



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 26 Meán Fómhair 2017

Tuesday, 26 September 2017

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before calling on Senator Swanick to speak to his matter on the Commencement, it is worth noting that this is the first sitting of the Seanad in what will be its temporary home until essential work on the renovation of the historic Leinster House is complete. The Office of Public Works has done a magnificent job in transforming the room for parliamentary use. Ba chóir d'Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí a bheith bródúil as an obair iontach atá déanta anseo. Táimid an-bhuíoch dár gcomharsana in Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann a chomhoibrigh linn chun an toradh seo a bhaint amach.

I have received notice from Senator Keith Swanick that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to introduce stronger regulations requiring all landlords to adhere to the highest level of safety standards with regard to carbon monoxide prevention measures.

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

To ask the Minister for Education and Skills to outline the progress that has been made on funding for the Educate Together school to be built in south Kildare in light of the recent CSO figures which state there will be an increase of 24% in the need for second level school places by 2025 in south Kildare.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the recent report on Roscommon mental health services and his plans to address the concerns and recommendations contained in this report.

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

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The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make a statement on the economic and social costs of retaining immigrants.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to outline his plans for the continued implementation of the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools, and if he will guarantee that the funding of the national anti-bullying research and resource centre in DCU will be continued.

I have also received notice from Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to urgently introduce a redress scheme for families in counties Donegal and Mayo affected by defective concrete blocks in their homes following the publication of the report of the expert panel in July.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to publish planning guidelines for regulation of solar farms.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to put in place adequate funding to assist junior doctors involved in medical training.

I have also received notice from Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to address the system failures surrounding the untimely death of a person, details supplied, in February this year, and if he will make a statement on this matter.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to provide an update on when the increased €1,000 representational allowance will commence for county councillors, and if he will provide clarity on the new increased vouched expenses scheme and options for councillors.

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

The need for the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to make a statement on the recent safety concerns regarding the Ballinaboy gas refinery in Urris, County Mayo.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the current status, ownership and future plans for the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Swanick, Noone, Devine and Lawless and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Commencement Matters

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Senator Keith Swanick: Cuirim céad fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Is mór an onóir dom labhairt anseo tráthnóna mar tá an seomra seo speisialta, stairiúil agus ornáideach. Ba mhaith liom moladh a thabhairt don Chathaoirleach, an Seanadóir Denis Ó Donnabháin; don Cheann Comhairle, an Teachta Seán Ó Feargháil; agus do Choimisiún Thithe an Oireachtais. Our temporary move to the Ceramics Room of the National Museum will in no way inhibit the work of Seanad Éireann, and I congratulate all the staff, designers, builders and technicians who have created our Chamber.

I thank the Minister of State for joining us to discuss this very timely issue. The dangers associated with carbon monoxide are promoted this week through Carbon Monoxide Awareness Week. The dangers are so immense that there is a need for constant vigilance in this area. I am increasingly concerned about landlords across the rental sector who are failing to carry out annual servicing of boilers such as oil and gas. All heat producing carbon monoxide emitting appliances need to be serviced annually. According to the HSE, on average six people die unnecessarily from carbon monoxide poisoning each year, and countless more present to their GPs and other health professionals with other symptoms from carbon monoxide poisoning, such as nausea, headaches, breathlessness and vomiting.

Owing to the fact that it is a colourless and odourless gas, carbon monoxide is highly dangerous and can kill in minutes if levels are high. In addition, large numbers of people are living in properties with poor health and safety measures in terms of heat producing, carbon monoxide emitting appliances. My Fianna Fáil Party colleague, Deputy Cowen, recently outlined a plan for an NCT-style system for the entire rental sector, and it is something which I believe is badly needed. There are regulations in place concerning gas safety and that new homes must have carbon monoxide alarms, but we need a more coherent approach from the Minister of State's Department.

In 2017, the 31 local authorities have budgeted to collect over €435 million in rent from local authority tenants, making the State the largest residential landlord. Throughout the year I have looked into the major ambiguity that exists with the mandatory servicing of oil and gas boilers across local authorities because there appears to be some confusion surrounding this issue. I followed up directly with the chief executive of each local authority late last year and asked for the number of local authority homes in each area and the corresponding number of boilers serviced. Some of the local authorities refused to answer the questions and others failed to respond despite repeated queries from my office and from elected councillors. Some said that it was not their responsibility. Others have an excellent system in place.

To give the Minister of State an indication of the level of ambiguity, let me read just two conflicting responses from two local authorities. Meath County Council directly manages a

housing stock of approximately 2,870 units, of which 179 contain a gas boiler and 620 an oil boiler. In the servicing regime for the said boilers, gas boilers are serviced annually while oil boilers are serviced biannually. On the other hand, Mayo County Council's tenant handbook, which forms part of the tenancy agreement, requires all tenants of houses provided by Mayo County Council to ensure that a yearly servicing of boilers is carried out. The council is not legally required to carry out annual servicing of boilers. This is nonsensical. We have two totally conflicting and divergent situations in two different local authority areas. If this is the case where the State or local authority is the landlord, what is it like in the private sector? The Minister should query this directly with each local authority and with landlord associations, housing associations and other relevant groups. Ideally, I would sit down with the Minister and his officials to discuss this matter further as I feel there are real and practical approaches that can be taken. In Ireland, on average six people die unnecessarily per year from carbon monoxide poisoning.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State. He will find the surroundings a little different.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I do. I welcome the opportunity to answer the important query raised by Senator Swanick and I am glad to be here for the first sitting of the Seanad in its new building. I am looking at the roof and see alarms on the ceiling, though I do not know if there are also carbon monoxide detectors. It is a fantastic room and I wish Senators well in their time here. I am taking this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, who is in the Dáil Chamber at the moment. This matter is particularly topical because - something I did not know until this morning - this is carbon monoxide awareness week. Perhaps that is what has prompted the Senator to bring it up as an issue today.

The presence of carbon monoxide in the home is recognised as a critical health and safety risk for households, which is why it was included as one of the new measures introduced under the revised minimum standards for rental accommodation, that is the housing standards for rented houses regulations 2017 which came into effect on 1 July this year. Article 6.6 of the regulations, on heating facilities, states that each house shall contain, where necessary, suitably located devices for the detection and alarm of carbon monoxide. The regulations also specify requirements for a range of other matters, including structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, fire, natural light and the safety of gas and electrical supply. With very limited exemptions, the regulations apply to local authority and voluntary housing units as well as private rented residential accommodation. All landlords are legally required to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations. Responsibility for enforcement of the regulations rests with the relevant local authority, supported by a dedicated stream of funding provided from part of the proceeds of the tenancy registration fees which are collected by the Residential Tenancies Board. More than €32 million has been paid to local authorities since 2004 to assist them in the performance of their functions under the housing Acts, including the inspection of rented accommodation. Since then, in excess of 185,000 inspections have been carried out.

