due to the lack of houses. That is the biggest issue. Another problem with the HAP is that the Department is still using the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. As the Minister will be aware, if one is on a local authority housing list and the local authority has a RAS house, one is taken off the housing list and left homeless. If a person is on the RAS they do not qualify to go back on the local authority list. The Department is making people homeless.

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I accept that the Minister has established the five pillars and that there have been small improvements, although I do not see many. The position is similar with the rent pressure zones. Again, they apply in the Dublin and Cork local authorities. I welcome that, but Carlow and neighbouring local authorities do not qualify. Who is setting the agenda for counties in rural Ireland to qualify for these rent pressure zones, because they are experiencing these pressures? I do not know where the facts and figures are coming from. This must be addressed. There is such a lack of information between the Department, local councils and councillors, and the councillors have no remit in much of this either, that there is a great deal of misinformation. I can outline a case involving the HAP. I was dealing with a person recently who is on a HAP scheme. Her landlord told her she had to leave because the property was being sold. Technically, however, the landlord has to give 18 weeks' notice in writing. It must be a legal letter. These letters are going from landlords to tenants but they are not legal. There is so much misinformation going back to tenants through local authorities and through the Department that the Minister must do something about it.

The five pillars are interlinked. However, putting so much money into the rental market when there is such a lack of supply of houses will not address the issue. Even with regard to homelessness, there are no refuges in most local authorities. A person who is homeless in Carlow tonight must go to Waterford because there is nothing in Carlow, yet there are so many empty houses. That must be addressed but it is not included in this pillar. For the long-term picture, when the Minister has so much money it must be invested in proper areas such as building, under a long-term plan through the local authorities. The main issue is that every local authority is different. The facts and figures coming back from the Department are totally wrong. I can give the Minister several figures and statistics based on my daily dealings with people. What the Minister is saying does not add up.

I ask the Minister to refer back to the Department and return to the House with proper figures. Let places such as Carlow and other areas in rural Ireland be included in the rent pressure zones and qualify for all the help that is available. The Government is creating a two-tier recovery. The fast-track planning measures only affect the bigger cities like Dublin, Cork and Limerick and do not affect rural Ireland. In rural Ireland, people do not build 100 houses at a time, although they would be delighted to do so. The Government is only putting a plan in place for the bigger cities and is forgetting the smaller counties that need more help. Places like Dublin, Cork and Limerick will thrive but rural Ireland will fall apart.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy English for coming to the House today. I will start on a positive note. It is important to acknowledge the huge amount of work that has been done. The Minister of State referred to the fact the Government is building on work done by Senator Paudie Coffey. I am delighted the Government has not forgotten all the effort the Senator put into this area. There are so many documents about housing at this point. I looked at a document yesterday that Senator Coffey had circulated previously. I thought that perhaps the Government had forgotten it so I am glad the Minister of State acknowledged the Senator's contribution.

I want to focus on some of the achievements to date. I have read the report and the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. I am also a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. I wish to concentrate on Pillars 1, 2 and 3. We know that there have been approximately 2,700 sustainable exits from homelessness, up from 2,322 in 2015. A homeless fund of €98 million is in place for 2017. We know that 206 additional beds are now available in supported temporary accommodation across the

four local authority areas in Dublin. While I do not want to be Dublin centric, I wanted to mention that issue because there was a particular crisis there. We also know that 810 tenancies have been created for homeless people under the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme, with which many people will be familiar. At present, 22 rapid-build homes are under construction. I am not too sure if any have been occupied as yet. The figure for rapid-build homes varies every time I ask for information. There are plans to build up to 350 such homes at some stage, although some questions remain in that regard.

I also acknowledge that €1.2 billion in current and capital funding has been provided in 2017. We now have a housing delivery office, a housing procurement unit and other supports which were established under the Rebuilding Ireland plan. If I am wrong in anything I have said, the Minister of State can correct me, but these are the positives that I see happening. Regarding Pillar 3 - building more homes, we see that 23 major urban delivery sites have been identified, with the potential to deliver up to 30,000 new homes - a very significant number - in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Dublin.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: All cities.

Senator Victor Boyhan: The help-to-buy scheme for first-time buyers, involving refunds of income tax and DIRT paid over the previous four years, is also in place.

Having acknowledged that progress, I want to focus on what we are discussing today, namely, a report on progress made in the fourth quarter of 2016, from September to December. I note that under Pillar 1 - homelessness, the progress report provides updates on 15 action items. We see that two are incomplete, five are on schedule and eight are complete. However, we also know that there are a number of issues outstanding. Under Pillar 2 - accelerating social housing, the objective is to deliver an additional 47,000 social housing units up to 2020-2021. The progress report, which provides an update on 13 action items, shows that none are incomplete, which is positive, seven are on schedule and six are complete. They are the facts before us. Under Pillar 3 - building more homes, the progress report shows that four key objectives are incomplete, two are on schedule and five are complete.

I will now take a closer look at four items contained in the second quarterly progress report on Rebuilding Ireland - Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness which was published in February 2017, namely, actions Nos. 1.1, 2.1, 3.1 and 3.9 on pages 18, 29, 37 and 41 respectively. Action No. 1.1 reads as follows: "We will accelerate and expand the Rapid-Build Housing Programme to provide, in the first instance and as a priority, more suitable accommodation for families". The report states that at the end of 2016, a total of 350 rapid-build homes were advancing and the status of the action is "incomplete". I ask the Minister of State to address that issue in his response later. Action No. 2.1, the status of which is "on schedule", is to "substantially increase the delivery of social housing" units. To be fair, in 2016, the target was 4,240 homes which was exceeded by approximately 1,000. I want to acknowledge that.

Action No. 3.1 is the establishment of a €200 million local infrastructure housing activation fund, the status of which is "incomplete" and progress here has been extremely disappointing. This was one of the key deliverables that the Department and the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, set out to address the housing crisis. The Government has been in office for almost a year now. We need to know more about this. I understand that approximately 74 proposals were submitted and that around 22 city and county councils engaged but we need to see action in this area. By March, the Government was

supposed to have announced its favoured options. I have a major concern about this matter. I have heard from several local authorities that lands in their ownership, that is, public lands, have no infrastructure or a shortage of appropriate infrastructure but they cannot get funds to provide that infrastructure and deliver social housing. I am talking here about State lands, property that is owned by the State. At the same time, the Department is considering advancing substantial public funds to private developers to develop private lands, but for whom? They will build developments of ten to 20 units which will be rented out for between €2,000 and €3,000 per month. There is a serious problem here. I ask the Minister of State to go back to the Department and analyse this more closely. We cannot have a situation where 31 local authorities have substantial landbanks, for which they have paid millions, which they cannot develop for social and affordable housing because of a lack of basic infrastructure. In many cases, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government sanctioned the purchase of these sites which are now sitting on the books of the local authorities. The Minister of State will know the councils to which I am referring. How can the Department square ignoring them with giving private developers substantial sums of money in order that they can make money? That said, I have no difficulty with profits *per se*.

I will wrap up on action 3.9, which reads as follows: “We will support the development of on-line planning services for the local authority sector and An Bord Pleanála”. This was another key tenet of the Government’s housing policy. The Minister of State insisted previously in this House that this would be brought on stream very quickly but we will not see it being rolled out for many more months. The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill has not progressed through the Houses and it will be months before it is enacted. We were told that it was critical and that it would get through the various Stages in the Oireachtas before Christmas and that the Minister did not want it to be delayed. While I wish the Minister and the Minister of State well, I believe this is an issue that must be addressed now. I have two final points to make and appreciate-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator is over time.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I ask for an additional minute, given that there are only four Senators present.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I cannot give the Senator another minute. He is already over time.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I ask the Minister of State to go back to the Department and examine the issue of NAMA lands and whether we can use them for housing. The Department must also approach the Conference of Religious in Ireland, CORI, and ask it to cough up lands that it offered to give the State in an indemnity scheme which was nothing short of a disgrace. CORI has not delivered but has the potential to deliver lands for critical social and affordable housing for the people of this country.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue again. I also welcome the Minister of State to the House to report progress on the Rebuilding Ireland programme. As a former Minister of State with responsibility for housing, I know full well the commitment being given by the current Minister, Minister of State and staff in the Department to addressing what we all agree is a housing crisis. There must be a context for all debates and an explanation of how we arrived at this particular scenario. I was particularly worried to hear a Fianna Fáil Senator proposing zoning as the answer. I would argue that excessive zoning

throughout this country is what got us into trouble in the first place.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is local authority zoning. That is different.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I refer to excessive zoning in areas where there was no demand until the market was dysfunctional and ultimately went bankrupt. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past. That is why I welcome this action plan. I also welcome the fact that planning decisions, zoning, national and regional development plans are based on a factual analysis of the demographics, demand and type of housing needed for the next 30 years, carried out by the independent Housing Agency. Proper funds will be provided to meet that demand. However, we need more medium and short-term interventions which this action plan offers. The Minister of State has outlined some of the significant progress made on 56 specific actions to increase housing output and deal with homelessness. The social housing needs of in excess of 18,000 people and families were met in 2016, which is ahead of the target of 17,000. There is a long way to go and the Minister of State and Members on this side of the House acknowledge that. Solid progress is being made. The enhanced budgets provided in this action plan indicate the will of the Government. Only by having a strategic action plan supported by local authorities, which are key to this, will we deliver on the ambitious targets.

The Minister of State will agree that homeless families and children who urgently require roofs over their heads must take priority. The many initiatives being announced and acted on will go some way towards dealing with them. I welcome the plan because it contains determined public and transparent actions with timelines. That is the way to do business. The Minister and his officials come before both Houses and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, and publish the action plans and what has and has not been delivered. That is the type of transparency and accountability we need in the public system.

I welcome the performance indicators for turning over local authority voids because I worked on this area. We need to examine the cost per unit to have some consistency around the country and more importantly, the turnaround time for the delivery of the void so that it is not sitting vacant for months when there are people waiting on a housing list. We need to bring accountability to the local authorities which are being provided with funds to turn the voids around. This system will improve their performance.

Delivery is the key to resolving this housing crisis. As our statutory housing bodies, the local authorities are critical to this delivery. The approved housing bodies will be important to the delivery of many projects around the country and they are working on those already. It is important that they and the local authorities are adequately resourced with engineering, housing and architectural staff to deliver these projects because they were denuded of staff during the crisis. It is also important to have an efficient streamlined system. There was a lot of bureaucracy involved in getting approval from the Department. Local authorities blamed the Department, which blamed the local authorities. We need to stop the blame game, find the barriers and streamline the system to deliver more housing projects.

We also need to consider the role of the elected members. There are very proactive members in every local authority but yesterday it was brought to my attention that when a public private partnership was proposed to deliver 85 housing units in the Ardee area of Louth, Sinn Féin opposed it at council level. The party tried to defer delivery of the project but thankfully it was voted down. We need to leverage all resources, public and private, to deliver housing

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for people in need. Why would we, for ideological reasons, stop or defer 85 housing units in one local authority area? I often hear Sinn Féin pontificate here about the need for housing at national level but at local level it disrupts delivery. It is not good enough to put ideology before the delivery of housing.

It is critical that we use the Housing Agency analysis to inform local and national decisions to give us the right type of housing to meet people's needs. I am disappointed that Senator Murnane O'Connor, who is from Carlow, did not mention that Waterford and Carlow were used to pilot the repair and lease back scheme. More than €140 million is being provided over five years to assist private property owners, local authorities and approved housing bodies to renovate vacant houses and bring them back to beneficial use. I know the Minister intends to expand this scheme into other local authority areas. This type of initiative will put a dent in the housing need. We do need new buildings but that will take time because they have to get planning permission, go out to tender and be built. We need to prioritise the places where there are houses. That includes voids and the repair and lease back scheme. I welcome those initiatives.

Rebuilding Ireland is a very good tagline but it needs to go beyond the Pale, to provide for communities around the country. When I was Minister of State, I designated the north quays in Waterford a strategic development zone. That was only the second strategic development zone designated outside Dublin. There was good news this morning that serious investors are now engaged with the council to redevelop a 17-acre site in the heart of Waterford city on this strategic development zone to provide mixed use, commercial, retail, public realm and more important, quality housing. The Government has approved the strategic development zone and has committed in its 2016-21 infrastructure and capital investment programme to provide €40 million for enabling works to leverage these schemes. This type of scheme will rebuild Ireland and our regions. I wish the Minister of State and the Department well in developing further initiatives for more housing projects.

Senator Paul Gavan: I am glad that Senator Coffey mentioned ideology because there is an ideological problem at the heart of the Government. In the worst of times in this country we built public housing, through the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. I do not often compliment Fianna Fáil but it was largely responsible for that public housing. Fine Gael has never been comfortable with the idea of providing homes for the people. The ideological problem at the heart of this action plan is that it hopes the market will ultimately solve the problem. I was very struck a few weeks ago when the Taoiseach said in the Dáil that there are 8,000 houses being built and mentioned chippies and brickies. However, later, on "Drivetime", Ronan Burtenshaw, a housing analyst, pointed out that only 1,800 houses actually are being built and the rest are in planning. That shows the gap between the reality of housing under this Government and its grand promises and plans.

This report is another indictment of the Government's inaction on key measures that it highlighted as solutions to the deepest housing crisis since the foundation of the State. It is a scandal that 198,000 homes lie vacant across the State. The Department's latest figures show a record number of people are dependent on emergency accommodation. The Dublin Regional Homeless Executive published figures recently which showed that 60% of homeless families in Dublin have been in emergency accommodation for more than six months; 40% of families have been in hotels, bed and breakfasts or hostels for more than one year and over 138 families have spent more than 18 months in emergency accommodation. The sad truth is that some of the 2,500 homeless children have spent more of their lives in emergency accommodation than in a stable home. This comes from a Government that prioritised tax cuts for the wealthy in the

previous budget rather than putting adequate resources into tackling the homelessness crisis.

Many of these families live in inappropriate, unsuitable and insecure accommodation. We have heard stories of families being forced to stay in damp rooms with blood-stained sheets, mice and cockroaches. There is an obvious solution to this problem. In Dublin alone, there are 40,000 empty homes, that is, almost 40 houses for every homeless family. The various schemes announced by the Government to target vacant homes are simply not enough. The three schemes currently in place will only deliver around 6,400 homes over six years, which is only 3% of the total vacant housing stock. Similarly, of the 1,100 on offer to Government by various banks, the Government has only committed to purchasing 200 of these. We recently learned of the allocation of a paltry additional €26 million that will bring only 0.4% of the vacant properties throughout the State back into use. Those are the facts beyond the promises of this Government.

The repair and leasing scheme is a good initiative and Sinn Féin has supported it from the beginning. My only criticism is that since the pilot seems to be working well in Waterford and Carlow, as Senator Coffey acknowledged, I cannot understand why the Minister is not more ambitious for the roll-out of the scheme.

There are more than 198,000 vacant properties throughout the State. In my own area of Limerick city there are 2,564 vacant units and the figure is 5,889 in Limerick county. This is more than enough homes to take people out of emergency accommodation and off waiting lists. Targeting only 800 vacant properties and providing only €26 million in additional funding demonstrates how this Fine Gael-led Government has not got its spending priorities right. Having an ambitious plan in place that can facilitate the quick turnaround of the maximum number of vacant properties is an obvious solution to the housing supply crisis in this State. The Minister says funding is not an issue. Therefore, he must demonstrate a clear sense of urgency regarding the State-wide roll-out of this scheme and adjust his target beyond an inadequate 800 homes.

Instead of taking responsibility for the housing crisis that his party has perpetuated, the Minister continues to hide behind statistics. If funding is not a problem, there is no reason the Government cannot ramp up its acquisitions target for vacant homes. If the Government is serious about tackling the housing and homelessness crisis, it needs to consider seriously some of the recommendations made by both the Simon Community last week and the Peter McVerry Trust today on returning vacant homes to use.

Sinn Féin is not here merely to criticise the Government's inaction. In this House we put forward the Rent Certainty Bill, which was a genuine effort to provide solutions that would at least start to ease the pain and suffering that is homelessness and the threat of homelessness. This Bill sought to link rent increases to the consumer price index. In simple terms, this means that rents should not increase by more than the cost of living. While there was criticism from some quarters that the consumer price index was not the best indicator, no viable alternatives were offered.

I want to stress that this is not a panacea. Our private rental sector is deeply flawed and it will require multiple pieces of legislation as well as action by all stakeholders to reform it into a model that is sustainable. Rents in Limerick increased by 13.2% last year, which was even more than the increases in Dublin. However, if the Minister of State looks at the model in a city like Vienna, for example, he will find one third of houses are private, one third are public and one third are owned by housing co-operatives. That is the type of ideological model that works,

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as we see across western Europe. Unfortunately, however, it is one the Minister of State's party will never embrace. Indeed, the figures for co-operative housing units in Ireland are among the lowest in western Europe. Again, I do not see the action plans to address that issue.

I am interested in Senator Coffey's comments. I recall that when a housing co-operative wanted to establish units in Limerick, Fine Gael councillors came out in droves to oppose it, along with their Fianna Fáil colleagues, I am afraid to say. We can quote many examples. The problem is that the ideological heart of the Government is right wing. It believes in market solutions and, unfortunately, the market has failed and continues to fail. Supply will remain a constant problem as long as not enough units are being built, as long as there is a large number of tenants in private rental accommodation who should be elsewhere and as long as a huge number of vacant units remain. We need more progress, more ambition and fewer reports.