To assist local authority inspectorate staff in determining compliance with the new standards, comprehensive guidelines have been developed and were issued to all housing authorities in August 2017. Carbon monoxide requirements are covered in much greater detail in these guidelines. The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 gave local authorities legislative power to enable them to issue improvement notices and prohibition notices where landlords are

in breach of their obligations. Fines for non-compliance with the new 2017 regulations were increased, with a maximum fine of €5,000 and a daily fine of €400 for each day the offence continues.

Anecdotal evidence from local authority inspectorates to date indicates that landlords, generally, have been proactive in fitting carbon monoxide detection devices in their rental properties. The strategy for the rental sector, published in December 2016, also prioritises the strengthening of the inspection capability of housing authorities to increase the number and frequency of inspections of rental properties. In addition to the updated regulations and guidelines, procedures for a more efficient, standardised and transparent inspections and enforcement approach across local authorities will be introduced, with specific ring-fenced funding for inspections provided from 2018 onwards. The target is that by 2021, 25% of all rental properties will be inspected annually.

Senator Swanick's referred to the divergence in this respect across local authorities. The only commitment I can give here is that contact will be made with the local authorities. It is the case that in service provision across a number of sectors, local authorities vary from authority to authority in the way such provision is actioned on the ground. The prevention of carbon monoxide exposure and poisoning is an issue of such importance that there should be a more uniform approach to addressing it across the country. The Senator's suggestion is not unreasonable.

An Cathaoirleach: As the Minister of State gave a comprehensive reply, I ask the Senator to be brief.

Senator Keith Swanick: When the Minister, Deputy Naughten, was in the Seanad last December, he said: "Taking off my energy hat and putting on my climate change hat, it is important that all boilers are serviced on an annual basis because that improves their efficiency". There is a simple solution to this issue. During the summer I drafted proposed legislation, the health and safety carbon monoxide Bill 2017. I would be happy to work on it with the Minister of State and his officials with a view to producing a solution to this issue during this important carbon monoxide awareness week.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I will contact the Senator directly and we can meet up.

Schools Building Projects

Senator Catherine Noone: I wish to raise a matter that has been brought to my attention by some councillors in the Kildare area. In light of recent CSO figures, which state that there will be an increase of 24% in the need for secondary level school places by 2025, can the Minister explain what progress has been made on funding for the Educate Together school to be built in the south Kildare area? There are currently 4,000 13 to 18 year old teens in the area but, according to CSO data, there will be an estimated increase of 24% in the need for secondary school places over the next nine years.

It is little noisy in the Chamber.

An Cathaoirleach: Ciúnas le do thoil. Can we have ciúnas in the Chamber as it is hard to hear what the Senator is saying.

Senator Catherine Noone: I do not mean to be a *prima donna* but it is quite distracting.

An Cathaoirleach: In this new Chamber, the sound carries differently.

Senator Catherine Noone: The South Kildare Educate Together Second Level campaign has been active for some time and gained almost 3,000 signatures in support of the provision of a second level Educate Together school in the area. A report produced by the campaign shows an estimated shortfall of 415 places by 2025, not taking into account all of the new three and four-bedroom houses built in the past year, many of which will house families whose children will need secondary school places in the future. Earlier this year there were proposals for a joint venture between Educate Together and Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board to be considered for the provision of a second level community college, possibly in Newbridge. Is there any update on the progress made on these proposals?

On a side issue, there is a need for the Curragh post-primary school to be rehoused in more suitable accommodation. It is currently located in the barracks, in two former Army buildings. Is there any update on progress on that proposal?

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I am delighted to be here in this lovely new Chamber. I congratulate the architects and everyone else involved in its design.

I thank the Senator very much for her question and raising this matter as it gives me an opportunity to outline to the Seanad the current position on the ongoing campaign for the provision of an Educate Together secondary school for the south Kildare region. My Department uses a geographical information system, GIS, to identify where there will be pressure for school places across the country. The GIS uses data from the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland, the Department of Social Protection and my Department's own database. With this information, the Department of Education and Skills carries out nationwide demographic exercises at primary and post-primary levels to determine where additional school accommodation is needed. Where demographic data indicate that additional provision is required, its delivery is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, depending on circumstances, be provided either through one or a combination of the following: utilising the extended existing unused capacity within a school or schools; extending the capacity of a school or schools; or the provision of a new school or schools.

There are seven school planning areas in south Kildare, namely, Newbridge, Kilcullen, Monasterevin, Kildare town, the Curragh, Athy and Castledermot. Following completion of the last demographic exercises, the Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, announced the opening of four new primary schools and nine new post-primary schools, to be opened in 2017 and 2018, to cater for increased demographic needs nationwide. As part of this announcement, it was noted that a range of areas nationwide, including south Kildare, were experiencing increased demographic pressure and would be kept under review. These demographic exercises showed that while the school planning areas in south Kildare were experiencing some demographic growth, it was considered that, with the addition of both significant planned and recently delivered infrastructure in areas of south Kildare, the existing schools should, between them, be able to cater for the overall level of demographic demand for post-primary school places. The reference to an increased need of 24% for second level places by 2025 in south Kildare appears to originate from a report compiled by the South Kildare Educate Together Second Level campaign group, which has also been submitted to my Department. The Central Statistics Office

has confirmed to the Department that it has not yet made future population projections arising from the 2016 census and has indicated that the population projections are scheduled to be released in April 2018. As with other school planning areas nationwide, the demographic data for the south Kildare school planning area is being kept under ongoing review by the Department of Education and Skills to take account of updated child benefit data and updated enrolment data. Recommendations on foot of the last ongoing demographic exercises being carried out by my Department are expected to be received before the end of the year.

Senator Catherine Noone: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to give the response. The last paragraph is really what I would have asked the Minister of State to do having heard the previous statement regarding whether there will be further information available in April 2018 and if there is a need at that point, which is projected by the report. The origin of the report is irrelevant as long as the data is correct. That is something that needs to be looked into. I know there is a very active campaign to have an Educate Together school or indeed a joint venture in the area. I know councillors in the area and Deputy Heydon are very much on top of this issue but it was great to get a response from the Minister of State today in the Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome a former long-standing Member of this House and former Leader of the Seanad, Donie Cassidy, to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. I almost said Senator Donie Cassidy but that might be predicting his future.

Mental Health Services Report

Senator Máire Devine: I will share a minute of my time with Senator Ó Clochartaigh.

An Cathaoirleach: Three and one?

Senator Máire Devine: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: I will remind the Senator.

Senator Máire Devine: I welcome the Minister of State to our new abode. I am not sure how it will pan out but we will do our best to behave ourselves. I want to raise the issue of Roscommon Mental Health Services and the report published a few days ago. The report reveals secrecy, poor standards and, quite frankly, negativity within Roscommon Mental Health Services. It also shows that moneys were given back by Roscommon Mental Health Services to the tune of almost €18 million - €18 million that is so desperately needed. In a reply dated 18 September to a parliamentary question by my colleague, Deputy Buckley, the HSE said that no unallocated spend and no moneys were given back. They have been given back. This report is quite shocking and saddens me as a former mental health nurse. There was a significant reduction in nursing levels and there was a massive reduction in the filling of medical posts. We recognise that there is a problem there, are working on it and have solutions.

When we spoke previously about Linn Dara, I told the Minister of State that there are solutions within my organisational body, which is the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA. The association has reviewed the Roscommon report and has no confidence in what is to become an implementation group established to give effect to this review's recommendations. Senior management was referenced in the review. How can we have confidence in the implementation

group when the report clearly states that leadership at a number of levels appears to be ineffective?

The PNA is demanding that the proposed implementation group be independently chaired, not include the senior managers who were in place during the period of the review and include representatives of on-the-ground workers. I am gobsmacked that €18 million was sent back. The review focused excessively on financial matters to the detriment of the staff's working conditions and safety, as well as patient care.

We need to abide by the recommendations made. We know that there will be no comfort if the implementation group is led by those who were found in the review to be totally ineffective. Why would we put them in charge? At times it is a little like what is going on in the Garda. Why would the Minister of State continue with it when we know that it is broken? He needs to fix it. Mental health services need to be managed well and the Minister of State has been tasked with that responsibility.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá alltacht orm agus mé ag cloisteáil inniu go bhfuil €18 milliún do na seirbhísí seo curtha ar ais as Ros Comáin.

As the Minister of State might know, Galway and Roscommon are linked in the provision of mental health services. I attended presentations a number of years ago at which we were told that the model to be used in the Galway-Roscommon mental health service would be exemplary in terms of best practice, but it is absolutely not.

I attended a joint policing committee, JPC, meeting yesterday. I am concerned about an increase in the numbers of burglaries, assaults, etc., and told by senior gardaí that many of them are alcohol and drug-fuelled. In Galway we are way behind when it comes to the provision of addiction counselling and mental health services. It is, therefore, disgraceful to find out that €18 million has been sent back. This issue has to be addressed. When one makes a comparison, there are far more counsellors in Waterford and Tralee than in Galway city and county, Mayo and Roscommon. We certainly need those moneys to be put back into the services in the region in order that we can deal with the very serious issues mentioned at a grassroots level.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The HSE is committed to ensuring all aspects of mental health services are delivered in a consistent and timely fashion. In 2015 the mental health division of the HSE determined that it was necessary to conduct an independent review of the quality, safety and governance of services provided by Roscommon mental health services to support achieving the goals set out in A Vision for Change and other relevant national policies. I welcome the report which was completed in July and which makes 27 recommendations for local service improvement. Within a short period of being commissioned, it became evident that the initial timeframe proposed to conduct the review was insufficient and the review team requested and received extra time to complete its work.

The recently released report indicates that the review team was impressed by the majority of staff it met or interviewed and struck by their commitment to seeing services improve for service users in Roscommon. The overriding concern of the majority of those interviewed - staff, service users and carers - was that patients and families in Roscommon were not receiving services in line with best practice that would meet required quality and safety of care standards. The team concluded that there was a disproportionate focus, even in a time of straitened finan-

cial circumstances, on achieving budget savings at the cost of an adequately staffed and safe service.

Multi-disciplinary team working, MDT, the linchpin of modern mental health services, was severely eroded in Roscommon, with fractured relationships within the area management team, AMT, within the Roscommon teams and between a number of professionals and key consultant medical staff. Throughout, there were poor line management arrangements. Leadership at a number of levels appeared to be ineffective. The majority of nursing staff interviewed believed - the team agrees - that the senior nursing leadership critical to representing the professional views of nurses at the executive level was missing. It is the team's view that, in some instances, relationships appeared to have broken down irreparably. Managers in any organisation have a difficult balancing role and should be allowed to manage without undue interference. However, this can only occur in a working environment that is conducive to mutual respect and understanding. There was clear evidence that this was absent in this instance. Some senior medical and nursing staff maintained that the relationship difficulties impacted on their ability to bring about changes that they felt were necessary.

The review team pointed to the need for effective application of appropriate change management principles as a new entity attempted to merge disparate parts of hitherto separate organisations. The team believes preparatory work to support the area management team should have been under way as it embarked on creating a new culture. Little emphasis seems to have been placed on this, and when combined with economic constraints, less than favourable conditions then prevailed.

An implementation group has now been formed by the HSE to implement these recommendations. This House will appreciate that the HSE has statutory responsibility for the planning and delivery of health care services at local level, including mental health in Roscommon. The Senators can rest assured that the Department of Health and I will closely monitor the progress of the HSE implementation team to ensure that the recommendations of this comprehensive report are delivered as quickly as possible.

Senator Máire Devine: The Minister of State referenced A Vision for Change. It is an excellent document, but its sell-by date is last year. Some 73% of it has not been implemented. In this instance one can rightly call the Roscommon-Galway report, Aversion to Change. It is stuck in the past and stuck in the old ways.

I have two things to ask of the Minister of State. The first is that the implementation group is not peopled by those who were implicated in this report. That is of utmost need. To give trust and respect to this implementation group, we cannot have those named in the report as being inefficient, if that is the polite word. The second thing I ask is for is on behalf of the people and services of Galway and Roscommon. We want our money back. We want the €8 million back and ask the Minister of State to please provide a cheque as soon as possible.

An Cathaoirleach: I think the Senator has outlined her response sufficiently. Is there anything the Minister of State wants to add briefly?

Deputy Jim Daly: I assure the Senators that I have taken on board their concerns. I have met with the PNA on this matter and discussed this and a number of matters. I have met with it and heard its concerns previous to today. I gave it an assurance that I will take on board its concerns about the composition of the implementation group and who it consists of, and I will be

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monitoring it closely. I will also be visiting the region myself to have a look first-hand. There is a body of work to be done and a group has been tasked to do that work. I want to let some of that work get under way before I get involved directly, hands-on, but I assure the Senators that I intend to do that. I thank them for their concern about this important matter.

Senator Máire Devine: What about the cheque?

Deputy Jim Daly: I do not issue cheques, Senator. That is a matter for the HSE.

An Cathaoirleach: I am sure we will hear about this again.

Diaspora Policy

Senator Billy Lawless: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Commencement matter today. Before I begin, I would like to congratulate the staff of Leinster House and the OPW for their work in having this magnificent room ready for the new Seanad term. I got a shock when I walked in here. I thought I was in the US Senate for a moment when I looked up and saw the ceramics, and I thought I was looking at baby Trump. Look at it over there.

Over the past 20 years-----

An Cathaoirleach: There is a marked resemblance, Senator.

Senator Billy Lawless: Once one sees the resemblance, it is hard to escape.

Over the past 20 years, Ireland went from being a country of emigration to one of immigration, “E” for emigration and “I” for coming back in, and then it went to emigration again. Now we are all delighted that, thanks to the improvements to our economy, Ireland is in a phase of return migration. This did not happen by accident. At the height of the economic crisis in 2009, the inaugural global Irish economic forum was established. This was the beginning of a transformation of Ireland’s relationship with emigrants overseas. The referendum allowing emigrants to vote in the presidential election, which I read that the Taoiseach hopes to have in place next year, represents another milestone in this journey.