Senator Colette Kelleher: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and welcome the opportunity to respond to the progress report. A clear action plan, with published targets and progress reports, is a great way to govern, and I applaud the work that has gone into producing the report because it is significant. I have a range of questions for the Minister of State under four of the five pillars, and I will take them pillar by pillar.

Pillar 1 addresses homelessness. First, I would like more clarity about the position of rough sleepers. The progress report notes there were 142 people sleeping rough in Dublin in November, but what about other centres like Cork and Galway and how have the numbers changed since November? I welcome the fact that more than 200 emergency beds have come on stream over the winter, but rough sleeping happens in the summer also. Do we now have enough beds for all rough sleepers in all the places where rough sleeping happens? In Cork in 2011, we were able to say there were enough beds for rough sleepers in the city, so it is doable. I want to know the position, whether we are making progress to end rough sleeping and what else needs to be done.

Second, the very first action point of Rebuilding Ireland, action 1.1, promised to build 200 rapid-build homes by the end of 2016 but just 22, or 10% of the target, were delivered. That is a massive missed target. What are the delays? Rapid builds were presented as the solution for getting families out of bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels. What is the plan for homeless families after July 2017, when the practice of accommodating them in commercial hotels will have ended? Where will they be accommodated if the houses are not coming on stream? How different will the proposed family hubs be to hotels? I hope this is not just a rebranding exercise so that, instead of calling them hotels, we call them family hubs. Children and families need to be in permanent, long-term accommodation, not moved from pillar to post.

Third, action 1.13 promises 300 Housing First tenancies by quarter 4 of 2017. Is there a wider Housing First strategy for other urban centres outside Dublin and, if so, when will detailed targets be set and published in this regard? Consultation with regional and local stakeholders is essential to ensuring Housing First service provision is tailored to meet the specific needs of future tenants. What plans are in place for such consultations to take place throughout the country?

Fourth, action point 1.15 promised €6 million for homeless mental health services. From what I can see, only €3.5 million was delivered, despite overall increases in health spending. These are very vulnerable people and it is deeply disappointing to see this target missed. Will the Minister of State provide some clarity on these figures? I have heard first-hand from people

working on the front line of the vast gaps in treatment and access to treatment. In 2016, the Dublin Simon Community counselling service, Sure Steps, worked with 460 individuals, a 56% increase on 2015. The service is not funded by the State and relies on the goodwill of 20 part-time volunteers and trained counsellors. Will the Minister of State provide clarity on why the promised funds never arrived for such services?

Fifth, I am told the National Homeless Consultative Committee has not met since the Government was formed. This cross-departmental and cross-sectoral committee is an important forum. When will it meet?

On a last point with regard to Pillar 1, the Minister of State will know I continue to work closely with the Simon Community. Again and again the issue of the habitual residence condition is used to block people's access to services. How many people who are homeless are affected by this? What is the state of play of the habitual residence condition? In the context of Brexit and wider EU reforms, will the Government look again at the issue of habitual residence?

On Pillar 2, which deals with accelerating social housing, I congratulate the Government on exceeding its target. That said, the pace at which State lands are being made available for social housing is slower than expected. What will be done to speed this up? Housing associations require access to land already in State ownership to build more homes. Rebuilding Ireland commits to establishing a dedicated one-stop shop within the Housing Agency. Is this one-stop shop in place and fully operational?

Pillar 4 seeks to improve the rental sector. In 2000, just 10% of the population in Dublin lived in rented housing whereas that is now up to 25% in Dublin and 20% nationally, which is a large percentage of the population. While the rental strategy was a welcome step forward, like Senator Gavan, I would have liked to see it go further and faster. Last week Threshold, the national housing charity, called for the introduction of a deposit protection scheme to protect both tenants and landlords. What is happening in this regard? It also called for better minimum standards, including the issue of fuel poverty, and an NCT for private rental accommodation. What about licensees? What is happening in regard to people who are in rent-a-room schemes and what is their long-term security of tenure? Threshold wanted legislation to be introduced so that both the receivers appointed to mortgaged properties and the lenders who have initiated repossession proceedings are regarded as the landlord in relation to existing tenancies. These are sensible proposals by Threshold and I want to know where they stand with the Minister.

I will now turn to the issue of housing stock. Every time I hear the statistic I am struck that we have 200,000 vacant properties, which are 28 empty houses for every homeless person. I note that 3,500 social houses will be created from the repair and lease scheme plan going national by 2021, and this is to be applauded, but that is 3,500 properties out of a potential 200,000. Given the scale of the problem would the Minister consider the use of compulsory purchase orders or compulsory leasing orders? I believe there would be significant public support for such a measure and it would speed up the end of homelessness. It is disappointing that there is no movement on action 5.9 to make it easier to change the use of vacant commercial units or the areas above commercial units. For decades people lived above their shops in town centres - I did so myself - and a move back in that direction will help bring more life into some hollowed out cities and towns.

My final point to the Minister of State is that the 62 page progress report has made no mention whatsoever of Travellers, halting sites or the de-institutionalisation of people from congre-

gated settings. I am genuinely worried that the housing needs of these groups have been forgotten about. I would like a progress report on both. We need to move people out of institutions and back into communities. Housing associations support the Department of Health and the HSE in the programme of transitioning people from congregated settings to community-based accommodation, including supporting people with mental health services. The Irish Council for Social Housing continues to experience difficulties in getting approval for capital assistance scheme properties to facilitate moving people out of congregated settings. The capital assistance schemes focus on special needs groups such as the homeless, elderly and people with disabilities. Every effort needs to be made to ensure such obstacles are removed. My colleague Senator John Dolan will speak more on this subject but the housing options for people with disabilities and older people who require support are wholly inadequate and the strategies in these areas require prioritisation and greater commitment from Government. I thank the Minister of State again for the updated report and I look forward to hearing his response to these questions.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I will be sharing some of my time with Senator Murnane O'Connor.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Davitt cannot do that because Senator Murnane O'Connor has already spoken.

Senator Aidan Davitt: Did Senator Murnane O'Connor speak already?

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I wanted some clarification-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am sorry but under the rules-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: -----on a point of order.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am sorry there will be no clarification and no point of order.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I did not realise that the Senator had already spoken.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I wanted clarification on the scheme. The reason I did not bring the matter up was because-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Murnane O'Connor, we cannot engage in this now.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We need to address this.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Order please. I have ruled on the matter. Senator Davitt without interruption, please.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I thank the Minister of State. It is nice to see him here today. I missed him. In last year's St. Patrick's Day parade we were knocked down with TDs and Senators from Meath but with the redrawn boundaries there were not too many visitors in Castlepollard last time out. That is the way and that is politics.

On a more serious matter, Fine Gael has certainly brought in some good plans which we have welcomed here. We supported one of the most prudent plans, and certainly one that I appreciated most, which was the proposal to bring larger planning permissions directly to An Bord Pleanála. I welcome that. There are quite a lot of initiatives that one would have to welcome but there is one idea that could certainly be pushed out. As we know, the councils have a role to play but a lot of these guys are sitting on large land banks and they are very inactive in that regard. They have the manpower and the resources. They have the natural resource which

is the land banks, they have zoned land in many places and they have the manpower to get the planning, get the development in order and to get things moving. Ireland has been noted for, and indeed I grew up in one, the 1970s and 1980s grand-sized bungalows as they were at the time. They filled the countryside. They are one of the greatest successes of all time in relation to housing, particularly in the countryside, to get people into better standards of housing and to move them out from cottages. We could give people the opportunity to build houses for themselves, particularly in rural areas. They are not looking for a big handout. They are looking for the opportunity to avail of a site. If they are given a site and given the opportunity they will build the houses. They have initiative and they have the skills, with themselves, their neighbours and their extended family and houses would be built, I have no doubt about that. I encourage the Minister of State to look to the councils and to go back to what councils did best; to provide serviced sites for these people and to let them build. What is the big deal?

People could be living in these houses instead of living in rented accommodation which are currently taken up with people on housing assistance payments and all the other different types of schemes. People do not qualify for some of the schemes because landlords can naturally veer towards tenants who are working, as the Minister of State is aware. This can cut out a lot of people who should be entitled to housing from a rental point of view. The Government's position has been towards rental of houses for people who are on social welfare, housing benefit and who are in receipt of housing assistance payments and the other rental schemes. I would encourage the Minister of State to look at providing sites for these people even if there is a small cost involved. We have the land and we have the natural resource. NAMA has a lot of that resource as we have heard. Perhaps a pilot scheme could be tried. I believe it could be very fruitful and it could be the way forward in rural areas.

Senator Tim Lombard: I compliment the Minister of State on his presentation, which I listened to in my rooms. The Pillar 5 sites have been very successful so far. Major progress has been made in a very short period of time. Realistically it is one of the key issues within the Government's plank for us to ensure the housing market gets back onto an even keel and moves forward. The information today about the construction of homes being at a seven-year high is a very positive move. Having reached that point it is a great step forward from where we were.

In my own part of the world we have seen projects progress in the last three or four months at a rapid rate in Macroom, Skibbereen, two in Clonakilty, one in Kinsale and one in Carrigaline. This is positive because these are key towns that need social housing development. It is appropriate to have this kind of development in these key locations. Obviously there are going to be issues. The rent-capped zones are a key issue that must be dealt with; some places are in and some are out. In a town five miles from my home in a place called Carrigaline there are some 20,000 people, 14,000 of whom are in a rent-capped zone and 6,000 are not. One zone is in the Ballincollig-Carrigaline electoral area and one zone in the Kinsale-Bandon electoral area. As a result of geographical issues in the Bandon-Kinsale electoral area 6,000 people who live on the south side of Carrigaline are not in the rent-capped zone. These anomalies must be examined.

When we set up the zones we looked at electoral boundaries. These could change like the wind. I believe we are going to have a review of the general election boundaries followed by a review of the local election boundaries. In many ways we might look at the whole idea of electoral districts because they have not changed since 1891, and I do not believe they will change anywhere. Maybe we should be looking at more permanent boundaries. This would ensure we have security of rent and we could also look at a smaller demographic. At the moment we

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are looking at demographics that are quite large. Consider the Bandon-Kinsale district. It has 78,000 people in one electoral district. This is equivalent to the size of county such as Carlow. Maybe there needs to be a slight review of the actual strategy regarding the rent zones. It is a work in progress. In the short space of time that we have put this framework and body of work together there has been major progress. Now it is about building on that progress and going forward. Using voids and building of social housing will be key to delivering on that. With the progress we have seen in the past six months I am confident we can make more progress and see the delivery that is required. I hope that something will be done with the rent pressure zones in the key catchment areas affected. When we look at the smaller picture it might help us if we were to narrow the scope and to look at electoral districts rather than going forward with the large electoral areas we have now.

Senator John Dolan: The Minister of State is very welcome. It is good to have him here presenting this progress report. I will obviously focus on the areas of disability and mental health. There is a strong commitment in the programme for Government to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In this regard, I wish to mention Article 19(a), which refers to ensuring persons with disabilities “have the opportunity to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live on an equal basis with others and are not obliged to live in a particular living arrangement”. That is where I want to start with this. In the Rebuilding Ireland programme launched last July, I did not see any solid commitments to improving the chronic housing conditions of people with disabilities. It certainly mentioned programmes, strategies and this, that and the other and there was a lot of paper shifting from one desk to another, with people sitting down and talking, but I did not see many actions. Pillar 2 of Rebuilding Ireland pertains to accelerating the construction of social housing. Up to 4,000 people with disabilities have been on the social housing waiting list since 2013. They are not even mentioned in the document. I do not see this mentioned today either. Earlier, the Minister of State said, “the two progress reports published to date and the other information we have published show that solid early progress on implementation was made during the first six months of the lifetime of the action plan.” Perhaps there was but it was not made for people with disabilities.

On page 33 of the second quarterly report, it is stated that the Government will work with the HSE and local authorities on all issues, including funding supports, for housing people who are transitioning from HSE accommodation and for clients of the mental health services. This is ongoing and there are no dates. There has been no product so far. On the next page it is stated that the Government will continue to support the Department of Health and the HSE in the programme of transitioning people from congregated settings. There are over 2,700 people in these circumstances at present. I calculate that there are approximately 200 plus people targeted to move out this year. There is another decade of work in that. Therefore, many people will be left in these circumstances for a decade. Individuals do not serve that much time for having killed people in this country sometimes.

The plan states, “We will extend the National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities (2011-2016) beyond its timeframe of 2016 to continue delivery on its aims.” That really means “beyond when it was supposed to be concluded”. The timeline extends to 2020, which is just saying we have not done what we said we would do in recent years and that we will just keep it tipping along.

A motion was passed unanimously in this House last July. Senator Kelleher, other Senators and I were very happy to propose it. We were very delighted it had the support of the Govern-

ment and others. It called on the Minister to:

- confirm that the Government's action plan for housing includes specific commitments on the delivery of housing in sufficient numbers and type to also meet the housing needs of persons with disabilities;
- ensure the provision of an annual update from local authorities of the number of social housing units allocated to people with disabilities on the housing waiting list;
- ensure that any housing project supported by public funding, including Part V housing, provide a percentage of pre-planned and reserved housing units to meet local needs for persons with disabilities;
- ensure that the social housing 2020 strategy is routinely disability proofed;
- provide funding in 2017 to increase housing supply and to make necessary and timely adaptations to current housing stock;

and

- requests that the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government draft a work programme which will routinely consider and review Government progress towards delivering adequate and sustainable housing for persons with disabilities.

This has not happened. It is not the end of the world but it is deeply disappointing. The crisis in housing for people with disabilities, which is also a crisis for their families, has existed since old God's time. There are 4,000 people on the social housing waiting list and 2,700 in congregated settings. We have 1,100 people under the age of 65 in nursing homes because housing and other supports have not been put in place for them. This reflects the daily life and experience of those affected.

My expectation is that there will be a comprehensive report by the middle of 2017 to show not only progress but also delivery across these areas. These are areas that were agreed by this House in a motion. I do not want the Minister of State to list more commitments. We have commitments and promises and it is now a matter of bricks, mortar, housing adaptation grants and real actions. People need to see real progress on these matters.

There was a document some years ago called "A lot done and more to do". Right now, there is no evidence of anything done. There is a lot to do and a lot to verify. The spirit of the motion passed this time last year by everyone in this House demands nothing less than verification of what has been done. I hope that will be more rather than less. Showing respect to this House and, more important, to people with disabilities and their families requires that there be verification of what has been done and what is in process.

Senator Colm Burke: Many of the points I wanted to make have been made already. I thank the Minister of State for attending and making his presentation. In fairness, a lot of work has been done by comparison with three or four years ago. It is important that we recognise not only the work of the Ministers and the Department but also the local authorities. One of the problems with local authorities over recent years concerns staffing levels and the expertise required. There was a feeling among staff that, no matter how hard they worked on preparing plans, there would not be money available. It was believed a real effort was not made to make progress on many things that should have been done at a time when we did not have money.

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In my local authority area, that of Cork City Council, there are 19 individual sites identified. A number of them have been opened up and work on one has been completed already. Progress is being made on a number of others. I hope that, over the next 12 to 18 months, an additional 400 houses will be available in Cork city alone. Many other local authorities are following suit.

In addition to considering housing, we also need to examine the question of ensuring that there are adequate services available where we build houses, especially where they are built in considerable numbers. I am concerned because I have just seen a planning application being lodged for 230 apartments in an urban setting but with no plans at all for back-up amenities and sports and recreational facilities. We seem to be falling down in respect of joined-up thinking about having all the amenities available in an area, including schools.

A relative of mine working in Edinburgh had to refurbish 200 old army houses. At the same time as refurbishing, a plan had to be produced setting out how many new families would move into the area. Extensions to the schools had to be built at the same time as the housing was being made available. Here we talk about building schools and other amenities three, four, five and six years after building the houses. Sometimes the affected children are teenagers by the time we have any of this work done. Consequently, we need to have much more joined-up thinking.

A great deal of progress has been made on ensuring that local authorities are working effectively. My colleague referred to the disability sector. Let me refer to one area in Cork in respect of which I have worked very hard. I am glad to say €2.5 million has been allocated this year and that 42 houses which need to be adapted by the local authority will be adapted.

Previously, in any one year, on average, only six or seven adaptations were completed by Cork City Council and there was an eight-year waiting list for people who have a disability to get work done. I am delighted that money has been made available.

We need to look urgently at the long-term rental issue and the lack of security for those renting in the private sector. I know changes have been made but there is still a major concern for young families in private rented accommodation who are trying to save, pay rent and have their children going to a local school. They do not know when the letter will come in the door or the meeting will happen where they might be given six months' or even 12 months' notice that they have to move out of their accommodation. We need to move towards long-term letting because there is a whole cohort who will not get on the housing ladder and will not qualify for local authority loans or housing. That group has not been looked after and we need to do something on this issue soon. A significant number of people are caught in this trap. They have young families and want to stay in the area where their children are going to school. If they move out of their existing accommodation, they will not get a suitable alternative in the area which causes significant problems for them. We need to look at this issue urgently.

On the roll-out of private sector housing projects, we need to ensure all the boxes for the provision of services, such as roads, water or sewers, are ticked adequately and fast enough. Local authorities seem to be taking too long to react to putting in place services for developments to move on. We need to look at that. In one project in Cork, for instance, the local authority owns land on which 600 houses can be built. The provision of services for this site will cost €9.5 million. We should not have to wait until this time next year for that project to start. We need houses urgently. We should do everything possible to ensure funding is provided to lo-

cal authorities to roll out these services to allow the private sector kick into place. We can then, if necessary, acquire some of those houses in those developments for local authority housing.

I thank the Minister of State for the work done. We need to do a lot more and a lot faster, however.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank Senators for their comments. Most were positive but some were negative. I will not thank Senators for the negative ones but we have to accept them and take them on the chin. Joking aside, everyone is committed to the process of delivering more housing. We also have to take criticism as well because we cannot get this done as quickly as we want.

I am not fully sure what Senator Murnane O'Connor was trying to get at. I am not familiar with councils dezoning lands they bought for social housing.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It was due to the spatial strategy.

Deputy Damien English: Some councils have significant debts on land and have brought forward proposals to the Department to activate that. We will respond to that. I have met the Carlow housing team on two occasions at the various workshops we run in the Department but did not hear the issues the Senator raised. The Department has had numerous engagements with all local authorities, including Carlow, on all the proposals and actions. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and I, have met all the local authorities, both councillors and officials, and answered all their questions, which have run to several hundred in some cases. There is no issue about information.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: On a point of order-----

Deputy Damien English: I would be concerned if there is an accusation of misinformation or a lack of information because everyone agrees there probably is too much information. We are certainly not hiding anything. That is not the game we are in. I am happy to sit down with the Senator and a delegation from Carlow County Council at any stage to go through any questions. I do not agree with what the Senator said earlier, as it does not match up with my experience of dealing with Carlow County Council officials. I have gone to Carlow to look at some of the housing projects there such as accommodation for elderly people and renting houses in rural areas. The repair and leasing initiative was started in Carlow and Waterford and has made great progress. Carlow County Council has led the way in finding vacant houses in town centres, spending money on them and bringing them back into social housing use. I am not fully sure what the Senator was getting at. Maybe she can clarify the issues later and we can deal with them.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will come back in and clarify the issues.

Deputy Damien English: This is not just a rebuilding strategy and action plan for cities such as Dublin and Cork. It is fair to say the media may concentrate on the emergency situation that is at its worst in Dublin, Cork and perhaps Galway. This is a national plan, however, which affects every county and all cities. We are engaging with everybody of all abilities and disabilities on this issue. It is not a Dublin or Cork plan. Every local authority has been asked to put in place pipeline projects for the next three or four years. The Taoiseach referred to 8,000 houses in different parts of development, not under construction. It was reported as construc-

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tion and that is not the Taoiseach's fault. That is not near enough and that is what is in the pipeline. There are 504 various social housing projects of all around the country. We want a lot more than that and we have asked every local authority to find sites, projects and to become involved in joint ventures to bring forward new ideas. This includes Carlow. That message has been clear. If it needs to be repeated in Carlow, I will do that. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, is clear we want activity and we need it. It is as simple as that.

The housing assistance payment, HAP, is a success. It will be hit by a lack of supply of housing in some areas, certainly in the greater Dublin region, however. HAP was successful in the early years because there were vacant and available properties. Many of these properties are now drying up, making it hard to deliver on HAP. We have set high targets and we will keep pushing them.

HAP is an attractive offer for all involved. It is a solution and does not mean one is off the housing list. Taking up a HAP residency means one is on the transfer list, which means one is on the housing list. I do not know why the contrary has been put out. Most people will agree HAP is a solution. Most availing of the scheme do not want to come off it and many others request to be on it. I accept a lack of supply is an issue, however.

On the issue of tenancies being terminated early, I am not familiar with any such cases. If there are cases, will the Senator let me know? The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, is there to aid with that. People enter into rental agreements and it is not that simple any more to break them or put someone out. There are many protections available which have been enhanced.

On extending the rent pressure zones, there is a legal process in place which will stand up legally. We have to stick to this. It involves a local authority and the Housing Agency at the start flagging an electoral area in any county which they believe will qualify as a rent pressure zone. The Minister will instruct the RTB to carry out the research and gather the evidence that the area should qualify as a rent pressure zone. Already in January, rent pressure zones were extended to several towns. More will be looked at the next quarter. If there are places in Carlow which will qualify, they will come into that. However, we have to follow the logic set out. If we did not, it would not stand up to scrutiny or have a legal basis. The criteria are there for a reason.

It affects my area. Navan did not qualify even though one would imagine it would. Places like Maynooth and Drogheda did not qualify either but, in time, they will qualify when they tick the boxes. It is important the right process is applied. If not, it will not stand up legally and would not be worth having rent pressure zones in the first place. A process is in place and it is important the local authority engages with it because it has a leading role at the start.

We are currently mapping 700 different sites across the country. They are not all in Dublin. The Department, along with its housing delivery team, is assessing sites throughout the country. The work will start in the cities because that is where the major pressure is on. However, we will engage all local authorities to bring forward sites because we want more activity, despite what Senator Gavan thinks. We agree on building a certain amount of social housing and as we are not near that number yet, we want to make that happen as best as we possibly can.

The rental accommodation scheme, RAS, was mentioned in terms of making people homeless. I am not sure what was meant by that. It certainly does not make people homeless. That is not what it was designed for. It is a homelessness solution.

Senator Boyhan raised a number of issues. I hope I do not miss the main points but we com-

mitted to making announcements on the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, and all going well, they will be announced before the end of March. The Senator is correct in that over 70 projects came in on that. Quite a few of them were over €5 million and needed more detail and more work, and any delay that has happened is due to the need for more detail. It is important that this is announced properly and that the correct funding is allocated to the projects which will deliver housing. This infrastructure has to activate and open up sites that can deliver housing. There is no point in us contributing towards a bridge or road if the site is left undeveloped for years afterwards. We have to apply a great deal of scrutiny here to make sure we make the right decisions on that. The proposals came forward from local authorities, including a combination of private land and their own land. In some cases it is a combination of both but certainly on the private lands the local authorities might help to open up, there will be a delivery of social housing expected from that. If the taxpayers are going to help activate these sites through this fund there has to be a payback to them through a reduced price on the end product - the house - as well as social housing. I can assure the Senator that the local authorities are driving that. They make the suggestions to us. We did not go out and pick the sites. We are following the suggestions and proposals of the local authorities, and we are working with the local authorities. To repeat the point I made to Senator Murnane O'Connor, we are asking local authorities to bring forward their proposals for their own sites and their own lands and we will work out a pipeline over the years ahead to develop that. There are some key sites that we know are in need of infrastructure. This is about trying to activate private and public sites and a combination of both. We also want to activate other sites in public ownership outside of the local authorities' ownership. We have asked all agencies that own land, including NAMA, to look at all their sites, site by site, to see how they can be developed for housing, as well as a combination of that mixed tenure to get the balance right on social and private housing.

There were a couple of specific questions on the actions that we missed. I thank the Senator for his compliments on the actions we achieved. I accept there were approximately nine incomplete actions for the relevant quarter. The Senator raised four or five of them specifically and the rapid building programme was also raised by others. This is an area where we would like to see increased activity. The commitment was that there would be 200 rapid housing units delivered by the end of 2016. That has not happened to our satisfaction. A total of 22 have been completed and have tenants in them while another 350 are at different stages of construction. Some are further along than others. Some are at the tendering stage but are actually in play now in that sites have been identified, planning has been secured and they are moving forward. The big delay was actually securing the sites, which is unbelievable. There was a bit of tit-for-tat here between two Senators about who was objecting to what but we have to get the message out to everybody that social housing has to be accepted in the communities and sites must be brought forward. I have been at council meetings where councillors have told me that this is a crisis that has to be solved only to discover that they are objecting to housing plans. I am not blaming any particular party. I simply state that individual councillors who claim that they want to solve an emergency on the one hand and block projects on the other need to look in the mirror. It makes it very hard for us to achieve anything. There are 350 rapid housing units in play. The issue is that the commitment for 2017 is that there will be 650 units in addition to that, so there should be 1,000 rapid-build houses constructed or certainly near to completion before the end of this year. Our target will be that we will have them completed. We will engage with local authorities and ask them to use this scheme and activate it. We have put in place measures which make it easier to use and the procurement measures are dealt with there as well. There is no reason for delays in this. Rapid construction allows for different types of construction. It is supposed to deliver housing much quicker and it has not done so in some cases, but we now

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have enough sites to make it happen and it should be on track before the end of the year. Again, it needs commitment from everybody.

I reiterate that, on the €200 million in LIHAF funding, we expect to be able to announce that by the end of March, all going well, and then we will get that money spent and get it activated. That is only one mechanism. Other access to finance for infrastructure is available. The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, is involved in trying to make funds available, as are other agencies. This is a contribution intended to help activate sites and to get sites moving. The bottom line is we must deliver housing.

Another issue raised was in respect of online planning. The enabling legislation was held back because of the debate here before Christmas on the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016. That took precedence for a while but, with those regulations, we are still progressing with the online planning and it is on target to be here before the summer. It will be accompanied by the regulations that support the online planning in place for this year as well. We know it is important and it was discussed on Committee Stage. While everyone thought it was important to bring forward the legislation we dealt with in this House in December as a priority, the commitment to online planning is there, albeit behind schedule.

NAMA lands were mentioned. We are fully engaged with NAMA on a regular basis and are trying to activate their sites. Indeed, we launched a report on unfinished housing developments today that reviewed 2016 and fewer than 15 unfinished sites remain on NAMA's books. There has been plenty of movement there. There are strong commitments from NAMA in terms of the delivery of housing over the years ahead. We in the Department have developed quite a good relationship with the agency over the last six or seven months in our attempts to progress sites. It is something on which we are very much in tune with it. The same applies to our housing agencies and the local authorities. There is delivery there. I hope I have answered most of Senator Boyhan's questions.

Senator Coffey welcomed the priority given to try to address this issue. It builds on the good work Senator Coffey and Deputy Kelly had done before that. We have managed to secure additional funding, which matches the number one priority given to this issue by the Government. Many of the actions have been enhanced and increased. The Senator specifically mentioned the action plan process and I agree with him. It is a process that Senator Coffey had started in the Department regarding social housing. I know that Mr. Barry Quinlan was involved in putting that together as well. I have said before in this House - I was involved in the Action Plan for Jobs process in another Department for four or five years - that it is a process that will deliver. This is the second progress report. We are six months into this. I cannot show or prove the solutions here. I can only say that the process has delivered in many other areas - jobs being one of them. I refer to the process of rolling out the actions, putting the names beside them and committing the money and the personnel that are now available. This process does deliver and this will happen. I have no doubt but that if we follow this plan action by action, we will end this crisis. I have no doubt about that because I was involved in a somewhat similar process before. It is a good way of doing business. It is a process which is now being used in other Departments as well and this way of doing business is often discussed at European level too. It is quite a simple approach, which is common in business but was not used in all Government circles for years. It will deliver and I have no doubt about that. The important thing about having an action plan for anything is one's business case to secure the funding required. If there is no business case or plan the money will not be available. That is why, with this plan being published in July, we were able to get the commitment, through the Departments of Public Ex-

penditure and Reform and Finance, of the €5.35 billion we need to spend on this area over the next couple of years. That is what we are trying to do and I have no doubt that we will do that.

Senator Coffey raised the issue of voids. There has been great progress in this matter. We discuss the issue of vacant properties regularly. People do not realise that more than 7,000 voids - long-term social housing that had not been used for many years - have been brought back into play over the last two or three years. Again, that was started by the previous Government and has been continued by this Government over the past year. Last year alone saw 2,600 voids being brought back into use, and rightly so. We should recognise that progress is being made here and, by the middle of this year, voids should not be a conversation that is required any more. There is no excuse for long-term voids any more. There are a couple to be fitted out this year. There are some short-term voids, in some cases six weeks, in other cases three months. We are trying to narrow that timeline. However, long-term voids will be a thing of the past before the end of this year. There are some cases where boarded-up houses will be seen. They are part of a different scheme concerning remedial works, which are not counted as voids. They are a different situation. On my route into work I pass one every day and it can cause people to scratch their heads. Those are not being dealt with under the voids programme. I want to be very clear on that.

Senator Coffey also properly raised the issue that delivery is key. I cannot stress enough that the reason we are visiting local authorities and have stakeholder events on a regular basis is to ensure buy-in from all the stakeholders, including the local authorities, NAMA, the housing agencies and approved housing bodies. It might be thought that it is for media purposes, but it is not. All the different players, including all the parties, have a role in this. We might disagree on the overall targets in terms of the number of houses we are going to build, but I think we all agree that we must up our game when it comes to social housing. However, it can only happen if we all play our part at local and national level. This is what we are trying to do. If we do not deliver on this plan and drive it on, it cannot solve the problem. I accept that some want to do more. I have no problem with that but let us get this done for a start. With the best will in the world, building 47,000 extra houses over the next three or four years is an ambitious target. It is not enough for Senator Gavan's ideology and I am fine with that but there is no quicker way of doing it because we cannot build the houses quickly enough now. Even if our aspirations were twice this, it would not increase activity in the next week or two. We are trying to rebuild a system to be able to deliver the housing we require.

The Senator mentioned the repair and lease initiative. Again, it has worked in Carlow and Waterford with some success. I think more than 40 or 50 properties were dealt with in Waterford. There is endless potential with this scheme. If the money announced and secured for it gets spent, and I hope it does, we will find more because it is a good scheme that can work well and it does provide the quickest solution to bringing vacant properties back into use. The rebuilding is not just for Dublin or Cork. The Senator can see the benefits of it in Waterford, Limerick and many other areas. I hope that answers most of the Senator's questions on that.

In response to Senator Gavan, we cannot keep having this debate about ideology. We are not against social housing. I am certainly not against social housing and the more of it we can do, the better, but we are realistic about what we can achieve over the months and years ahead. It would be just as easy to say we would build 100,000 houses but it would not be believable or have helped us win the money we required from the various Departments because nobody would have believed us. What we have put in place is an ambitious but realistic plan that we want to and can achieve.

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Even before the recession, this country had decided to stop building social housing for whatever reason. I will not even go there. The system of rebuilding social housing was wound down, which is why we have a problem today. I accept that. We are committed to rebuilding it and putting local authorities and approved housing bodies back in a position to deliver, construct, rent or buy social housing - whatever it takes. We are committed to that. The money has been put behind that. Most of the €5.5 billion is for social housing, so Senator Gavan should stop telling me it is not on our radar because it is not true. It is committed there.

The Senator's party has lovely ideas but I have never seen all the money to make them happen. We are spending what we can and what we could secure to deliver this. It will put us in a position where the system can deliver 10,000 social houses per year by the end of the strategy. Thereafter, whoever is in Government, be it Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, the Green Party or the Labour Party, can make the next decision. If its wants to build 20,000 houses per year, that is grand. It is a lovely aspiration but we have to do what we can today. Trust me, if we could build them all tomorrow, we would do it. It cannot be done. We must rebuild the system and get sites activated, and that is what we are committed to doing and what we will achieve.

Senator Gavan again referred to the 8,000 properties. They are in the pipeline. We want to treble that. We accept that the number is not near enough what it should be but we are asking local authorities to bring forward more plans and to make it happen. It is not that we want to rely on or reward the private sector. We are conscious of this. We must find solutions today while we are building more social housing. That means leasing houses on a long and short-term basis, through the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme and buying properties. I am fine with all of this if it provides solutions for people who need a house today. We can choose not to spend any money on the private sector. That will not get people a home. We will use houses every which way we can - private or public sector - to make it happen. That is our job but the key is that we get value for the taxpayer in all we do. I believe we are getting it in some of the schemes we are implementing that work with the private sector to deliver or buy housing or use vacant properties. That is what it is about. It is not about ideology. It is practical. We have no choice but to work with the private sector today to deliver housing. If not, people will remain homeless, which is not something I, the Minister or our Department want to happen. I want to be clear about that.

The reality is not what Senator Gavan says it is. If he was right, we would not be spending or committing €5.5 billion over the years ahead, so he should just deal with the facts. I have no problem with him saying it is not enough for him. I can live with that but he should not tell me it is because of ideology or that we do not believe in building social housing, because that is not true. The proof is in what we are doing, the money is available to make that happen and that is what we are going to keep working on.

Senator Paul Gavan: The problem is in the figures.

Deputy Damien English: Exactly, and I wish we had the Sinn Féin magic pen but we do not. We must deal with reality and make it happen week by week and bit by bit.

Senator Paul Gavan: We have costed proposals. The Minister of State has rejected them.

Deputy Damien English: I have seen Sinn Féin's proposals, but when they are all put on the one page, they do not add up. The money is not there. We can only spend what we are earning and what we have. Again, because of solutions in the housing plan----

Senator Paul Gavan: What about the tax cuts for the rich? There is no problem there.

Deputy Damien English: I will come to that because I will tell the Senator that the reason we were able to allocate an extra €2 billion on top of what the previous Minister of State had secured for housing in the previous budget was because of a jobs recovery. I will not claim credit for all that. The private sector created all the jobs but there are an extra 230,000 jobs, which is more than there were three or four years ago. How has that happened? It is because of a combination of reasons but a key part of that is that we have always identified in our budgets that every change we made to the tax system was done with an eye on job creation. It has worked well and I have no problems standing over the decisions we made in the budget over the past three or four years. They are not tax breaks for the rich. They are tax initiatives to create jobs and they have been proven to work.

Senator Paul Gavan: That is the Minister of State's ideology.

Deputy Damien English: It has worked, which means we now have the resources we need to spend on social housing. I do not know where Senator Gavan is going to get his money from.

Senator Paudie Coffey: They said we could not do it.

Deputy Damien English: Exactly. Everyone said we could not do it.

Acting Chairman (Senator Ned O'Sullivan): I must ask the Minister of State not to be confrontational.