Today, I want to talk about the final part of this voyage as the fruits of a global diaspora policy start to take hold. For the first time since the crash, we are returning to net inward migration and 400 Irish citizens living abroad return every week to live in Ireland. According to the latest report published by the expert group on future skills needs, there has been an increase in labour shortage across all sectors. Returning to the peak levels of the start of 2008 with a high concentration in the financial and professional services sector, we need our best and our brightest back in this country. My pre-budget submission, which I intend to publish later today, calls for substantively small changes to be made that could have big outcomes in both encouraging emigrants to return as well as providing a smooth re-integration of those who left Ireland. These are some of the issues which face returning citizens that could be resolved with limited additional budgetary allocation to the relevant Departments.

We lack a website that could be a single point providing clear information for returning emigrants accessing services, where rather than refer them to the different agencies, there is a one stop shop. Primary schools’ enrolment policies can have a discriminatory effect. Car insurance and the non-transferability of the no-claims bonus is a huge issue. There is the issue of

converting foreign drivers licences to Irish drivers licences. Government, landlords and banks demand evidence of utility bills as proof of address. It is so difficult for returning emigrants to open bank accounts.

I understand that each of these issues creates its own hurdles but I urge the Minister to consider ways that both the information and real world assistance to deal with the hurdles of returning emigrants could be consolidated and more centralised. For example, the Citizens Information website is a wonderful tool for existing citizens understanding and interacting with our State services. A returning citizens website would be a good start. I recognise that there are actuarial issues relating to car insurance and perhaps safety issues for drivers licences but making returning emigrants jump through hoops is the lazy option. There has to be scope for better and easier accessibility to State, education and banking services for those returning home.

A major issue I hope to push forward during this session of the Seanad relates to third level education. In March 2014 the then Minister for Education and Skills announced that the children of Irish emigrants who have spent five years in primary or post-primary school in Ireland qualify for EU level fees at Irish universities and third level institutions for undergraduate courses from the 2014-2015 academic year. While welcome, this does not serve people who may have emigrated with their children either at the start of the recession or before and now want to return. Their children could qualify for the merit programme for scholarship to US colleges but because they are Irish citizens they cannot avail of any scholarships in the United States. If they return to Ireland they must pay almost full fees to attend an Irish university. That is not right.

We need to do better for our returning emigrants and I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank Senator Lawless for once again raising this very important issue and these challenges. I have not addressed the Senator in any role before but I commend him on the work he has done to date. Not only has he been rightly lauded for his work on the global stage and in a macro sense, he has helped countless thousands he has helped on an individual basis during his career. His work does not get the recognition it deserves.

My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, sends his regrets he cannot be here as he is launching the Irish Aid annual report which clashes with this debate, and he asked me to take this debate on his behalf.

When *Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy* was published in March 2015, the then Taoiseach noted the impact of emigration on our society, and stressed that we wanted people to be able to come home and play a part in the future of our society. Since then, Government policy has been to create the economic conditions necessary to make returning to Ireland an option for those who have emigrated and wished to return. Its strategy of steady, stable economic growth has benefited all our citizens and is helping to facilitate our emigrants' return to Ireland.

I am aware that for returning emigrants, returning to Ireland can be a challenging experience. People are moving their lives from one country to another, with all the challenges that entails both economically and personally. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, through the emigrant support programme, provides significant funding and support to organisations, including Crosscare Migrant Project and Safe Home Ireland, which work with citizens who wish to return to Ireland. Over the past decade more than €4 million has been allocated to

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Irish-based organisations working with returning emigrants. In addition, the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora chairs the interdepartmental committee on the Irish abroad which works to ensure that Government works in a joined-up way to realise the objectives of our diaspora strategy. This includes addressing issues affecting the Irish abroad and those seeking to return. Over the past year the interdepartmental committee on the Irish abroad has focused its work on addressing Government procedures reported to be negatively affecting returning Irish emigrants. Departments continue to work to address issues that have been raised at the interdepartmental committee. To build on the work of this committee in addressing such barriers, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has commissioned an economic report on barriers to people returning. In particular, the report will review and propose measures to address difficulties in areas that are not immediately within the remit of Departments to alleviate. The report will inform Government policy and actions in respect of the difficulties it finds.

In addition to assisting to address potential barriers, the Department is always looking for new and innovative ways to assist Irish people abroad and those returning. Research suggests that time spent living abroad improves capacity to succeed in creating and growing businesses. At the same time, returning emigrants face challenges unique to them in setting up a business. These include gaps in personal and professional networks, support and up-to-date local knowledge which are crucial to the successful establishment of new businesses. To support these returning emigrants in a practical way, the Department has established a mentoring programme for returning emigrants to help them set up businesses in Ireland and contribute fully to local communities and economies across the country. The programme will be open for applications next month.

As the Senator will be aware from his own experience, there will always be some financial and opportunity costs associated with moving between countries. However, the Government is committed to supporting the Irish abroad and those seeking to return, and ensuring in so far as possible that our returning emigrants do not face disproportionate or avoidable barriers as they return to live in Ireland.

Senator Billy Lawless: I thank the Minister of State, even if the Government started with the driver's licence. When I moved to Chicago, I went as soon as I could to get my Illinois driving licence. I acknowledge all states in America have their own driver's licence and there is no federal licence but I had to complete a written test, an eye test and a 45 minute to one hour driving test with an examiner. There are critical examinations, which is an easy one to do. We could start with easy measures. We do not have to have major reports, another think tank or whatever. Let us do it. It will not cost a great deal. I acknowledge that the Ministers were not available but I had to table the matter because I am making a budget submission today as well and issuing a press release.

Deputy Jim Daly: I will ensure the Senator's comments are conveyed to the Minister. I acknowledge the practical suggestions and solutions he has put forward. However, there are huge obstacles for individuals who are trying to return to Ireland and I accept they could be sorted more easily without waiting for all the reports and committees to come together. I will ensure that message is carried strongly to my ministerial colleague.

Sitting suspended at 3.20 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

Opening of Temporary Seanad Chamber

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader to propose the Order of Business, it would be fitting to mark the fact that for the next year or so we will be sitting in a location other than the Chamber in Leinster House that has been home to Seanad Éireann for the last 90 years. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh gach duine atá i láthair anseo inniu – Seanadóirí, aíonna agus cuairteoirí – chun an ócáid seo a cheiliúradh. Ócáid fhíorstairiúil atá ann, an Seanad a bheith ag tionól in Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann den chéad uair le beagnach céad bliain. Is iontach an obair atá déanta anseo ag Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí i rith an tsamhraidh chun an seomra sealadach seo a ullmhú dúinn. Ar son gach comhalta den Seanad, ba mhaith liom ár mbuíochas a ghabháil le hOifig na nOibreacha Poiblí agus, go háirithe, le bord agus stiúrthóir an Mhúsaeim agus leis a fhoireann freisin as bheith chomh comhoibritheach sin leis an scéim.