Deputy Damien English: I am allowed to fight back. The funding for housing is available because of the jobs recovery and that is the way it works. The funding is available for other areas as well but it can only continue to fund them if we have people in jobs. The best way out of poverty for anybody is to have a job if at all possible and that is what we are trying to do. We are helping people to get a job. Senator Gavan should not tell me they are tax breaks for the rich because they are not. If he analysed the budget, he would see that it is jobs-focused and that is what budgets have been about for five or six years, which has worked quite well.

People keep referring to the number of vacant properties. There are more than 200,000 such properties in the preliminary census. If someone read the last three censuses before that, they would see that it was always the same. There have been more than 200,000 vacant properties in this country over the past ten or 15 years. We are now putting in place strategies to try to deal with and activate them. Even when these properties were worth a fortune and when there was a shortage of houses back in 2002, 2003 and 2004 and people were paying massive money for houses, they were still vacant so it is not as simple as saying that we will compulsorily purchase them. The reasons they are vacant are complicated in many cases. We have asked the Housing Agency to bring forward a national housing reuse strategy that will be available in quarter two of this year to see how we can tackle all these vacant properties bit by bit and through different schemes and initiatives. This will involve looking at taxing them and compulsory purchase and will look at what is happening in other countries because we are prepared to do whatever it takes.

In the meantime, we announced a few schemes to get a move on while we are awaiting that overall report. The repair and lease initiative and the purchasing initiative will help deliver a few thousand houses over the years ahead. If they work and we spend all the money, we will do more because that repair and lease initiative is one of the best schemes we have. Let us see

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whether we can spend what we have first. If it is utilised, we can reallocate money to different circles within our schemes. It is not for lack of ambition. Again, it is practical. We will see what comes in with an available scheme. We are asking local authorities to knock on doors and push this scheme. If there is a house in Carlow, Navan, Cork, Dublin or Limerick that is sitting empty - I am very conscious that fewer than 1,000 people live in Limerick city centre - it is a crazy situation. There is a scheme that can make it happen but let us see. If it works, people drive it and everybody here encourages it, we will find more money for it but we must open up the scheme and see what happens. I see endless potential in it because there is a lot of vacant property, which is crazy when people need homes. We will do all we can to bring the two together but it is a combination of carrot and stick.

I know people advocate levies on vacant properties. That is all very fine and we will probably end up looking at that but there is a lead-in time to that. It was the same with the vacant site levy. According to legal advice from the Attorney General, it could not be implemented until January 2019. Work has begun on it but it cannot kick in until 2019. We cannot sit back and wait that long. We must do other things to try to activate these sites and houses and that is what the carrot approach is about. When people tell me that they own a property on a high street that needs €30,000 or €40,000 to do it up but they cannot find that money, we now have a scheme that provides that funding. The State will invest in that person's property but it wants it back as social housing for ten years. It is a fair scheme and good value for taxpayers' money and I hope it works. I hope we are in here looking for more money for it. I expect we will be and rightly so because it is one of the initiatives that will help.

The Housing Agency is dealing with issues with purchasing vacant properties. It has looked at about 900 houses and about 330 houses have been priced. About 238 houses are sale agreed and these houses will be passed on to the approved housing bodies. The Housing Agency can then spend the money again so it is a revolving budget. The agency buys the houses, secures them, sells them on and can buy more. It has €70 million to work with and has the potential to deliver 1,600 plus units. Again, it can do a lot more. The agency is very conscious that it cannot compete with other first-time buyers so it is trying to find vacant properties or other properties that fit with what we need but not compete in the market. It is about finding houses that do not cause a problem. The agency is dealing with the lending issues in order to try to buy in volume as well. If that works and if it gives good value for taxpayers' money, we will do more of it. We are trying these schemes to make it happen.

I have gone on too long. I hope that I have answered most of the questions. The Senator might not like all of the answers, but that is fine. If these schemes for vacant properties work, we will do more. The overall vacant houses strategy will be published, probably in the next six or seven weeks. That will give us more ideas and more initiatives to try to help.

Senator Kelleher asked a range of questions and if I miss any of them, I will come back with proper answers. My understanding is that the rough sleeper count is a national count and is not restricted to Dublin. It happens every six months, I think in November and July. Those responsible were very close to having accommodation for every rough sleeper. People do not have to sleep rough. That does not mean they have exactly what they want or that they can avail of it when it is needed. That is what we have to work on, to make it easier to access or to close that gap. Certainly, in Dublin city, we sat down in October with all the various NGO agencies, which do great work - Senator Kelleher is involved with some of them - and we asked them, from their figures, what additional accommodation they thought was needed. That would have been last September or October. At the time, they suggested that perhaps 140 or 160 additional

bed spaces were required. The Minister and the Department decided to go beyond that and an additional 210 spaces were provided. A total of €6 million was spent in the months of October, November and December to bring forward that accommodation. Those beds have been provided. There is a commitment to do more again this spring and to go beyond what we think we need, just to be sure. We are doing that and whatever is needed we will do. There is money secured for that and it will be spent.

The Senator asked do we have enough? I have just seen the figures for a couple of weeks around December-January and there were some nights where there were 100 vacant beds in emergency accommodation. Some nights there were 20, some nights 30 or 40, but most nights, that I could see, there were vacant emergency beds. I want to stress again that this is only temporary - we want to get them homes - but the Senator asked specifically about rough sleepers. The beds are there. We are enhancing the quality of those beds. I visited a lot of them during the month of January. The newer ones are much better than the existing ones, there is no doubt about that. We are enhancing what we are doing and providing a better quality of accommodation to allow for couples and families as well. We are quite close to having enough but that does not mean that there will not be rough sleepers.

Senator Colette Kelleher: It is only the beginning.

Deputy Damien English: It is only beginning. The key is that has to be only temporary. We have to get them into permanent homes and that is what we want to do. The HAP scheme allows for that and the Housing First approach is working quite well also. All the services are coming together. The Housing First approach is a great initiative. It worked very well in Finland and we are copying that model.

Senator Colette Kelleher: It needs to go national.

Deputy Damien English: I agree it needs to go national and that is the plan. The commitment was to have 300 in Dublin in the first instance. We are well on target to go beyond that. Again, under the HAP scheme, specifically for homeless people, there have been over 800 housing solutions found and we are trying to work directly with homeless people to find them homes and then put the services around them. Some of those rough sleepers require a lot of additional services to ensure that Housing First works. I know Senator Kelleher understands this. That is what we are trying to work on. The commitment is there and we know it will work.

I answered a question about rapid-build accommodation earlier. It is not where we wanted it to be. We were hoping for 200 units; there are 22 secured with people in them. However, there are 350 up and running. We should have an additional 650 before the end of this year, so there should be 1,000 in total. That is our target and we will do more next year. That is only one scheme. It is another funding area and we want to deliver on that as well.

Senator Kelleher mentioned the €6 million commitment that is meant to come from the Department of Health. We have flagged this with them. There is €3.5 million ring-fenced. They have promised it for 2018 and we are still not giving up on it. We will look for more for 2017. We have flagged this as an issue and are seeking more funding. It is definitely committed for 2018. We will try to increase the €3.5 million for this year as well, because I think we will need that. We are still in the first half of the year. If we can show that we can spend it wisely and put it to good use, it strengthens the case to secure the rest of the money. The Senator is correct that it was committed; it is an action that was not fulfilled. We are saying it is not there and we

are trying to work on that as well.

The Senator asked about the National Homeless Consultative Committee meeting. I must check the position on that. I would have assumed it was meeting but I am not sure. I will check. On the dual residency requirement, that should not be causing a problem but I will check the position and come back to the Senator.

On voluntary bodies, the one-stop shop is being implemented with them and new legislation to give them greater protection will be brought through the House during the month ahead. I will bring that legislation forward myself. We recognise that the voluntary bodies have a major contribution to make to address this homeless crisis. They have done great work. There are approximately 550 voluntary housing associations. They will not all be in a position to do the kind of projects we want. Some of them are just one-off projects, while others are for two or three units. There are probably 15 or 20 main players who want to up their game and do more and we want to facilitate that. By putting regulations and legislation around that, it protects them, and puts them in a stronger position to do partnerships and raise money. We are committed to doing that and people will see a lot more activity there.

In some cases, local authority members would rather that local authorities were doing more but we are saying that the reality is we need both. I would say to local authority members - and Senators will probably be in touch with them more than we are - that they should engage a lot more with the approved housing bodies because we want to see the relationships strengthened between the local authorities and those bodies. That is provided for there. Councillors can engage more and strengthen that relationship and conversation and feel more a part of the process.

On the rental strategy, I agree that it is a step forward. I accept it does not have everything that Senator Kelleher wanted. I have the document that Senator Kelleher gave me and we are constantly trying to enhance that. On the deposit protection scheme, security of tenants and receivers, the legislation is being worked on in the context of recognising receivers as landlords. In our view, and I would have argued it at the time, there is protection there but it needs to be clearer and strengthened again. We are committed to do that and we will work with Senator Kelleher to bring it forward in the months ahead. There are a couple of other key specific areas in respect of which I will sit down with Senator Kelleher to see what we can do.

I think I have answered the question on vacant properties quite well. Senator Kelleher mentioned a couple of issues, such as compulsory purchase orders and leasing orders. We are looking at those. The Housing Agency has taken all the suggestions on board and is compiling a report for us. It is the lead agency in bringing the report to us. We hope to have it in the next couple of weeks, when we can activate and build on what we are doing already. It would be a win-win situation for everybody if we could activate vacant properties. It would be the best use of taxpayers' money because they already have services and infrastructure, so we want to do that as best we can.

I am not happy with the spend on Traveller accommodation in recent years. It has not achieved what it ought to have achieved. I accept that the money was greatly reduced. The budget has increased by 70% for this year. My job, because it is mainly my area, is to ensure that the money is spent. I have sent a very clear message to all local authorities that we have to up our game in respect of Traveller-specific accommodation. I would not be happy that, in some cases, people are shirking their responsibilities. That is not going to continue.

Senator Colette Kelleher: It would be good to have a report on it.

Deputy Damien English: I would have no problem having a report on that but I am giving my commitment that this money will be spent and that local authorities will have to honour their responsibilities here across the board because some are not. That is not acceptable. It is an issue that has to be dealt with across the board. Increasing the funding was a key step to be able to say that there is increased spending; now let us get it spent. It was an area where funding was cut, like every other Department. Money was cut there and we are trying to bring it back up.

I think I have answered most of the Senator's questions. If I have missed anything, it was not on purpose and I will come back to it.

Has Senator Davitt gone wandering?

Acting Chairman (Senator Ned O'Sullivan): I have to advise the Minister of State that he has five minutes before we must move to the next business.

Deputy Damien English: I will go faster if I can. I am probably going too fast as it is.

Senator Davitt welcomed the panel commission changes. Again, these changes are designed to try to speed up activation of sites. It goes back to the carrot-and-stick approach. The vacant site levy will kick in in 2019. The work on the register for that will be done in 2017 and 2018, but the charge will only come into effect in January 2019. We are trying to encourage people to bring forward the sites by means of offering them the carrot of working with them, through the provision of infrastructure and other schemes, to make it easier to do joint ventures with local authorities and the private sector. Again, the intention is to encourage them to activate the sites now. That does not mean that we are giving people extra profits. If the State is working on infrastructure relating to sites, there has to be a payback for the State. That will happen.

Senator Davitt raised the provision of one-off sites to people. There is nothing preventing that from happening. We have been very clear to all local authorities and told them to bring forward their proposals, to show us the level of demand, to outline their ideas and to use their imaginations. We have a range of schemes here and ways of funding that. There was great success with site provision in some counties. In others there was not because houses were not finished-out or completed and that caused great difficulties. The scheme can work. If local authorities in specific areas, for example, Westmeath County Council, want to bring forward initiatives, we would be open to examining their proposals and working with them. This goes back to getting sites activated, getting the best use for taxpayers and getting people homes and houses as quickly as possible.

Senator Lombard referred to rent pressure zones. At present, these are dealt with on the basis of the local electoral areas. In some cases, this means that the population of a zone can be over 80,000 or 100,000. For now, the scheme is in place and we need to get on top of the major pressure zones. We are constantly taking the advice of the Residential Tenancies Board on that matter. We can use all of that advice and do more in respect of the issue. The Senator is saying it is a good start and that we need to keep an eye on it in terms of rent pressure zones but above all that, when it comes to rent, the key is to increase supply and that is what we are trying to do. Most of the actions in this action plan are about increasing the supply of housing and trying to deal with that as best we can.

The issue of accommodation for people who are renting was raised. We are trying to en-

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courage build to rent projects so that people purposely build rental properties and we are trying to deal with the rent security issue as best we can.

As for Senator Dolan's point, as I was not present in the Chamber for that motion last year, I am not familiar with it. There is a commitment, however, to provide accommodation for people with disabilities and it is an issue I would be happy to work on with the Senator. I will get the specific figures he seeks on the report. There is a commitment to produce a report by the middle of 2017 with real targets and results but again-----

Senator John Dolan: The motion called for an up-to-date report after a year.

Deputy Damien English: That is fine. I believe a report is due the middle of this year and I will get that for the Senator. If he reads the report he will see that it refers to a number of houses and developments. We purposely did not set out anyone's specific conditions throughout this action plan for housing. It just deals with the overall numbers, but we are clear in our engagement with local authorities that it should be accommodation across the board for people of all abilities, those with disabilities and all age groups. Accommodation for people of older years is also required. Each local authority completed its new assessments last autumn. They all have their new waiting lists and out of those they will bring forward their plans to us on what they need and that includes accommodation for people with disabilities. We are committed to that and to providing high-quality accommodation. We are running a competition on accommodation using technology for older people but also for people with disabilities. I refer to houses that are more easily adaptable and using updated technologies to make that happen. We are committed to having lifelong houses-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): The Minister has only three minutes left.

Deputy Damien English: That is something on which I will work with the Senator before the report is due in the autumn. To be clear, it is not that we have not mentioned any category; it is about the overall housing plan. Each local authority will have to tell us what it needs in each category. While we want to make that happen, the local authorities are being told clearly to cater for everyone in that regard. We have been clear on the commitment to design, quality and funding because if we are to get acceptance of social housing where we cannot get it at the moment, we have to have quality build and design. While we are under pressure in terms of the numbers, I want to be clear that we will not renege on the spend or on meeting the needs of people of all abilities. We have asked local authorities to bring forward new designs and we will reward imagination as best we can in that regard.

On adaption of houses, there has been an increase in the funding for next year. In the past year, approximately 8,000 houses were adapted in the private sector. Enough funding has been secured to bring that up to approximately 10,000 for 2017, if need be, but approximately 9,000 houses should be adapted under that scheme. The funding is available. Extra money was given to local authorities. Most local authorities who could prove they needed more money got that. We are committed to doing more of that if it is needed because we recognise that people want to stay in their homes, which is the purpose of the scheme. Retrofitting work is ongoing on public housing and so on but privately, over 9,000 should be able to have their houses adapted in the year ahead, and if we need more money we will find it.

Senator Kelleher mentioned the transition of people out of the various homes. My understanding is that this is not a money issue. The finance should be available. The Health Service

Executive provided €20 million and that has been matched by the Government so money should not be an issue. I will try to find out the main barriers in that regard.

Senator Colette Kelleher: I seek to find out what is happening in this regard.

Deputy Damien English: I will come back to the Senator with proper answers. I accept it is not happening fast enough but I am not sure where the fault lies. Generally, it comes back to money but I know it is not a financial issue. I will get an update on that and sit down with the Senator to discuss it because we are all committed to making sure that happens.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): The Minister of State has one minute remaining. It seems Senator Murnane O'Connor wants to make a point of order.

Deputy Damien English: Senator Colm Burke raised a couple of issues as well.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): Sorry, Minister. Senator Murnane O'Connor has a point of order.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am so disappointed with some of the Minister's answers but on a point of order, with regard to zoned land, I was a member of a local authority in Carlow for 18 years. Every five or six years, the Department-----

Senator Paudie Coffey: That is not a point of order.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Minister said to me he did not know about zoned lands. We were told in the last local area plans to dezone lands, which has happened.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): That is not a point of order.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is a point of order. The repair and lease scheme is a point of order. I was elected to promote the repair and lease scheme.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): Senator Murnane O'Connor, you have made the point.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: No, this is crucial.

Senator Paudie Coffey: The Senator thought zoning was a solution. She was wrong.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Twenty-one people applied for the repair and lease scheme in Carlow but only six qualified. I want to promote that initiative. I was here to be positive about it but the fact is that the uptake of this scheme is not good. It is a pilot scheme and the Minister needs to address it. It is the same with the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. People were taken off the housing list and put on the RAS. Half of the Minister's answers were off the mark-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): Senator, please resume your seat.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: -----but, overall, I thank him for coming into the House today.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): Apologies, Minister.

Deputy Damien English: That is the strangest thing I have ever seen but to be clear on the

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point of order, the issue was put to me that we are telling local authorities to sell off zoned land for social housing. I said that is not the case. The Senator has changed that to say zoned land in general.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I said zoned land in general.

Senator Paudie Coffey: The record will speak for itself.

Deputy Damien English: I am entitled to explain. What was said to me was that our Department has told local authorities to sell off zoned social housing land that they own. That is not true. I want to be clear that we have not done that.

The last set of questions were about State-owned lands and increased rental properties. Senator Colm Burke should know that this is exactly what we are trying to do. We are trying to bring in and encourage long-term rental schemes. We have issued new guidelines to local authorities on the build to rent initiative, which I believe will work.

On the issue of staffing levels, there have been increased staffing levels-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): Sorry, Minister, we have another issue to deal with. You had 41 minutes to conclude. I thank the Minister of State. No doubt he will be brought back to the House again.