Following the establishment of the Seanad under the Free State Constitution in 1922, the search began for a suitable permanent home for the Houses of the Oireachtas. While options such as the old parliament building in College Green, the Mansion House, Dublin Castle and Leinster House were being examined, the Seanad was hosted by the National Museum in the room immediately below this one. Leinster House was, of course, ultimately chosen as the permanent location and the Houses of the Oireachtas and the National Museum have been good neighbours since.

Almost a century later, the National Museum has again facilitated the temporary relocation of the Seanad. I speak on behalf of all Senators and for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission when I express our appreciation for the co-operation we received from the National Museum and, in particular, its staff in our recent search for suitable premises. I recognise the sacrifice the National Museum made in vacating this room and the adjacent ante-room but I am confident that when the Seanad moves back to Leinster House, the National Museum will enjoy the benefit of the transformation that has been brought about here by the Office of Public Works.

I would like to pay tribute to certain people not present today, the chair of the board of the museum, Catherine Heaney, and the director, Ragnall Ó Floinn, for their co-operation and help during our move. I would also like to welcome to the Gallery the Ceann Comhairle and Chair of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl. The Ceann Comhairle played a central role in bringing about mutual understanding between the Houses and the National Museum and in finding practical and mutually satisfactory solutions to the legitimate concerns that were raised with us. Also present is the Clerk of the Dáil and Secretary General of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, Mr. Peter Finnegan, whose contribution to the process has also been invaluable.

The Office of Public Works has a proud record of excellence in its management of the historic buildings which have been entrusted to it. Its commitment to maintaining the highest standards is evident in this Chamber which combines, in optimum balance, functionality, aesthetics and sensitivity to the historic fabric of the building. It has done a magnificent job, for which I thank the chairman of the commission and his staff. It is represented by the architect Ms Hilary Vandenberghe whose oversight of the transformation must be commended.

Thanks are also due to the Superintendent of the Houses and his staff in the facilities management unit, most notably Mr. Michael O'Brien and Ms Siobhán Malone who co-ordinated the work all summer long to ensure the Chamber would be ready for today.

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I thank the specialist contractors which also worked tirelessly all summer long on the design and preparation of the Chamber.

It is important to recall that the decision to relocate the Seanad Chamber was not taken lightly. The sole reason for the temporary relocation was to make way for the essential and extensive renovation of Leinster House, a building of great historic significance which is almost three centuries old. It must be properly maintained if it is to remain a safe and serviceable workplace into the future and we are to fulfil our duty to preserve one of our great public buildings for generations to come. We should always remember and value the fact that this is one of the oldest uninterrupted democracies in the world. The proper functioning of our democratic processes requires adequate space in which to conduct parliamentary business. The provision of this Chamber will ensure that we, in Seanad Éireann, can continue to fulfil our mandate under the Constitution until the work in Leinster House is complete.

Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. *a1* on the Supplementary Order Paper, motion re appointment of a new committee and change of names of other committee, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of the Order of Business; No. 1, motion of referral of Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2017 to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of No. *a1*; No. 2, motion of referral to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality of a Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council amending EU Regulation 2016/794 for the purpose of establishing the European Travel Information and Authorisation System, ETIAS, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of No. 1; No. 3, motion of referral of the Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017 to the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of No. 2; and No. 4, statements on national disability inclusion strategy 2017 to 2021, to be taken at 5 p.m. and conclude within 90 minutes, with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each and the Minister to be given five minutes in which to reply to the debate.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators that the leaders of groups have three minutes each and all other Senators two minutes each. I do not want to spoil our first day back by interrupting Members and asking them to resume their seats when they have extended the time available to them.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I stand in the beautiful Ceramics Room of the National Museum of Ireland and welcome all of my colleagues back for what I hope will be a fruitful new term. We, in Fianna Fáil, are very grateful to the staff of the National Museum of Ireland for facilitating our temporary relocation. We promise to ensure the integrity of the museum will be maintained and respected at all times throughout our stay.

I commend the Office of Public Works which is represented by the architect Ms Hilary Vandenberghe, the ushers, the Oireachtas Commission and the staff of the Seanad for all of the work they have done behind the scenes in the past year or more to ensure a smooth transition and also the viability of Leinster House into the future for politicians, staff and the public to

either work in and enjoy.

As we sit in this beautiful room the homeless crisis is deepening. At the launch yesterday of the 2016 annual report of the Mercy Law Resource Centre, an organisation that provides independent legal services and which gave legal advice to over 1,077 individuals last year, the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, outlined three issues that he recognised were causing the homeless crisis to worsen. The first was the unlawful refusal to provide emergency accommodation for individuals. The second was the lack of proper needs assessments for children who were or on the verge of becoming homeless. The third was the over-reliance on what he described as self-accommodation that left children vulnerable to rough sleeping. Self-accommodation means that individuals have to spend the day making calls to hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation in the hope of securing accommodation and sometimes they do not succeed. He also called for more State intervention for those on the cusp of homelessness and for psychological support for children who are currently, or were previously, homeless. He described a tsunami of hurt coming down the line for which we must prepare. We must ensure that the supports are there for those who need them including, as a priority, emotional support. This is good advice that I hope the Government will heed.

The statistics themselves are shocking. At the end of 2015, 3,625 adults, 1,616 children and 775 families were homeless. At the end of 2016, these figures rose to 4,643 adults, 2,505 children and 1,205 families. Shockingly, by May 2017, the figures, which continued to grow, reached a new peak of 7,700 people, including 2,700 children. The elephant in the room is the lack of supply and the lack of affordable homes. The average price of a home in Dublin now stands at €400,000 but the average salary is in or around €45,000. The average house costs nine times the average salary. Even for many double income, no children households, the average house is out of reach. I call on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to address this House and to outline his immediate plans with regard to the housing crisis. It is not the first time I have raised this matter in the House.

Another topic which requires increased scrutiny is the Government's handling of Brexit. The uncertainty caused by Brexit is of serious concern to the Irish public. I agree with the views of my party colleague, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, that waiting to see what happens is not a viable position, given the importance that the outcome of any negotiations will have on all sectors of the economy and on the Irish population. While the comments of the British Prime Minister, Ms Theresa May, on the Good Friday Agreement and on the fact that a transition period is required are welcome, harm to our SMEs remains ongoing with the failure of the Government to outline exactly its contingency plans. Businesses, especially small businesses reliant on trade with the UK, are suffering. A truly national response is needed in preparation for a hard Brexit but this does not seem to be forthcoming. I call on the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to address this House in the coming weeks and to clarify the Government's position on a number of key issues, including the Border, post-Brexit relations with the UK and our position *vis-à-vis* the European Union.

I would like to make one observation regarding our health system. Today's trolley watch figures show 425 people on trolleys, while the figure this time last year was 345 - an increase of 23%. Waiting lists for assessment for speech therapy in Dublin South-Central alone are at 278, while the list for those awaiting therapy is at 907. The average waiting time for an appointment for an occupational therapy assessment in Dublin South-Central is 43 weeks. These figures, though highlighting a particular area, clearly demonstrate our failed system. I call on the Minister for Health to come to House to outline his plans for public health in this country.

Senator Michael McDowell: I would like to be identified with the compliments that have been paid to the National Museum of Ireland and to the Office of Public Works for the huge amount of work - and the very successful work - carried out on our behalf. I acknowledge the decency of the National Museum in co-operating with the process. I want to be identified in particular with the Cathaoirleach's remarks of gratitude to the Ceann Comhairle for the role he played in ensuring that everybody was happy with the outcome. I also want to echo what Senator Billy Lawless said today, that it is good to have a rendition of the American President in one of the cherubs at the end of the Chamber. It proves conclusively that he does not own a bathrobe or does not use a bathrobe very often.

The first of the two issues I wish to raise today is related to this House, namely, the Seanad Bill. As the Leader will recall, at the close of the last term of this House we agreed that Government time would be made available for the progressing of the Seanad Bill which is before the House.

Senator David Norris: I take it he has read it by now.

Senator Michael McDowell: In the circumstances, I would ask the Leader to reconfirm that the Order of Business for the forthcoming weeks will make provision for that. Second, in the context of the amount of business that we have to do in Seanad Éireann, there was an agreement in principle that there would be further room provided for Private Members' legislation if there was not a telling requirement on the part of the Government for legislation time. Looking at the Order of Business, which has been proposed for today and the coming days, it appears there will be time available from the Government for this purpose.

I wish to raise the remarks of the Taoiseach on his intention to struggle might and main, as he put it, to ensure property tax is not raised in the next couple of years. When one is Taoiseach, it is one thing to say that one has a policy in mind, but it is a different matter to say that one intends to struggle might and main to contain the existing law from having an affect on the people. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, the Minister for Finance, or whoever accepts responsibility in this area, to come to this House for a considered discussion on the future of the property tax and on the injustices, which it is now threatening to impose even more-----

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Michael McDowell: -----on struggling families who do not have the resources to pay it and are not in a position to increase their income or to produce further income to pay what will be a crippling tax burden on them in the coming years.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I and my team want to be associated with the expressions of appreciation of the National Museum, the Office of Public Work and the work of the Ceann Comhairle in bringing us here. Of course, it does not matter what are surroundings are but it is the work we do and how it impacts on the lives of ordinary people and their families that matters. What really matters are the lives of those who are really struggling.

The first issue I wish to raise is pertinent to my community in Erris. Members will know that on Thursday, the parish of Erris and the people of Mayo and Galway were deeply impacted by the release of unscented gas into the system by Corrib gas. I want to address the lack of information for the Erris community. People were left in their homes overnight on Thursday, not knowing whether to leave or remain in their homes. A couple of text messages were sent

out late on Thursday evening with very little information and no contact information. Shell had already evacuated its own staff, and people were aware of this, although Shell claimed it did not evacuate them but just told them to go home earlier in the day. This added to the confusion as to what the community should do.

There must be an immediate investigation into these occurrences and why they happened in the first place and also why the company did not communicate with residents in a full and timely manner. The customers of Gas Networks Ireland were also left in a vulnerable situation. The supply of unscented gas is dangerous by the mere fact that people cannot smell a leak, if an appliance has been left on. This is apart from the inconvenience and disturbance caused to households, businesses and crucial facilities such as hospitals and nursing homes where services are dependent on a reliable source of energy. The question remains of who exactly is responsible. Is it the EPA or another agency? There were several statutory authorities and agencies involved in the granting of permissions and licences for this project yet when something like this incident happens, it seems there is nowhere for the buck to stop. I had requested that the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, come to the Seanad to deal with a Commencement matter but that request was not accepted. I ask that the Minister, Deputy Naughten, comes to the House as soon as is possible to discuss all those issues but also to outline the Government's responsibility for having an emergency plan in place that is communicated not to a few households but to the whole of the community.

Second, I wish to raise the issue that public representatives, particularly local authority councillors who are absent for more than six months are deemed to have resigned. In the case of a woman, if she is ill, she would be covered under the legislation, but this does not apply if she is on maternity leave. The maternity protection legislation 1994 to 2004 states that a woman, whether employed or self-employed, is entitled to maternity leave.

This legislation conflicts with these Acts and is discriminatory against women. I ask that the Minister come before this House as a matter of urgency to explain how this matter will be resolved. I know that if men could have babies we would not be in this situation.

Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Until such time as men can have babies, I ask that the Minister come before the House and correct this anomaly immediately.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator has made her point.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I join in the thanks to all who have facilitated this temporary move of the Seanad Chamber, including the Office of Public Works, the National Museum and the staff of the Oireachtas, who played a key role. Of course I also thank the Cathaoirleach himself for his work in that regard. I would like to make an appeal that this temporary movement of the Seanad Chamber be accompanied by long overdue movement on the issue of Seanad reform. We know that such reform is in the programme for Government and that it has been committed to repeatedly by all parties, yet we have still not seen movement. Given that the Government has not indicated any intention to hold any referenda on this issue as part of its political reform agenda in its list of expected referenda, we need to assume that it will therefore be pursuing a legislative approach by implementing the Manning report and ensuring the passage of the Seanad reform Bill.

I also note that yesterday was the second anniversary of Ireland signing the United Nations'

sustainable development goals, SDGs. This was a revolutionary moment internationally. The SDGs set out a universal global blueprint for what good development might look like. Ireland played a key role in driving that agreement for a long-term stability of economy, society and environment. I ask whether the debate about budget 2018 and the discussions we are having around development match the ambition of that international blueprint, which we called on all nations to pursue. I ask the same about the proposals we are looking at in terms of social and economic sustainability and equality. Do these proposals come from the ground up, or are they still rooted in the trickle-down dynamic which has been discredited by the International Monetary Fund and by so many others?

When we think about the SDGs, it is important that the challenges which we face, nationally and internationally, cannot be tackled with an individualised approach. These challenges require long-term planning and collective action. This is recognised by civil society, with more than 100 very diverse organisations in Ireland having signed up as part of Coalition 2030, which had a march through the city centre yesterday. It is important when we look at international issues such as climate change. Over the summer, all of us witnessed the devastation which climate change is causing and contributing to around the world. When we look at crises such as that in homelessness, where numbers are spiralling, simply telling people to take their chances in a market, or even giving them some small amount of cash to take those chances in a market, is not an adequate solution. We need to recognise collective responsibilities.

I urge the Government to remember that it is not simply responsible for providing opportunities. It is responsible for delivering outcomes. We need joined-up and long-term thinking. I note that the commitment to equality proofing which the Government has made is a very positive step in that regard. I ask the Leader whether he expects an equality statement to accompany budget 2018.