JobPath: Statements

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): The Minister is very welcome.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank the House for the invitation to outline my Department's activation policies and in particular the important role of the JobPath initiative. Getting and keeping a job is the most effective way that people can be lifted out of poverty, achieve financial independence and have improved living standards. As a result of the improvement in the economy and the range of activation activities carried out by the Department of Social Protection, much progress has been made in helping people to return to employment and in helping some people to get jobs for the first time. We are continuing with a range of programmes and JobPath, the subject of today's debate, is making a real difference for people who are long-term unemployed. The results to date are positive and the feedback from those who have participated in the initiative has also been positive in a clear majority of cases.

The service is still in its early days and the employment outcome data, although promising, should therefore be treated as preliminary. It will take some time to build up a definitive view of the service. A small number of poor experiences by participants can attract negative commentary and there will always be people who have a bad experience of any programme, service or scheme but I want to assure the House that independent reviews of outcomes to date of the initiative are very positive.

The Government, in the Action Plan for Jobs and the Pathways to Work strategy, is targeting continuing strong economic recovery and employment growth, as well as ensuring that unemployed people benefit from the increases in employment. The action plan led by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation creates jobs, and Pathways to Work, led by my Department, ensures those who are on the live register get those jobs or at least a fair share of them. The

economic recovery is unusual in Ireland in that employment growth has been matched almost equally with a fall in unemployment. This is proof positive that Pathways to Work is a success. Generally, growth in employment and falling unemployment are lag indicators in economic recovery, with economic growth happening first, employment rising later and unemployment only falling after that. In Ireland, unemployment has been falling since the beginning of the recovery and is falling as fast today as it has at any period in recent years.

The most recent data show that unemployment has fallen from a peak of more than 15% in 2012 to 6.6% last month, a rate which is lower than the EU average. The long-term unemployment rate peaked at 9.5% in the first quarter of 2012 before falling to 3.6% in the last quarter of last year. By the end of 2016, long-term unemployment accounted for 54% of all people unemployed, down from almost 65% in 2012. The number of long-term unemployed in the third quarter of 2016 was 80,000. This compares with 200,000 in early 2012.

The JobPath service was designed to augment and complement my Department's existing employment service capacity, which is provided by Intreo, the local employment services and job clubs, as well as employment activation schemes like community employment, CE, Tús, Gateway and, formerly, JobBridge. The additional capacity provided through the JobPath service has allowed the Department to provide the type and intensity of services required by jobseekers, particularly those who are most distant from the labour market and find it hardest to get jobs and keep them. Many more jobseekers are getting one-to-one engagement and support than ever before. While I appreciate that for some that attention may be unwelcome, for most it is welcome.

How does it work? The JobPath service is based on the referral of long-term unemployed jobseekers. For the purposes of the JobPath service, all long-term unemployed people on the live register are categorised into groups based on how long they have been unemployed, for example, one to two years, two to three years and so on. Selection for referral to JobPath is by means of a stratified random sampling using these groupings. The objective is to ensure equity in selection and that the people referred are representative of the long-term cohort on the live register. Selection is carried out by my Department and not by the JobPath companies.

My Department refers each customer selected to JobPath for a period of 12 months. Two contractors are delivering the service: Turas Nua and Seetec. Generally speaking, Turas Nua provides services in the southern part of the State and Seetec in the northern part and Dublin. It is not unusual for Government services to be provided through private companies by means of contracting or outsourcing. Indeed, many community employment scheme sponsors and community service programmes are registered companies as well. Some even turn a profit. The contractors provide services from locations that are accessible to the customer by public transport or private motorised transport with a normal journey time or commute of no more than 60 minutes. Where such services are not provided, my Department will quickly engage with the provider to ensure they are provided or that our clients are helped to access services.

At a time when there is concern about the loss of post offices, banks and Garda stations in rural Ireland and small towns throughout the country, Seetec and Turas Nua offices are opening throughout the country, many in small towns, providing a local job service in local towns for the first time and creating employment in their own right. The JobPath service provider writes to each referred jobseeker inviting them to attend an initial information session presented jointly by an official from my Department and a representative of the contractor. The letter of invitation includes a standard notification to the customer about the need to engage with the provider

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and the nature of the services and support that will be provided. The subsequent information session provides customers with information on customer rights and responsibilities, the JobPath programme itself, the service provided by the contractor and a copy of the service statement. After attending an information session, customers are given an appointment for their first one-to-one meeting with a personal adviser. This meeting should take place as soon as possible after the information session. The date of this first one-to-one meeting is the start date of the 52-week engagement period on the programme.

When meeting their personal adviser, each customer receives a guaranteed baseline service, including a personal progression plan. The plan sets out the skills and competencies of the customer, identifies any obvious barriers to employment and helps the customer to identify his or her particular goals and interests in a return to employment. With the JobPath service, jobseekers have access to a personal adviser who works with them over two phases. In the first phase, which lasts for up to a year, the adviser provides practical assistance in searching, preparing for, securing and sustaining employment. The second phase starts when the jobseeker is successful in finding work. During this phase the personal adviser continues to work with the jobseeker to provide any extra support needed for a period of up to 12 months. This helps the client to stay in employment and hold on to the new job. It is a service we were never able to offer before.

When my Department refers a customer to JobPath, it requires the customer to engage appropriately with the service provider. The service provider is required to make every effort to encourage the customer to attend. Customers who do not attend or do not engage with the service can be referred back to the Department by the service provider. In such cases, my Department will examine the circumstances of non-attendance and seek to facilitate the customer's engagement. I wish to stress that any decision regarding entitlement or payments being reduced or stopped can only be made by officials of my Department, officers designated by me using statutory instruments, and not by the JobPath companies. The rules are the same and apply to all jobseekers. One must be genuinely seeking work to receive a jobseeker's allowance or benefit. Taxpayers are willing to support financially with their hard-earned tax euro people who are looking for work, but they should not have to pay for those who are making little or no effort to help themselves and find work.

JobPath is a payment by results model. All initial costs are borne by the companies, such as costs of premises, staff, etc. The companies are paid registration fees and job sustainment fees. A registration fee may be claimed only when a jobseeker has developed a personal progression plan. Job sustainment fees are payable for each 13-week period of sustained employment, up to a maximum of 52 weeks. The total payments to the JobPath companies amounted to €26.8 million in 2016. The jobs must be full time, that is, more than 30 hours a week, with some exceptions. This means JobPath companies are incentivised financially to assist people to find full-time jobs that they are likely to hold down and are therefore suited to. Precarious part-time employment that is not sustained provides little or no revenue or profits where the company is concerned.

The Department has recently published its first performance report on JobPath. Should Senators wish to examine it in more detail, this report is available on our website. The initial data on the impact of the service are very encouraging, showing high levels of satisfaction among clients of the service and that people who engage with the service are more likely to secure employment than those who do not. Employment outcome data show that compared with a similar group of people who did not take part in the service, people who availed of the service were 23% more likely to have started a job. The difference is more marked and even better for

very long-term unemployed people. For those out of work for more than three years, some 44% were more likely to have found a job if they participated in JobPath than others out of work for as long who were not referred. These outcomes refer to full-time jobs of more than 30 hours a week. In short, JobPath works.

The results of an independent customer satisfaction survey recently undertaken indicates that jobseekers feel that they are receiving a good service and that JobPath has improved their chances of securing employment. Between 76% and 81% of customers were satisfied with the service provided and only between 5% and 8% expressed dissatisfaction. Over 90% of customers reported that JobPath staff made them feel valued and that they have a good relationship with their JobPath adviser. They also felt that the service had improved their chances of getting a job.

The service was implemented on a phased basis from June 2015 to July 2016. The numbers referred initially were low but this is increasing, with more than 82,000 customers referred to date. As has always been the case, we do not allow people to chop and change mid-stream between different services, programmes, courses or schemes. JobPath is no different. If someone is unsuccessful after a year's effort on JobPath, they can become eligible for schemes like CE. This is a good approach, as it means they have tried and have been supported to try to get a regular job before falling back on schemes like CE and Tús.

It will take time to accumulate data on a sufficient number of clients who have completed their engagement period for a complete and robust assessment of the outcomes. The first statistics on outcomes were published in January 2017 and fresh statistics will be published each quarter, with the next release available next month.

The improvements in our economy are very encouraging and we are clearly experiencing a jobs-led and job-rich recovery. There are, however, no grounds for complacency.

We know that for a variety of reasons it is hardest for those who are long-term unemployed to return to the workforce. JobPath is one of the targeted measures introduced by my Department to assist those returning to the workforce. The results are encouraging and exceeding expectations. We hope to see the continued successful delivery of the service, in conjunction with other activation measures, including local employment services which now have reduced caseloads, jobs clubs, community employment and Tús.

I again thank Members for giving me the opportunity to speak and look forward to our discussion on the matter.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Fianna Fáil welcomes the fall in the level of unemployment. Credit must go to the people and businesses that are responsible for the recovery which is due to their resilience, skills, hard work, entrepreneurialism and determination to move forward to secure a better future for themselves, their families and communities. Despite the fall in the level of unemployment, the recovery has not reached all sections of society and thousands remain unemployed, many of whom are long-term unemployed and in danger of remaining at the fringes of society, spectators rather than participants in their communities and society at large. It is clear that a concerted effort must be made to make this an Ireland for all rather than an Ireland for certain people or certain sections of society.

While Fianna Fáil is in favour of measures that support people in getting back into employment, it is imperative that activation measures such as JobPath be holistic in their approach,

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sensitive to people's needs and do not replicate the mistakes associated with JobBridge. Furthermore, Fianna Fáil does not support programmes that are punitive and coerce jobseekers into taking up unsuitable and inappropriate jobs. It must be recognised that those who are long-term unemployed, or at risk of becoming unemployed, may have a number of issues that make it difficult to enter the labour market. Therefore, it is essential that the Department puts checks in place to ensure the two private companies, Seetec Limited and Turas Nua which have been charged with responsibility for delivering JobPath, will be trained in how to deal with and be aware of factors such as mental health issues, family breakdown and substance misuse that may impact on a person's ability to work. At the heart of any activation programme must be the individual and his or her particular needs. It is important that the Department engages continuously with all stakeholders involved in the activation programme in order to improve it.

The Minister has outlined how the programme works and the benefits associated with it. Some of my colleagues who instigated this debate have raised concerns about JobPath. One of the major concerns is not being able to access community employment schemes as JobPath takes precedence. Concerns have been raised that those who have been referred to JobPath can no longer participate in community employment schemes. Public representatives across the country have received complaints from people who have been offered a place on a community employment scheme but who have subsequently been referred to JobPath and must participate in it rather than take up the place on the community employment scheme. Many of the people who have contacted their public representatives would prefer to take up a place on a community employment scheme which in many instances would be more suitable and appropriate to their needs. It is claimed that JobPath is eroding community employment schemes to the detriment of communities and those who benefit from vital services community employment schemes provide throughout the country.

It has also been reported that those who run community employment schemes cannot fill vacancies because of JobPath. In December 2016 the manager of the Offaly Centre for Independent Living claimed that JobPath was causing untold damage to existing community employment schemes and that there were vacancies on many such schemes that could not be filled. JobPath is being blamed for suffocating them and denying them a supply of staff by removing the referral process and imposing even more stringent constraints within the eligibility criteria. Community employment schemes have grown to develop a great social and economic benefit and we must be mindful of the impact JobPath is having on them. While the goal is to move the majority into full-time, sustainable employment, we need to be cognisant of the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable for everybody. There is a need for a degree of flexibility in the activation system and an awareness of people's age, skill set and previous experience, as well as their needs and goals. The social welfare system should not completely remove a person's right to choose and should be flexible to allow people, if they have the choice, to choose between a community employment scheme or JobPath.

I note the customer satisfaction survey of participants in JobPath and acknowledge that it is much better than JobBridge. Although the findings are very encouraging in terms of staff friendliness and engagement, there is a lot of room for improvement. I look forward to hearing how the Department will take on the concerns I have raised and improve the scheme.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Before I offer criticism, I congratulate the Department of Social Protection which has done a lot of good work over many years to provide access to further education and training for members of society. I benefited from its support when I returned to college in 1990 and will be forever grateful for its assistance and the humane approach taken

by the officials with whom I dealt. There was no political element to my interaction; I was just a member of the public who dealt directly with the Department, which is the way it should always be. Officials are well capable of doing their job without interference from politicians.

Any scheme that brings people back into the workforce and allows them to upskill and re-train must have the full support of all sides of this House. No scheme has yet been developed that is perfect in every way and there will always be complaints. There will always be a better way of doing things and somebody who knows better than everybody else. That is fine because that is what allows such schemes to evolve to deliver better programmes. The Department gets a kicking enough of the time, but it has been innovative, far-seeing and co-operative in the way it has dealt with programmes. However, political decisions need to be taken.

Seetec and Turas Nua are two English companies, one with an Irish name. The Minister should look at their websites and see to whom they report. It saddens me that offices are being opened by these companies around the country when we have the perfectly good Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, which is capable of delivering programmes at the highest level. It saddens me that the further education sector which I entered in 1990 is still struggling to find its position in Irish society. The abolition of FÁS and the commencement of SOLAS have taken us a long way, but ETBI can do so much and needs to be included in the centre of this scheme.

Some of the back-to-education initiatives are excellent as ideas, but there is not enough financial support. People who find themselves unemployed, for whatever reason, should be offered a pathway back to work through education and training. ETBI and individual education and training boards have been exceptional in meeting the needs of the unemployed. The guidance service available in every community is excellent in helping people in identifying skill shortages. This is not the place to discuss people going back to study at level 5 when they already have level 8 or 9 qualifications. That is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills and I will discuss it with him at some stage in the not-too-distant future. However, I ask the Minister to engage more with ETBI. I am not saying the Department does not engage, but it needs to do so more. Instead of opening new offices, let us utilise what we have already. There are 17 further education and training colleges in the country. We need to integrate education and training further into those colleges. I know that SOLAS is working towards that. Speaking as a former president of the Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, I know from some of my former colleagues, that there will be difficulties in doing that. The TUI was never afraid to negotiate and was never afraid to meet a Department halfway. That has been proven in the recent negotiations on the Lansdowne Road agreement. I beg the Minister for Social Protection to engage with Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, and get it involved. I ask him to engage with the small training companies in the country, those with three or four offerings. I understand from some of these trainers, for example people who specialised in health and safety training and nothing else, that they are finding it hard to meet some of the requirements that are being laid down. I am not sure whether that falls at the door of SOLAS, or the Department of Social Protection, but it is an issue that needs to be examined.

Let me say to the Minister and his officials to keep doing what they are doing but please keep one ear open all the time for suggestions. I ask him to engage with the ETBI and see how much of the demand of the Social Protection clients can be met through the further education and training sector. I believe that ETBI can deliver everything that is needed and more besides. I would not be a Member of the Seanad or have made it to president of the TUI but for the start I got in 1990 in the then Limerick senior college, now Limerick College of Further Education

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and I know my colleague, Senator Maria Byrne is a passionate guardian of that college. I will be forever grateful to the education and training boards and the Irish Vocational Education Association and the Department for Social Protection who went more than a mile to meet me.

The Minister should carry on with what he is doing and I thank him for his time.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): I thank Senator Craughwell. Senator Ray Butler, who is the next speaker, has eight minutes.

Senator Ray Butler: I welcome the Minister to the House. The Programme for Government 2011-2016 contained a commitment to replace FÁS with a new national employment and entitlement service. In the subsequent service plan, published by the Department of Social Protection, it was stated that the Department would explore the potential to augment internal resources through the Department, outsourcing some of the elements of the service. What emerged was JobPath, a model of contracting the provision of employment services for those individuals who are long-term unemployed. The Pathways to Work, PTW, launched in 2012 signalled the potential of contracting with third party providers to complement and augment the existing capacity of the Department of Social Protection, which was already delivering under contract arrangements with local employment service providers to deliver employment services. The JobPath contract model was designed during a two year period, taking account of advice received from Irish and international experts on contracting of employment services and inputs following a number of public stakeholder consultation briefings.

The Department retained the services of the not-for-profit Centre of Economic and Social Inclusion, London to advise on the JobPath model and the procurement process. The key objectives of JobPath were to help people obtain paid employment to the quality of an outcome payment. The service providers must help jobseekers find jobs for at least 30 hours per week for a period of at least 13 weeks. Outcome payments, known as subsequent fees are paid out for each 13 week period of the employment for up to one year. JobPath is a payment by results model, which means the companies will not be able to fully recover their costs until they place sufficient numbers of jobseekers in sustainable jobs, therefore the overall cost of the JobPath programme will be determined by the number of people who participate in the programme and the number who get sustainable jobs. Payments to the companies who organise JobPath amounted to €1.2 million in 2015, to €29 million in 2016 and it is estimated that in 2017 it will rise to €65 million. This increase in the expenditure profile reflects the phased roll-out of the service and is the culmination of outcome fees over time. It is unlikely the expenditure will exceed €65 million in any given year. The contracts between the Department of Social Protection and the service providers are for a period of four years, with an additional two years run out period. This means that where a person commences engagement with a JobPath provider, at the end of the fourth year, the provider must provide the services for the next 52 weeks and if the person secures employment at the end of that 52 weeks, the provider may claim payments in respect of the provision of an employment support for up to 52 weeks thereafter. The Department at its sole discretion has reserved the right to extend the four year referral period for up to another two years.

The level of complaints about JobPath is very low. All complaints have been resolved or are in the process of being resolved. The response to JobPath has been quite positive relative to the number of clients referred to the service. A few concerns have been raised at this point, such as moving to community employment, CE, schemes and this has been addressed. To date the number of complaints received represents just over a quarter of 1% of the 82,000 jobseekers

who have started their engagement period with the service. Most complaints were from people who were reluctant to engage with JobPath. Each participant gets a service statement at their initial engagement and it outlines the level of services they can expect. Each company has its own complaints process. If clients lodge a complaint directly to the Department of Social Protection, such complaints are referred to the company in the first instance for investigation in the line of contractual arrangements. Department inspectors visit provider premises both with and without notice to test compliance and contract terms. The Department recently commissioned customer satisfaction surveys to assess independently whether customers were satisfied with the level and quality of the service delivered. The results from the survey indicate that jobseekers feel they are receiving a good service under JobPath, with a 76% to 81% satisfaction rating versus 5% to 8% dissatisfaction. On a personal note, I know that emotionally and especially mentally, without having a job or a reason to get up in the morning, things were very difficult during the recession. JobPath is a very positive experience, providing an opportunity for people which builds their confidence and provides a sense of self worth. I congratulate the Department of Social Protection and the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): I thank Senator Butler. I understand that Senator Conway-Walsh is sharing time with Senator Devine. How would she like to allocate the time?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Yes, may I have five minutes please?

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): I will signal when the Senator has one minute remaining.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Chairman.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House to discuss this very important issue. I will come straight to the point as I know the Minister is a busy man.

I have a number of questions, to which I have been unable to get answers, despite numerous attempts. How much has the JobPath programme cost to date? I want a figure for the cost of the whole tendering process, the use of economic research specialists and the legal costs around it. Will the Minister please give me a figure, as I am sure the Minister has the figure with him today, knowing that we were discussing JobPath.

How much will the programme cost the taxpayer by the end of the four year cycle, and the five year cycle? Are there break or penalty clauses, should the Government decide to pull out of the contract early?

Will the Minister explain how it could be acceptable that the basic requirement, even to be considered eligible to bid for a contract to provide the JobPath programme was that the company would have a minimum turnover of €20 million per year, which excluded many local Irish companies and voluntary organisations from the scheme? Were these companies driven by profit and wanting to ensure the full payment can be drawn down? There is a danger that the long-term harder to reach unemployed are overlooked in favour of those who are more ready to slip back into certain employment sectors. I am particularly concerned for those who are most distant from the labour market or individuals who have issues with alcohol, substance misuse or mild depression. I ask the Minister to confirm that if a client has a mental health issue or any kind of disability, he or she is referred back to the Department.

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I am also concerned that outlying rural areas will be abandoned in the drive for profit maximisation and in the name of efficiency, effectiveness and value for money. Did the Department consider reviewing the local employment service, LES, contracts at the time to deal with the demand generated by the recession?

There is also the issue of those selected for JobPath. They are being forced to travel miles to access services that are provided in the local LES offices. This does not make sense. It also does not make sense to have two British companies opening offices here to duplicate the work that is being done by LES offices. I have worked in this area myself so the duplication of such work does not make sense to me. I heard the figures that were presented by a previous speaker here but they belie the anecdotal evidence that has been conveyed on the ground. We need to take a proper look at the figures and the report. We must determine how many cases were sampled and for what duration.

How can we expect the local employment services to compete with companies that are for-profit and are being widely promoted to third parties by the Government and the Department of Social Protection? It seems that all of the referrals have been sent to JobPath rather than the LES.

There is another issue with the Youth Guarantee. The Government has secured substantial EU funding under the Youth Guarantee to put in place innovative measures and preventive programmes to address issues regarding training, education and employment for the under-25s to prevent long-term unemployment. It now appears, nationally, that the under-25s who are unemployed for more than 12 months are being sent to JobPath. I ask the Minister to clarify the matter. My issue with the initiative is that the under-25 target group was not part of the original JobPath contract. What was the EU funding from the Youth Guarantee scheme used for? What results were achieved? What value for money audits have been carried out?

I want the Minister to know that people want real jobs, particularly in rural areas and in my own area. It has been repeatedly said to me that all that we need in this area is for a sufficient number of people to be provided with a wage packet at the end of the week that would, in turn, stimulate the economy and put money into households.

Is JobPath the activation monster to follow the Irish Water monster? How much does JobPath cost? How much has it cost the Government to set up? Why are two British companies delivering what can very well be delivered by the local employment services in this country?

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): I thank the Senator and give the remaining time to Senator Devine.

Senator Máire Devine: I do not intend to take long. The Minister said at the start that it was not unusual for work to be outsourced and, indeed, some companies had even returned a profit. There is so much wrong with his statement that I do not know where to start. It comes from a platform of the Government enabling and paying, on behalf of the taxpayer, foreign private companies to provide jobs. As my colleague, Senator Conway-Walsh, has said, we are capable of doing the work here yet taxpayers' money has been used to pay the companies so much that they make a profit. That is the difference between the Minister and me. He has a liberalism agenda that is the polar opposite to mine. I would like to see investment in our people, public services and public delivery using our own money - the taxpayers' money - to provide services.

I have so many issues with JobPath. I still liken it to JobBridge. I am not exactly sure how

the schemes differ. From my investigations I have learned that we are missing financial information to conduct a full analysis of the scheme, leaving us in a position of only being able to analyse estimates that have been provided by bits and pieces of information drip fed to us by Departments over time, including the Department of Social Protection, and previously in statements and interim reports. One such analysis was the January 2017 report. Between July and September 2015 it seems that the taxpayer paid 1,043 registration fees to private companies in order for 305 people to secure employment. Of course the Department will not release the price of the registration fees.

In December 2015 an estimated €12 million was given as the total spend on JobPath for 2015. If one takes July to September as half of the period, then one can assume that approximately €6 million was spent over three months. It is incredulous to think that it cost €6 million for 305 people to get a job. Are these estimates correct? Does the Minister believe the taxpayer got value for money? What about the €26.8 million that was spent on the scheme in 2016 compared with €20 million that was given to the LES? Why have privately-owned schemes received more funding? Referrals to LES have decreased by 10,000 people. Have the 10,000 people been placed on JobPath instead where we have had to pay extra to fulfil the profit desires and fill the pockets of privately-owned companies? I urge the Minister not to give me the commercially sensitive answer. There are people on JobPath who cannot fulfil the CE schemes that provide vital community services.

I concur with everything that my colleague, Senator Conway-Walsh, said earlier and I hope that the Minister can answer some of the questions.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerry Horkan): I wish to acknowledge the presence in the Visitors Gallery of a very long serving former councillor, Mr. Michael Donnelly. I welcome him and his group to the Seanad and I am sure everybody extends a welcome to them.

The next speaker is Senator John Dolan and he has eight minutes.

Senator John Dolan: I welcome the Minister to the House. I am happy to have an opportunity to be involved in this debate.

Earlier the Minister said we are “experiencing a jobs-led and job-rich recovery”. His comment does not resonate with the people that I am particularly interested in but I shall come back to this matter in a moment.

The comments and input by Senator Ardagh strongly resonate with much of what I want to say about people with disabilities, different conditions and whatever, and the issues with JobPath *vis-à-vis* CE schemes. The ESRI published a report by Dorothy Watson in the past few days. Let me give a flavour of the report. It states:

31% of working-age people with a disability were at work compared with 71% of those without a disability. For those without a disability, the rate of job entry picked up in the recovery period and the rate of exit dropped. However, there was little sign of a recovery for people with a disability by 2015. Overall, the odds of employment entry are nearly four times lower for people with a disability. People with a disability remain about half as likely to enter employment. The odds of employment exit are twice as high for people with a disability.

I am referring to the findings of the ESRI; it is not me with a hunch.

The report continues:

Implications

Government policy is to facilitate the employment of people with a disability who want to work - an estimated additional 36,000 people with disabilities. Our calculations show that if all people with a disability who wanted to work had a job, half of them would be at work (instead of 31%).

I shall note some areas of specific importance that were mentioned in the report as follows: retention of medical cards when people move into employment; support for additional costs of disability itself; flexibility in how jobs are structured, including the hours and jobs tasks; and ensuring that there is equal treatment in access to services such as health, transport and other areas. I call the following the determinants of employment for people - health, social services, cost of disability payment, cost of getting to work, transport, training and education.

My involvement in the areas of disability and, indeed, the training and employment for disabled people dates back to the early 1980s. I remember a scheme called Teamwork, community employment schemes, social employment schemes and the more recent schemes, and *vis-à-vis* JobPath and CE programmes. Let me say the following from my own gut and experience. The possibility for people to do something, particularly in their local community, with people they know and in organisations that they know, which are often community sports, disability groups or whatever, is the real deal maker for people to gain employment. It means people receive encouragement from the people that they know in that place. I have been a member of the Irish Wheelchair Association and I have seen people go on to jobs in the open labour market because somebody would have told them there is a job going and encouraged them to apply. Somebody will literally take them by the hand and encourage them to do that. That is how it works.

Senator Ardagh mentioned the issue of JobPath in a sense colonising the possibility of people going into community employment programmes when they want to do otherwise. We know that some people would go the other way if they were offered an opportunity for training or work but there are people who want to do it and we should find every way we can to make that happen.

The comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities should have been in place in January or February 2013 but it did not see the light of day until 2 October 2015 in the wake of the general election. Its first annual report is about to be made public, 18 months after it started. Among the issues raised by the chairman and others is that the Government needs to make a significant start in implementing its public service wide commitment to a 6% quota.

An allied issue is that the possibility of activation without real prospects is disingenuous. People with disabilities need that chain of opportunity if they cannot move into the workspace. There have been huge improvements in the area of education in the past decade and a half. That is good but, dare I say it, it is bad in another sense. If those people pass the leaving certificate but do not get on to the education and training board scheme or go to college, they fall back into a HSE day programme or one run by one of the voluntary organisations. That is a killer for people. Ways must be found to keep them on the trajectory into employment and activity.

Last summer, in the run-up to the budget, I pressed the Minister for a package that would particularly support people with disabilities in terms of income supports and costed disability payments, which is part of the issue in terms of getting back into work. The Minister said he did

not favour an increase for people with disabilities or particular groups. There was a €5 increase across the board in the budget, which was very welcome for everybody. I draw to the Minister's attention that on 1 February this year, the CSO published statistics that thankfully indicated that the route out of poverty was beginning to work for the general population and that there was some small improvement for people. However, in its next sentence it stated that people with disabilities are falling further and more strongly into poverty. That is a real issue. I refer to employment, transport, other related supports and training in particular. I call on the Minister to look specifically at this area. We saw many disabled people designed, to use that word, out of activation programmes because they had become unemployed during the recession. There must be a major start in terms of tailored programmes for people with disabilities and mental health needs in order that they can get moving in that direction. We have invested so well but more needs to be done in terms of education. That becomes less of an investment if we cannot keep people moving in the right direction. I thank the Minister.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister to the House and thank him for his detailed presentation. There has been much discussion of JobPath, but I will speak from my own experience in terms of the people who come to my office who are long-term unemployed. My experience to date has been with Turas Nua because it operates in the Limerick area. I am aware that many positive changes have been made, certainly in terms of what people experienced in the past. People who were long-term unemployed had a good experience when they went into the social welfare office in the past but they are now allocated a designated officer who works with them for the 12-month period. That is very positive because they are building a relationship with that person whereas in the past they may have met a different person on every occasion.

When the Acting Chairman made his own contribution he referred to the training boards, but my understanding is that once the 12 months are up, people are being encouraged to retrain and upskill. The education and training boards, ETBs, are playing a very important role in terms of that training. There is engagement but there should be more of it. A number of people who are going back to training are now upskilling. They would never have found themselves in that frame of mind previously but they have found it to be a very positive experience.

I read with interest the first quarterly report which has been on the Minister's website since January 2017 and which is so positive. I am getting a positive reaction from people who have been on the JobPath scheme. I also met two people who signed up to the scheme who were subsequently offered full-time jobs in the companies where they worked. They were very positive about the entire training experience and they are also upskilling and training at the same time. In the one-to-one engagement with the person they are dealing with in Turas Nua they are being shown how to present their CVs and deal with issues around confidence and motivation. Many people who were unemployed for a long time were lacking in confidence and motivation, but the fact their mentor, to use that word, is working with them one to one is certainly working.

There has been very little negativity around the scheme. There is a fear that people are not available to take up community employment, CE, schemes, but that is due to the fact our unemployment figure is less than 7%, which is very positive. I am sure that is an issue the Minister is reviewing in the Department in terms of encouraging people to go back into training and take up employment, even if only for the short term. However, not everybody is suited to a CE scheme and some people are not suited to JobPath. I am aware from dealing with people that there are slight differences between the two but people are being assessed for their suitability for the schemes and their skill sets are taken into consideration. There was a fear also around data protection but I understand the data are used only in terms of placing people in their rel-

evant positions.

This has been a positive initiative. There are probably a few areas that need to be addressed in terms of further upskilling and training, but I welcome it in a positive light.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to discuss JobPath, which I recognise is one part of a comprehensive set of other measures we are discussing in the Committee on Social Protection. I have two or three questions on JobPath. A concern I have in respect of JobPath, and I would appreciate the opportunity to have it addressed, is that it saw a very rapid scaling up, with 60,000 talked about as the number of cases that would be processed. It is a very large-scale project. The scaling up of some of the other initiatives and schemes rolled out was not at this level.

I am also concerned about a matter which I am sure has been dealt with and discussed at length, that is, the fact that the programme is contracted to private service deliverers, namely, Seetec and Turas Nua. I apologise for my lateness in joining the debate.

I shall refer first to my macroconcern and then to my microconcern. Given that we are talking this very new step on such a wide scale, how reversible or changeable is it? We know that under the public procurement legislation at European level, states have a right to exclude certain health and social services from competition in public procurement. Has there been an analysis made of whether having JobPath tendered for and delivered by private contractors potentially diminishes our right to reserve public delivery and, through it, public accountability for these services?

Much of the rationale initially concerned capacity. These measures were being implemented when we were coming out of a very significant public service recruitment freeze. If, having engaged in this experiment, the State were to decide to move back to a period of recruiting front-line staff and increasing the capacity of front-line case workers within the public system and delivering services through that route, how would it be managed? What is the analysis? How would it fit within European public procurement contracts? When JobPath was first being introduced, concern was expressed by community groups about this issue. They were told that it had to be contracted out because the European Union required it, but it did not, in fact, require it. That there was a little misinformation on this issue at the very beginning is a concern.

Another core concern about JobPath from the beginning is that there seems to be a very small percentage allocated to increase the capacity of and for the training of staff. The training and skill levels of staff did not seem to be weighted as heavily as they might have been in the allocation of the contract.

Let me move to the core issue, the operation of JobPath. I appreciate that, given the scale of JobPath, we will hear all kinds of story, positive and negative. I will outline a couple of key concerns. Owing to the random selection process, is the initiative delivering the appropriate casework? At a meeting of the social protection committee representatives of the Labour Market Council expressed concern that people might not be routed to the job that was most maximising and progressive in terms of their careers. That was a wider concern. Concern has also been expressed about the focus on a jobs-first approach. At the meeting of the committee we heard that we potentially needed to consider giving a stronger weighting to education and training. My concern relates to the opportunities to avail of education and training for those who are participating. If people decide they want to reroute to the back-to-education allowance,

for example, or if they find a community employment scheme, what is the position? I accept that we need better progression from community employment schemes. How can someone exit JobPath and re-enter an area to use a more appropriate skill?

There is also concern about the conversations between JobPath providers, as commercial providers, and other companies and corporations. Some concerning issues have arisen, including over the family income supplement, in conversations between employment services and employers. It is important that the service be in place to serve individuals, not preferred companies, for example, particularly if the companies have poor employment practices. With whom is it appropriate for companies to work? In what way should they be working in this regard?

The question of sanction also arises. The Minister has specified that sanction should take place within Intreo offices, not through JobPath. Nonetheless, there is a very strong perception and concern that if one does not take up a role recommended by a JobPath case worker, one may be vulnerable to sanction. That is a concern that needs to be addressed.

By focusing on the live register, are we again missing an opportunity to deal with the many thousands of people who may, on a voluntary basis, wish to access employment services but who do not want to enter a system with the potential for sanction, with these rigid targets and a more rigid set of potential outcomes? The local employment services which did an exemplary job in many parts and were open to all, including those not on the live register, are potentially where we should be refocusing our energy. I refer to an arrangement without sanction but one which encourages voluntary engagement, including for the many women who have fallen out of the live register system.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank Senators for a very interesting and broadly constructive debate. I will do my best to answer as many questions as I can to which I have the answers. I might not have jotted all of them down, but I will do my best to cover as many issues as I can.

JobPath does not take precedence over the community employment programme. It is just that we do not allow people to switch from one scheme or programme to another. We do not want somebody to spend one month on a community employment scheme and then suddenly move to Tús, or to spend two months on a Tús scheme and then proceed to Gateway. We do not want to see people chopping and changing between schemes and programmes. If somebody has a starting date for a community employment scheme within four weeks, he or she can participate in the scheme, but we do not want people who over a period of three years could have participated in a community employment scheme suddenly finding they have an interest in a community employment scheme when referred to JobPath. I have come across plenty of such examples. Ideally, we want to move to a jobs-first model, whereby people who are trying to find a job in the first year are supported in this regard. We are moving towards this. When people are not able to find a job, the most appropriate place for them is on a community employment scheme.