Senator Ivana Bacik: On behalf of the Labour Party group I join with the Cathaoirleach and others in welcoming everyone back after the recess and in thanking all of those involved in making this space so beautiful for us. In particular I thank the staff of the Oireachtas; the National Museum under its board and its chair, Catherine Heaney; and, of course, the Office of Public Works - Hilary Vandenberghe and her colleagues. For those of us who saw this space before the work was carried out it is a remarkable transformation. I will not comment on the state of undress of the cherubs. It is good to know that the National Museum will be left with such positive benefits from the - hopefully relatively brief - time which we will spend using this Chamber. I thank it again for its co-operation.

I thank the Leader for organising a debate on housing this week. He predicted that many of us would be looking for such a debate given that the issue of housing and the scary increase in the numbers of homeless families has been such an issue over the summer months, and it looks like it will remain so for some time. I thank the Leader for that.

I also ask the Leader to arrange a debate in the coming weeks on the issue of precarious employment - the “precariat” as it is known - because we are seeing increasing concern around the status of workers. The Mayor of London recently decided against renewing the licence to operate of the so-called taxi company Uber, largely because of its treatment of those with whom it works. It does not call those people employees. In that context, I welcome the motion on the sectoral employment order (construction sector) that is before the House today without debate. It is a legacy of the work of the Labour Party and, in particular, of Senator Nash during his time as Minister of State and will provide stability and protection in the workplace for approximately

50,000 construction workers. It is a very important measure.

I ask the Leader to clarify the intentions of the Government in regard to the package of referendums that will apparently be held over the next year. I join Senators McDowell and Alice-Mary Higgins in expressing disappointment that it appears there will not be a referendum on Seanad reform. I am also disappointed there will not be a referendum on the public ownership of assets such as water and other utilities. My party colleague, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, today launched a Bill that would provide for such a referendum and it is a shame we will not have one. However, I am glad it appears there is a commitment to holding a referendum on the eighth amendment, which hopefully will result in its repeal, in 2018. That is long overdue and many Senators will be campaigning for it.

I make a historical reference that next year we will celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage and there will be a series of events in the Oireachtas. I chair the Oireachtas group that is organising them and many colleagues are working with me in that regard. The Seanad will play a leading role in the events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of women receiving the right to vote.

It is also important to note historically that today is the 425th birthday of Trinity College Dublin and we will be celebrating that today.

An Cathaoirleach: Happy birthday.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I ask the Leader to facilitate as a matter of urgency a special debate on the cancellation of bus services in the east of the country over the past few days. Sixteen bus services have been cancelled, including routes to Cavan, Kells, Athboy and Wicklow. Adequate notice is not being given, which is resulting in people standing at the sides of roads waiting for buses that will not come. The cancellations arise from disgruntlement, among other things, with new rostering within Bus Éireann. Twelve-hour shifts that are very discommoding and difficult for drivers and their families have been introduced. The solution lies in more drivers being recruited. That has been committed to but more drivers need to be immediately recruited and a more sensitive and consultative approach taken with drivers on rostering issues and with communities on the cancellation of buses, which should not be happening. I ask the Leader to treat this as a very serious and urgent matter. Some people are not able to get public transport and do not know that is the case. The problem is that people are not getting to work and there are many spin-offs from that. That should not be the case at a time when we are trying to encourage the use of public transport. It is a very serious matter and I expect a comprehensive response from the Leader.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators there is two minutes speaking time for Members who are not leaders of a group and that only one item may be raised. That has already been ruled upon.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I wish to highlight the lack of defibrillators in schools and to call on the Leader to bring the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, to the Chamber to discuss that lack and the importance of supplying them to every school in the country. In recent weeks, the life of a young boy in Rush, north County Dublin, was saved by the quick thinking of his principal, Tim Ó Tuachaigh, of Gaelscoil Ros Eo. A defibrillator was available in the local GAA club on the grounds of which the Gaelscoil is currently housed in temporary accommodation. It is lucky that the defibrillator was available and the boy's

life saved. He is now out of hospital and recovering well and hopes to return to school in the coming weeks. Life-saving defibrillators should be available across the country. The Minister has said that schools and their boards of management are free to spend their capitation fees in whatever way they want and that includes the purchase of such equipment and relevant training for staff members.

However, that is not satisfactory. We all know that the capitation fee does not even cover the basics in schools. This means that boards of management and parents have to fundraise locally to supply this life-saving equipment in schools. That is not good enough as it means that only children from very well off school communities can afford to access this life-saving equipment. We need to supply it across the school system to ensure all children are treated equally in that regard by having access to these life-saving devices in a cardiac emergency. The Minister should rethink his approach. I, therefore, ask the Leader to call him into this Chamber to discuss the issue. I pay tribute to the príomhoide Tim Ó Tuachaigh agus na múinteoirí go léir and wish this special and lucky little boy the very best in his recovery.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I join previous speakers in congratulating all those involved in the restoration.

I thank the Leader for organising a debate on housing which is well overdue. I am particularly delighted that the Minister is coming into the Chamber to speak about the issue. It is important that he tell us what his plans and changes are in terms of a reconfiguration of Rebuilding Ireland within 12 months. It will be an interesting debate.

The principal issue I wish to raise relates to a letter I received from the Road Safety Authority about driving tests. We know that many third level students have returned or are returning to university in a matter of weeks, but the driving test waiting lists are an absolute scandal. The Road Safety Authority wrote to me on 21 September confirming that Athlone, Buncrana, Castlebar, Churchtown, Clifden, Clonmel, Dungarvan, Finglas, Kilrush, Loughrea, Nenagh, Portlaoise, Raheny, Skibbereen, Tuam, Tullamore and another 48 towns were on a list of places where people were waiting between 21 and 26 weeks for a driving test. It is an unbelievable scandal that people cannot take a test and receive a full licence, particularly those in rural parts of Ireland who wish to access third level education and employment. I was speaking to someone from Buncrana who has two third level students registered to start university in Derry in two weeks' time, but they cannot go there because of the transport issue. Given the current state of driving test waiting lists, as confirmed in the letter of 21 September to me, we should at least have the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, come to the House to explain what exactly he and those in his Department are doing to address the crisis.

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: I also welcome everyone back and thank all those who worked so hard to have this beautiful Chamber ready for us today.

I refer to the issuing of the Jadotville medals, an issue I have raised on numerous occasions. It is welcome that the Minister has agreed to give a medal to the gentlemen who survived in Jadotville in the Congo in 1961. It is long overdue and I am glad that it is happening. However, I ask the Leader to use his good offices to encourage the Minister and the Department to rush the medals through. As the Leader will appreciate, many of the gentlemen in question are quite elderly; as such, time is of the essence. It is planned to hold Jadotville Day in Athlone in October when there will be a series of events to mark the siege, including the unveiling of a

plaque in the civic square. It would, therefore, be appropriate to issue the medals that weekend as people will be travelling from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. I ask the Leader to urge the Minister and those in the Department to do all that they can to provide the medals on time in order that the ceremony can take place the same weekend.