It is absolutely the case that those who run many community employment schemes are having real difficulty in filling vacancies. I am very concerned about this. I do not want to see the very important services provided by community employment schemes such as meals on wheels, TidyTowns work, child care services and some social care services no longer being provided. Much of this work should properly be done through Government agencies and Departments, but that is a battle I will have to have with my colleagues in time to come. I would

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like to see some of the services transition to normal arrangements. I certainly do not want them to fall by the wayside. I am determined to ensure that will not be the case because of the real value of the work in question, be it fixing pitches or other jobs. This is really important, as we all know from our constituencies.

The reason those who run community employment and Tús schemes are having difficulty in recruiting is not solely JobPath; there is a much bigger story to be told. We had a certain number of community employment schemes and increased the number of places by approximately 10,000. We then added Tús, Gateway and JobBridge. Now there is JobPath. We have seen nearly a quadrupling of the number of services and schemes available, but the unemployment rate has reduced by half in the meantime. What does one expect to happen in these circumstances? Of course, it will be harder to fill places if the unemployment rate is down by one half, if not more. That the number of schemes and services has increased dramatically is the reason those run schemes are having difficulty in filling places, but I do want to do something about it. I am working with my colleagues to widen the pool of people eligible to participate in community employment schemes. Younger people, for example, are currently not eligible. There are also people who are timed out because of a rule that one can serve only a certain number of years on a community employment scheme. I refer, in particular, to those who have been involved in JobPath for one year. Tens of thousands of people have spent one year on JobPath and not got a job. They, in particular, should be encouraged to enter the community employment programme. We need to challenge community employment scheme supervisors, in particular, and sponsors not to try to hang on to the person with whom they are comfortable and who is doing a great job and does not need much help. We need to challenge them to find the people who do not have a job through JobPath such as those in receipt of disability or lone parent or other long-term payments and try to encourage them to take up places. What would really help in that regard – it is obviously a matter to be considered in the context of the next budget – is increasing the top-up received by participants in these schemes. It is approximately €22.50, which is not an awful lot. If one participates in a community employment or Tús scheme, for example, and receives the additional payment, one might even be worse off by the time one covers the cost of lunch or transport two or three days a week. I would like to see that issue dealt with in the next budget, if I can get the finances to do so.

JobPath does represent a policy shift. It is a job-first approach. The idea is to try to get people into work in the first instance and also to accept that it is quite normal to work and at the same time receive training and education, be it part time, at night or at weekends. The idea is to try to get people into work and to accept the fact that it is quite normal for people to be in work and involved in training and education at the same time. We have probably all done it, whether it was part time, at night or at weekends. This is the kind of person an employer wants and they are sceptical about people who spend their entire lives going from training scheme to training scheme, then back to welfare and another training scheme. Some people spend ten years on a carousel of training schemes, welfare, a CE scheme, more welfare and another training scheme and they do not get jobs. What we are implementing is much better, though there will be exceptions and we must accept that one size does not fit all.

It is not accurate to characterise the companies as British or English. Turas Nua is headquartered in Roscrea and I opened the headquarters. Its major partner is Farm Recruitment Services, FRS. People who know rural Ireland will know that company as the people who recruit people for agriculture.

I am a little bit confused by Senator Devine's remarks about being upset at the neoliberal

idea that companies should be allowed to bid for contracts. God forbid it be a foreign company or, even worse, a British one.

Senator Máire Devine: The Minister is misrepresenting what I am saying.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: At the same time she is very upset about Brexit.

Senator Máire Devine: I am not upset.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: She wants to insist that Northern Ireland remains in the European Union. What is the European Union about? A fundamental principle of the European Union is the four freedoms - movement of capital, labour, services and goods. Any EU company can bid for a contract in other parts of the EU. Once again, Sinn Féin has a two-faced approach in which it is determined to keep Northern Ireland in the European Union but they do not want the European Union to apply to anything we do, particularly as regards Government contracts. That makes no sense to me.

Senator Craughwell said education and training boards, ETBs, were very good and should have a role. I agree with that and the Department has a lot of involvement with ETBs, particularly with Springboard and with people on the back to education allowance. The education and training boards are about education and training, however, while JobPath is about activation and recruitment. They are very different services.

Senator Dolan mentioned people with disabilities and he will be aware of some of the programmes we have in this area. For example, the wage subsidy scheme subsidises employers for the cost of employing people with disabilities and there are adaptation grants for employers to adapt their premises so that they can hire more people with disabilities. It is an area where we can do an awful lot more. Professor Frances Ruane has just finished her Make Work Pay report, which will be published in the first two weeks in April and will assess the enormous barriers to employment for people with disabilities, such as the fear of the loss of a medical card or travel pass. People on disability allowance are also concerned that if they take up a job and it does not work out they will have great difficulty getting their previous payment back. All these things are laid out very well in the report, which will be co-published by me, the Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection, Deputy Finian McGrath, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, in the coming weeks and I intend to publish it not just with its recommendations but with the policy responses to those recommendations. There are a lot of things that could make a real difference to people with disabilities and encourage them to take up work such as an assurance that, if it does not work out, they will not find themselves adrift.

I will have to come back to Members with more detailed costings on JobPath but I will certainly give any information I can. I gave the figure of €26.8 million for 2016 but it is not just about the costs. It is about the value and what it has achieved. People referred to JobPath are 20% more likely to get a job than the control group of similar people who are not so referred. That is particularly true of those at the greatest distance from the labour market, the very long-term unemployed who are 40% more likely to get a job than the same sort of person who is not referred to JobPath. As is the case with any service the Government provides, one has to consider the value as well as the cost. The results to date suggest it will be a very economically and financially advantageous programme.

If a client has mental health issues or a disability that prevents them from working they can be referred to the Department or can refer themselves to the Department for another payment,

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such as disability allowance or an illness payment. We are finding that as we work more intensively and engage one-to-one with many more people on jobseeker's allowance, we are finding more people who are on the wrong payment and should be on disability allowance or an illness benefit. People can be on jobseeker's allowance for a very long time and could have continued to receive it but when we made efforts to get them into work it became obvious that it was not the right payment for them. Part of the reason for the increase in disability allowance is the fact that people have migrated from jobseeker's as a result.

We are reducing the caseload of the local employment services, LES. Not too long ago they had caseloads of over 1,000 people per officer and I do not know how anyone could possibly do that. We are trying to get the ratio down to 1:150 and the LES will go back to what they did at the start, namely, work intensively with those who are furthest away from the labour market and need the most support. If I was a caseworker I would rather work with such a ratio and I do not know one could operate a service on the basis of a ratio of 1:1,000. Indecon is carrying out a full review of the LES and will report this year. The statistics show a great variation in performance in the LES. Some produce very good results but some do not and are pretty poor. The JobPath is based on payment by results, which is not the case with the LES, where the taxpayer has to pay even if they are unsuccessful in getting people back to work.

Senator Higgins said that JobPath could be scaled up very rapidly and she is correct. That is one of the advantages of having private contractors and those companies did that at a time of high unemployment, when there was a public sector recruitment barrier and it was needed. It can also be scaled down very quickly if we do not need it so much, or at all. When one takes people on as public servants it is much harder to flex up and flex down and there are pension issues, issues with buildings and so on. In this system, our own officials in our own Intreo buildings provide a core service that will always be needed while we use contractors such as JobPath to scale up or down, depending on how much additionality we need and how much unemployment there is. This is standard in the private sector where companies have their own staff and buildings for core services but can flex up and down as they need to according to demand. This also makes it easier to be adaptable so that if we want JobPath to do different things in the future we can do that.

I am not an expert on EU procurement law but I am told that the question is complicated and has a complicated answer so I will have to come back to Senator Higgins on it. Public or personal service delivery contracts are not excluded from the requirement to abide by EU public procurement rules but there is a higher threshold for the requirement to go to EU-wide tender.

There are a number of ways to exit JobPath. One exits automatically after a year, one can take up a job, one can sign off or one can apply for alternative payments, for example disability payments, back to education allowance or back to work enterprise allowance, for which a lot of people apply.

I have answered as many questions as I can and I have noted a few things on which I will follow up with Members in the form of correspondence.

Death of Martin McGuinness: Expressions of Sympathy

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): I propose to start with the Sinn Féin Party's contribution if that is acceptable to the House. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Leader for allowing this time this evening. I spoke about this earlier but, again, I want to express my heartfelt sympathies to Bernie and Martin's children, Fiachra, Emmet, Fionnuala and Grainne. Our sympathy and solidarity are with them in these difficult days ahead. Many republicans across Ireland and friends of Irish unity worldwide will be mourning the passing of Martin McGuinness.

To me, Martin McGuinness was a warm, kind and generous human being with a huge social and emotional intelligence which enabled him to reach out to form relationships, friendships and partnerships with people who had different opinions to his from the unionist community and many other communities throughout the world. Many people from different political perspectives admired and recognised his ability as a statesman and politician.

His first stint as education Minister saw him make the momentous decision to scrap academic selection at the age of 10. This was done out of genuine concern for the education of those from disadvantaged backgrounds such as his. Teachers in the Six Counties still speak with genuine affection of his time as a Minister. The turnout in the Bogside in Derry this afternoon was a sign of the regard in which the people of his native town held him. His family were the centre of his life. He often spoke of how he would travel home to Derry from Stormont, no matter how late in the day he finished. His one wish was to return home each evening to the family for whom he cared so much. Today his extended family and friends showed just how much he means to them.

The one constant in Martin's life was republicanism. It was much more than a political label to him. It was an embodiment of freedom, equality and unity. It was not easy to be a republican in the 1970s in Derry, from the arrival of the British military campaign, which brought death and havoc to the streets of Derry, to the long years of struggle and the move towards conflict resolution. I thought the former President, Mary McAleese, put it very well in context when she spoke earlier today. I want to thank the many people from all political sides and none who have expressed sympathies on the passing of Martin. The republican struggle brought many difficulties with it and Martin did not shy away from any of it. From his role as an IRA volunteer to a peacemaker, Martin faced difficulties, even in recent years when he spearheaded efforts at national reconciliation. There were obstacles facing him then.

Thankfully, it is now a safer Ireland in which to be a republican. There were many tough times of British oppression and aggression when republicans looked for leadership. Martin provided that leadership. That democratic space in which we as republicans operate now was carved out by the intellect, effort and basic human goodness of Martin McGuinness.

We will dearly miss Martin as a comrade and a leader. However, from talking to many republicans today, we are more determined than ever to achieve those very things dear to Martin, namely, freedom, equality and unity. People often talked of his endless energy and resolve. I have no doubt his desire for freedom, equality and unity will spur us on in Sinn Féin to achieve a better, fairer and truly united Ireland. Bobby Sands said that everyone has a part to play. Martin McGuinness certainly played his part and played it very well. For that, I will always be eternally grateful. I know many others will too. Go raibh síocháin ar a anam Gaelach.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): I thank Senator Conway-Walsh for that truly heartfelt expression of condolence.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group in the Seanad and on my

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own behalf, I extend my sincere sympathies to the McGuinness family and to the wider Sinn Féin Party on the loss of Martin McGuinness. It is a very sad and difficult time for his wife, Bernie, and his children, Fiachra, Emmet, Fionnuala and Grainne. I hope they take some comfort today from the genuine and kind words contained in many of the tributes acknowledging the tireless work and personal commitments their father gave to the peace process on our island. For their father's work and the work of others, we in the Fianna Fáil Party are very grateful.

As has been reiterated already, Martin's death represents a sad moment in the shared history of this island. Martin was heavily involved in the IRA's army council for many years of the Troubles. When in later years he converted to full-time politics, he brought many hardened IRA members with him to ensure the ultimate success of the peace process. History will remember Martin McGuinness as a committed peacemaker. At this time, however, we cannot forget those who lost their lives during the Troubles and their families who will also be grieving today.

I met Martin McGuinness last July in the soldiers' gymnasium in Richmond Barracks at the unveiling of a statue to Francis Ledwidge, who was fittingly a member of the Irish Volunteers and wrote the well-known poem, "Lament for Thomas MacDonagh". At that time, Martin spoke of his republican friends whose grandfathers had fought with the British Army at the Battle of the Somme and said there had been a national amnesia about what happened during the First World War. It is only right that we get over it.

Meeting him in person on that July day, I was struck by his warmth and kindness. During our brief chat afterwards, I got a small insight into his personality and how he won people over by his generosity of spirit and charisma. I hope Martin's work in the peace process will inspire others and all of us to follow his legacy and to continue to build on the strong foundations he laid down, as well as continuing to build strong relations between all traditions on this island. Peace on this island can never be taken for granted. We must all strive to continue his work to preserve it. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I express my sympathy to Martin McGuinness's wife, family and to his colleagues in both Houses of the Oireachtas. From talking to several of his colleagues today, I know how profound and sad his passing has been for them and their work.

When one looks at his legacy, it is complex to say the least. He had a remarkable journey. He finished school at the age of 15 and passed away at 66. That is a short life. I was thinking how short that life was because he seemed to be always there. However, when one looks at the facts, from the age of 15 to 66, he spent most of his life as what people term a "republican". Today is not a day for a debate about the true values of what a republic is. However, all Members in both Houses are republicans in the true meaning of what it means. A republic values all, gives equal opportunity to all, and allows all, no matter how diverse they are, to express their points of view and where they have come from. Everyone has that right, regardless of whatever tradition or culture they come from, to express their views. It is right that they are at least listened to and appreciated.

One of the remarkable things for me about Martin McGuinness was that he was a man who acknowledged his membership of the IRA and never denied it. Terrible things happened to people on all sides during what we call the Northern Troubles and so many families lost loved ones on all sides. There were so many conspiracies, double deals, double talks and mistrust on all sides of the argument and of the debate.

In many ways, Martin crossed swords, literally, with many people. He had his own vision of the Ireland he wanted to see. That was his right. He articulated that and stood by it. Time and time again, he proved in the end that he had the ability to bring people with him. That must have been personally difficult for him because he had to convince and persuade others to change course, to abandon certain policies and ideologies to go forward. That is not an easy thing to do in politics or anywhere else. He renounced, and had to renounce, his earlier political arguments and convictions because he saw another way and he led another way. To his credit, we have to give him that.

He ultimately accepted that a ceasefire was necessary to open talks for peace which led to the Good Friday Agreement. We will always have to acknowledge that.

In the last years of his life, he worked tirelessly as a peacemaker. As Martin's family and friends prepare for what is going to be a Christian funeral, I am reminded of some words from the Beatitudes. Someone might ask what an Anglican is doing looking up the Beatitudes. I took the time to look at them today because when I was coming in this morning, I found myself dwelling on "blessed are the peacemakers". For those who profess to be Christian, and live by the Christian principles and wish to follow the Christian burial or funeral rite, they would believe in some of these things. I want to reflect on two short sentences from that. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers." He has indeed left us a legacy. How one chooses to interpret that is a matter for themselves. May he rest in peace.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): I understand Senator Dolan and Senator Alice-Mary Higgins are sharing time. There was originally an idea that only one person from each group would speak but because people wish to speak, I will not stop that.

Senator John Dolan: On behalf of the Civil Engagement group, I express our sympathies to the McGuinness family, to Martin's wife, his children and grandchildren. Last autumn, I found myself grieving for somebody else called Martin, a great disability advocate and leader. I am not raising that for any other reason than to make the point that maybe I have some sense of the rawness, grief and loss of Martin's family and of those who loved him, those who worked and struggled with him and, indeed, those who might not have been of his persuasion who came to respect him in more recent years.

I met Martin once in Glenties at the MacGill summer school. We had dinner together with some other people. When he started to talk to me about his fishing, I began to get a bit upset that I was eating a fish myself at the time. That did not prove to be a problem.

Martin clearly had an easy way with people. In that sense, he was born to be a politician. If times had been different, that might have been a path taken earlier by him.

I have often thought what I would have done if I saw the guardians of the peace of the Republic of Ireland, the Garda Síochána, or indeed the armed forces, come into my community and behave in a way that was quite the opposite of the way they should. We should consider that people found themselves not only without the support of those who were supposed to protect them but also quite the opposite.

Martin was so important for conflict resolution but more so in peace building. That is how I would like to remember him. I do not know how his beloved wife, Bernie, his partner all his whole life with all the ups and downs, and his children will cope and deal with this. It will be the kindness of people and their support that will bring her and the others through this.

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May he rest in peace. My sympathies to all those who knew Martin and grieve his passing.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I join in expressing condolences and paying tribute to the contribution which Martin McGuinness made to the lives of all on this island in moving through our history and shaping our future together. In my small number of encounters with him, Martin McGuinness was a very warm, generous and engaging person. He was somebody who knew what it was to live in history and have the weight of history on him and yet to rise continually to the challenge of each moment and to the new challenge of each moment.

We have heard of the contribution Martin McGuinness made in recognising that permanent conflict was not the answer in bringing an end to violence in Northern Ireland and negotiating the Good Friday Agreement. There has been much talk of the historic moment of his handshake with the UK Head of State, Queen Elizabeth II. While that was a historic moment, alongside that was the great challenge of all the many other moments of building and sustaining relationships, of being able to work in partnership with Ian Paisley and David Trimble and so many others. That is something that needs to be commemorated because that can be the greatest challenge, to go again and again into each new situation and to overcome constant obstacles with a genuine faith in the importance of institution building, peace building, and community regeneration and engagement. What made him able to have those meaningful relationships across all sides was the honesty he brought to his approach and his acknowledgement of suffering - the suffering of his own community and that of other communities - as well as his ability to acknowledge good intent and that it could come from each different side.

Seamus Heaney spoke of hope and history. It is something that Martin McGuinness quoted at length himself, but he never took for granted the power and the fragility of democracy and peace. Having been at sporting, musical and cultural occasions with him, I saw that he really cherished the dividend of democratic engagement and of the peace process. Having been radicalised to a large extent by his experiences in the terrible events of Bloody Sunday, it meant a huge amount to him to see Derry as a city of culture, to see it recognised in its full potential, and to see it as an example of what the full flowering of community across the island could be.

We heard about the journey he had taken. It is incredibly sad to think that there will not be, as there should be, a further chapter in his journey, one where he would have time with his family and in which he could contribute in further and different ways, having given literally all of his life to the challenge of trying to build a republic in different ways.

I note Martin McGuinness's comments in 2012 when he spoke of the journey we all have to take. That is a journey that we, on this island, are still on. It is a journey from the past, because there are many who are still bereaved and there are many who still have questions that need answers. There are many raw residues of our conflict that still need resolution. Most crucially, however, he will be missed in the future given the challenges we have now to work together to build peace, recognising that peace is both precious and fragile, not only on our island but across Europe and the world, to work for democracy, to recognise the democratic institutions and the need to build, restore and earn trust and inspire participation, and to have the ongoing debate about what a real republic might be and how we can deliver and be part of a republic together.

I celebrate Martin McGuinness's contribution and pass my deepest condolences to Bernadette and his family.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Is le croí trom atá mé ag éirí anseo tráthnóna le cúpla focal a rá in ómós do Martin McGuinness, fear a chur mé aithne air le roinnt blianta anuas agus fear a raibh ard-mheas agam air ón aithne a chur mé air. Ba mhaith liom mo chomhbhrón féin a chur in iúl do Bhernie, Fiachra, Emmet, Fionnuala agus Grainne. Ní bheidh aon duine in ann an folús pearsanta sin atá fágtha i ndiaidh Martin McGuinness a líonadh, táim cinnte. Ní bheidh aon duine in ann an folús poiblí a líonadh ach an oiread. It is very hard to find words that would do justice to the personality that was Martin McGuinness. The best thing I can do is share some personal insights and stories from times I spent with him. When he was running in the presidential election of 2011, I received a telephone call from management to say I was needed on the campaign bus. When I asked what was going on, they said Martin had to go on TG4 and speak in Irish for one minute and that he needed somebody to help him. They were two of the best days I ever spent. They were absolutely fantastic. For a man who had been through so many challenges in life and involved in so many difficult and sticky situations, the thing that terrified him most was having to speak for one minute in Irish on TG4. He told me he had never had the opportunity to learn Irish in school, which he had always regretted. He worked really hard to get the few words right.

Many would credit Martin McGuinness with possibly swinging the presidential election campaign in the way of Michael D. Higgins in the famous moment with Seán Gallagher on the TV programme which is now a piece of history. Perhaps President Michael D. Higgins has a lot to be thankful for also. It was very important that Martin had stood in that election. As somebody from outside the Twenty-six Counties who could not vote, he raised the issue of voting rights for people living in the North. He also brought to the fore in the debate legacy issues.

On the bus Martin also told me some very funny stories, as can happen when people are on a bus together for a couple of hours and fall into conversation. He told me about what had happened when the Assembly was initially being set up and how difficult it was to talk to people, as they would walk out of the room as soon as he walked in. On one occasion there was a particular unionist politician who was standing at a urinal in the men's bathroom and could not walk out. Martin struck up a conversation with him and as soon as the unionist politician had finished his business, he dutifully left. It is amazing how the initial reticence to even communicate was overcome by the magnanimity of Martin's personality.

Martin also had a wonderful story to tell about a visit by a number of political groups to South Africa. It took place under the auspices of the African National Congress to discuss the ongoing peace process. They were being brought somewhere way out in the sticks. We think Connemara is remote, but this place was really at the back of the beyonds. It was insisted on that there be two buses, one for the unionists and other for the nationalists, but one of them broke down. I cannot remember which, but they all had to share the same bus for the rest of the journey. Apparently, there was reticence to sit next to each other on the bus. Martin saw in it great humour; he saw it as part of the building of relationships between people.

While Martin McGuinness was a Northern politician, he was revered and loved across the country, as we saw in Galway during the presidential election campaign. A huge crowd came to listen to him in Salthill. I have received so many messages from people in the west in the past few hours who are genuinely sorry to see him go. We are speaking for them also.

Another seminal moment was when I was invited to a private meeting with Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Prince Charles at NUIG. I had to pinch myself because I could not believe I was watching history happen. It was incredible how people who had been foes for

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so many years were able to shake hands and have talks about the future. There was a genuine sense of openness and, actually, a sense of fun. Once the formalities were over, there was a little banter. Obviously, it was Martin who started it by talking about Gerry Adams's affinity with nature, his love of hugging trees and the like. The conversation moved to fly fishing, in which both Prince Charles and Martin had a great interest. It was a measure of the man that he had moved so far forward in that relationship. It was something to savour, learn from and look up to.

We were attending one of our pre-session think-ins in County Louth, I think, when news came through that Ian Paisley Snr. had passed away. Martin was genuinely saddened. He had built a real friendship with him and was truly sorrowful.

For the past five years there has been a standing call from us in this Chamber that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister from the Northern Ireland Assembly be invited to attend. I understand there are diplomatic factors that influence whether such things can come to fruition. Nonetheless, I am saddened that we never got the opportunity to have the First Minister and Martin, in his role as deputy First Minister, in the Seanad Chamber to share some of their experiences. Martin stood on the core principles and values of republicanism, equality and so on. It is very telling that even in his last days he was still calling for full implementation of the international agreements, particularly in areas such as Acht na Gaeilge, which is ironic as he was not a fluent Gaeilgeoir.

Mention has been made about what happened in the past in Derry when Martin was a young man. As somebody who had a relatively trouble-free existence, having been brought up in England before moving to Connemara, I often wonder what I would have done if I had been raised on the Bogside in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. Would I have done anything differently from him and the likes of him? As Senator Victor Boyhan said, they did see brutality. It is very easy for us to judge but hard to say what we might have done. It is to Martin's credit that he always called for a truth and reconciliation process. It is one of the things which he said was absolutely needed in order that those hurt by the conflict on all sides could be heard and that the process of healing could commence. He also called for open recognition of LGBT and women's rights in the North.

Táimid anseo anocht le céiliúradh a dhéanamh ar fhathach fir. Fear a sheas an fód gan fuacht ná faitíos, a raibh an-mheas againn air agus a bhí mar chara agus comrádaí a bhí abálta i gcónaí treoir agus comhairle a chur ar fáil dúinn.

The one thing I always remember about being in Martin's company is that I always came out with a smile on my face. He always left people with a smile no matter how serious the issues involved. It was a pleasure to have known him. Guímid leaba dó i measc na n-aingeal anocht.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: We are here to commemorate the passing of Martin McGuinness. I believe it is safe to say all of us present in the Chamber, even though we are from different political traditions, love our country and want the best for it and its people, North and South. It is also fair to say the British did not treat the Irish, North and South, very well, as history tells us. People took different paths and, at least at the beginning of his career, Martin took the path to violence. Others chose peaceful means. Objectively, he was a man who inflicted and oversaw a campaign of murder and pain in the name of a cause. Thankfully, he went on to correct it. He took the correct path to ensure future generations would not have to go down the path to violence. He also helped to create the environment that allowed people on this island to live in

peace. He played a major role in the peace process and we have to acknowledge and be very grateful for what he did. It showed considerable bravery on his part to step away from the vicious cycle of violence. His legacy will be best served by the continuation of the peace process.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh talked about truth and reconciliation. There has to be truth for victims on all sides to find a sense of justice. Truth is the foundation of justice and leads to reconciliation, as has happened in many countries to good effect. I would definitely support such a process.

At a human level, we are all judged on the context and times that were in it. I would acknowledge the times and the environment in which he lived. The Bogside in Derry was very difficult. That gives context to his actions and early career.

It is better to remember not how that political career began but how it ended. I pay tribute to him and to his memory for that. May he rest in peace. I join in the expressions of sympathy and condolences to his family on their very considerable personal loss at this time.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I would like to be associated with all these warm, genuine and well-deserved tributes to Martin. We know he had a most pleasant personality. He was always kind and courteous. I met him first at Free Derry Corner in the 1980s - he was there along with Councillor Shaun Gallagher, a Derry city councillor - on one of my visits to Derry and I always enjoyed going up there. I will not be repetitive. He deserves all that has been said. We know he was a tireless champion for peace and reconciliation and he achieved so much. I would like to be associated with the expression of deepest sympathy to his wife, Bernie, and family. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh an anam dílis.*

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I put the following message up on Facebook this morning. It states:

Notwithstanding the fact that those claiming to speak for the IRA in 1974 put my family through hell, I am deeply saddened at the passing of Martin McGuinness. It took two men who wanted peace, McGuinness and Paisley, to find in their hearts the wherewithal to commence the journey of understanding of each other's tradition. They together put the foundations in place for peaceful co-existence of all traditions on this island. I pray that the leap of faith both men took will not be squandered. May Martin McGuinness rest in everlasting peace.

I did not intend to speak tonight but I read that message into the record for a specific reason. I was a member of the Royal Irish Rangers and in 1974 in Derry, Ranger Best was taken from his house, brought into Donegal and shot. I have had many messages from people today asking about those who are missing and where are they, and I can understand that. I raise this matter tonight because of the other contacts I have had from former members of the Royal Irish Rangers, who would be on the unionist side, who are deeply committed unionists, who marched in the Orange parades and who are deeply committed to unionism on all sides, expressing their sympathy to me on Martin McGuinness's death. That speaks volumes. That ties in to what has been said. Let us remember the end of his political career rather than the beginning of it. The fact that people I know to be deeply committed to unionism could find it in their hearts today to contact me and express sympathy at the passing of this man is a tremendous tribute to him.

I will finish on this point as it was agreed a few Members would contribute to these expressions. Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley, the two founding members who built the foundation

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for the peace process between them, are both now gone. We now have two new leaders and currently we have no Assembly in Northern Ireland. We must be careful about the risk of the development of a vacuum. I sincerely hope that on the unionist side, Ian Paisley's generosity is not forgotten and that on the nationalist side, Martin McGuinness's generosity is not forgotten. I feel deeply sorry for the McGuinness family to have lost a man so young. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Senator Paul Gavan: I only want to add a few comments. An awful lot has already been said. Like many people, I got my first impressions of Martin McGuinness from his appearances on television, in particular that strange time which we may have forgotten when we could see but not hear him on television and an actor's voice spoke for him. Those were strange times both here and in Britain where I found that was still the practice when I went back there to work. It is a measure of how far we have come that Martin went on to lead the peace process, build the peace and, more than that, build a roadmap for a peaceful path to unity, and not any kind of unity but an inclusive republic based on the best progressive principles.

I also want to say - I hope Members will understand this as I believe it is important - that I am proud of all of Martin and his career. I am proud of the fact that he stood up to defend his community in the 1970s. My family who were living in London at the time were very proud to see men like Martin McGuinness stand up and be counted when that community was under attack and, as Gerry Adams said so truthfully today, Martin never brought war to the North, the war came to Martin and to his community. Equally, there was his passion for peace and to build peace throughout the 1990s and beyond, and his powerful speeches at our Ard-Fheiseanna have always stayed with me. He would have been the lead speaker on a Friday night and he was always reaching out, always stretching and always building his vision of an inclusive republic. Certainly in my recent trips to Belfast, it was clear that this has had a huge impact across communities. It is great that this has been acknowledged by all parties here.

It is also worth remembering his very dignified role in the presidential election. It is easy to forget that he suffered huge attacks from the media at that time; they were relentless and nasty at times. He met each of those attacks with dignity and respect and he built bridges again during that campaign. As alluded to by my colleague, Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh, he played a very influential part in making sure that we have an excellent President today in Michael D. Higgins. I referred to the horrible section 31 ban but fair play to Michael D. Higgins as the man who repealed it and played his part in building peace and progress in our country.

To conclude, I want to recognise the great man that Martin McGuinness was, as a freedom fighter, as a statesman, as a peacemaker and above all as a republican.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan: I want to offer my sincere condolences to the family of Martin McGuinness and to his colleagues here in the Sinn Féin Party. I had the honour of meeting him only last year at the time of the general election when David Cullinane was elected in Waterford. Within a short time of his election, Martin McGuinness arrived down to Waterford in the south east to acknowledge David's election and to support him. I had a few moments with Martin at that time. I had stood as a candidate and in the course of our conversation I told him I had worked with Greenpeace and I had been on the *Rainbow Warrior*. Immediately he reacted and said, "I am so sorry for the loss of your friend". He had an experience back in 1985 and was able to refer to it. He was a man of tremendous experience and had quite a complex life. I sincerely hope his legacy of peace will be brought forward by his party, North and South, and that peace and justice will prevail in this country for ever more. That would be the best legacy

of Martin McGuinness and his memory. I offer my sincerest condolences to his family and to the Sinn Féin Party.

Senator Mark Daly: To Bernie, Fiachra, Emmett, Fionnuala and Grainne, we extend our sympathies. They have lost a husband, a father, a grandfather. We have seen the passing of an extraordinary Irish man. He was a man who negotiated with the British in his early 20s and who fought the British. Those who opposed him saw him as a worthy adversary as well as the enemy. He was a man who thought about the future. Then, when it was time to sue for peace and when it was necessary for a ceasefire he was able to make the journey.

He saw events like Bloody Sunday and the treatment of his fellow citizens in Derry. As anyone would, he took up the struggle that had been taken up by many in previous generations. When necessary, he went through the negotiation process and led it. He shook hands with the Queen when many questioned whether he should. As ever, he was a man ahead of his time. He sought equal rights and opportunity as well as equality. Many have said that he made an extraordinary journey. While that is true, it is equally true that he led others on an extraordinary journey and that journey continues today.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: As Leader of the House and as leader of the Fine Gael Party in the House, I join every Senator who has spoken tonight in paying tribute and sympathising with the family of the late Martin McGuinness.

Like Senator Grace O’Sullivan, I met Martin McGuinness during an election count in Cork last year. We were being interviewed on radio as I was about to be eliminated. He extended the hand to me. He sympathised and said that it was better to fight and lose than not fight at all.

I met him in Logan International Airport, Boston, several years prior to that meeting. My time in his company was full of laughter even though we shared different political viewpoints. I am a republican who wants to see a united Ireland - I said as much on Newstalk this afternoon. We may have differed in our approaches to politics and how we achieve the end result.

Today, when I woke up and heard the news, I was actually saddened. I was listening to Newstalk and RTE in the car on the way up. I listened to the various people who knew him well, including Denis Bradley, Mary McAleese and people in Sinn Féin. I was struck by the impression that he was a man – I will come back to why I am saying this in a moment – who saw and witnessed what happened in Derry. Classmates of mine in the seminary had friends or family involved in the IRA. They always discussed what or how would we do it. In many ways, it was easy for those of us living in the South and away from the North to say that the path of non-violence was easy.

We can always admire people like John Hume and Seamus Mallon for the bravery they showed. We can admire people like David Trimble and Ian Paisley because they came on a journey. Senator Feighan referred to the commentary in *The Irish Times* today on Martin McGuinness as a man of war and a man of peace. He reached out as a politician and as a member of Sinn Féin and the IRA. He recognised that there was a bigger and perhaps a more advantageous route. Notwithstanding this, what I admire about him on one level is that he never hid from his past. He never ducked and dived. He admitted it and he recognised the importance of what he did for himself, even though others may have disagreed with him. He reached out to his opponents and extended the hand of friendship. Senator Ó Clochartaigh spoke about building bridges. That was the theme of Mary McAleese’s presidency. Martin McGuinness reached

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out and built bridges. I was struck by the remarks of David Ford on the radio today, as well as by the letter David Trimble wrote to Martin McGuinness in which he stated that Mr. McGuinness was indispensable to the peace process. As Senator Mulherin has said, he worked in his political life to bring peace to our island. My friends in the seminary often said that peace was about a long Grand National. That phrase was used by one of my friends who is a priest in the North. He said that we fall at some fences but we get up and keep going. As the Taoiseach said in the Dáil today, Mr. McGuinness travelled the road to peace.

I know there are victims of violence who have a different view to many of us today. Tonight is about recognising the man who recognised that, for those of us who seek a united Ireland, the process is about getting there through dialogue and peace. This evening, Bill Clinton spoke nicely of how Martin McGuinness refused to live in the past. Perhaps, as Senator Conway-Walsh said, that will be his legacy. We must finish the job. I exhort all of us as politicians to finish the job that was set off by so many.

It is fair to say that, as Northern Ireland deputy First Minister and Minister of Education, he left the North in a better place. His legacy will be one of bringing so many to the table for dialogue. As Gerry Adams said today, he was the man they picked to go and negotiate.

I have listened to the personal and heartfelt tributes from the Members opposite from Sinn Féin. This person was passionate and convincing and he was a leader.

I hope that we can see an end to sectarianism and the fulfilment of the dreams of all of us in this country.

The biggest loss will be that felt by his wife and family. On behalf of myself, the Fine Gael Party and everyone in the House I extend our sympathies. Others will write and history will judge. Ultimately, however, if Martin McGuinness did not have the courage to place his hand in the hand of Ian Paisley or to walk in the peace process, then we might not be here today. Death is not the end. Death can never be the end. Death is the road, life is the traveller and the soul is the guide. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Acting Chairman (Senator Michelle Mulherin): When it is proposed to sit again?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Ar 10.30 maidin amárach.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.50 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 22 March 2017.