An Cathaoirleach: At the start of the Order of Business approximately 20 or 25 hands went up. I am trying to get used to the new Chamber and will allow everyone to speak. I am trying to do my best. In case someone says he or she should be first on the list or is being excluded, I am trying to jot down everyone's name as I go along and I think most are included.

Senator Paul Gavan: I am sure that many of us heard a modern day Nazi on RTE Radio 1 this morning, spilling bile and racism. It was a fairly horrific five minutes of radio, but it made me think about what this man would think about our direct provision system. We can be fairly confident that, along with his colleagues in Golden Dawn and Front National, he would be firmly in favour of it. After all, our current system of direct provision prevents people from working, from studying, cuts them off from the rest of society, regulates almost every aspect of their lives, and it does not tell them when the system is going to end.

I want to read a small part of a wonderful article by Christiana Obaro, which I am sure many Senators saw last week. She describes living in direct provision, and says:

Do not tell me that direct provision and being the only EU country, apart from Lithuania, that bans asylum seekers from working is the only solution the Irish can come up with to control the immigration of persecuted people from poor countries. Surely you can come up with a kinder, better way? Imagine your child going to another country only to be locked away in camps with endless rules, depressed and isolated from local communities, not allowed to work, given a bed space in a room to share for years with strangers. You are doing this to men, women and children who have fled countries who you have seen on the T.V. news, with all their violence, persecution, hunger and poverty.

It is a stain on politics in this country that for years Government after Government has decided to ignore the disgrace that is direct provision. I am asking for a debate and for the Minister to come to the House. I am asking Fine Gael to take action on behalf of all of us. It has the power to change this system. It is an absolute shame. I believe that many people on the Fine Gael side know this. I would like a pledge, because many of us have been raising this issue since we came into this Chamber, and frankly, nothing significant has changed. There is an opportunity now, after the Supreme Court ruling, to allow these people to work, but good politics and good principles must come into play.

Senator John Dolan: I hope that our ongoing behaviour and the standard of our engagement will rise to the splendour of the Chamber that we are in. It is truly spectacular.

An Cathaoirleach: I share that hope with the Senator.

Senator John Dolan: I hope that the Cathaoirleach is not taking my time. This morning I was outside the gate with the Irish Wheelchair Association. It presented a petition relating to its pre-budget submission. A number of other Deputies and Senators were there as well. Three areas were mentioned in the petition. One, in the area of health, related very strongly to the provision of personal assistance supports for people with disabilities. One related to the area

of housing. I will not go into the detail, but thousands of people with disabilities were on the social housing waiting list before our official national housing crisis started. The other area related to national public transport, which covers taxis, buses and trains. Many people with disabilities cannot use them. Even when they give 24-hours notice on a weekday or 48-hours notice for weekend travel they still regularly cannot avail of that public service. These are issues which are certainly pertinent for the budget. We must ensure there is a social side to the budget for people and families who are in real need.

Today there are 1,207 young people with disabilities in nursing homes, and when I look around this Chamber I note that some of those people are half our age. The average length of stay in a nursing home is about two years. There are people in their 30s and 40s who cannot foresee anything but the rest of their lives in nursing homes. That is connected with two things which were mentioned this morning. I have raised the need for supports so that people can stay in their own homes, within their own communities and with their families. We are talking about getting people out of residential settings. The State is putting those people into those residential settings. The allied part of that is having suitable housing in the community. The same cherub to which Senator McDowell refers is clearly a regular user of sunbeds. We are coming up to the budget and it is incomprehensible that the VAT rate on sunbeds is 13.5% while the VAT on sun cream and sunscreen is 23%. Under the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010, sun bed sessions are currently allocated a reduced VAT rate as they are deemed to be a service consisting of care of the human body. It is ranked alongside beauty treatments and yoga while the standard 23% VAT rate is applied to sunscreen. The idea of sun bed sessions coming under the category of care for the human body is beyond comprehension as there is strong scientific evidence of the link between skin cancer and sun bed use.

In 2009, the international agency for research on cancer classified sun beds as carcinogenic to humans, leaving them in the same category as plutonium and tobacco. A recent Ipsos MRBI poll by the Irish Cancer Society revealed that 150,000 people in Ireland used a sun bed last year, with 36,000 using them on a weekly basis. The survey revealed a worrying increase in the number of young people using sun beds. There are many anomalies in the current VAT system and I have written to the Minister in connection with many of them in the food area, but this is a glaring anomaly. Changing it will not affect the overall budget but it would send a very clear message that we cannot have a higher rate of VAT on sun cream than the one on sun beds, which do so much harm to people.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I have raised the issue of breastfeeding on many occasions in this House, as well as the support given to women regarding it. This morning, I learned with great disappointment that the baby friendly health initiative for our maternity hospitals is ceasing from today because of the withdrawal of a miserable €50,000 by the HSE. I raised the issue by way of a Commencement matter on 12 July with the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, who gave an undertaking to come back to me very quickly but I have had no contact from him. There are many benefits to breastfeeding, not only in giving a child a healthy start and reducing obesity in children but also to the mother in the area of cancer prevention. I ask the Leader to bring the Minister for Health to the House to discuss what I believe is a very important issue that affects the health of our children and our mothers.

The initiative to which I refer is the only independent initiative that operates within our maternity hospitals and I believe the HSE has pulled funding because it does not like international benchmarking within our maternity service. It has been operational in this country since 1999 and now, without consultation, it has been withdrawn. I find this quite disturbing, especially

given that it could be funded right through our period of deep recession. If we truly want to encourage mothers in this area and to support our hospitals in improving standards within the service, this initiative has to be re-established, independently of the HSE, as soon as possible. The baby friendly health initiative is recognised by the World Health Organization and UNICEF but the HSE has done this without consultation and requests to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to meet the voluntary group have fallen on deaf ears. I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate on this issue as early as possible.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I wish to be associated with all the nice words on the facelift the Seanad has received. A fabulous job has been done.

The Leader might remember that we discussed the revaluation of rates and the Minister said he might return to the House on the issue for 2017. The process is well under way and Mullingar is one of the towns where quite a lot of work has been done. There has been a massive shift in the way rates have been revalued and the burden has been passed to retail shops, which have had a 60% increase in Mullingar, Tullamore, Longford and other provincial towns. My good friend spoke about Navan. The increase in rates has been similar across towns. There has been a decrease of 80% in the rates applying to industrial units in Mullingar and the surrounding areas. There has been a 60% reduction in the rates applying to the hospitality sector, which has also had the bounce of the VAT reduction. As we have been told, the figures are freely available. Currently, 60% of all clothes in retail outlets in Britain are being sold online. We have to examine the rates applying to retail stores. The retailers are feeling a serious pinch. They are on their knees. Unless we want to pollute our towns with coffee shops, chippers and bookmakers, we will have to seriously examine this issue.

There is a fundamental flaw in the way the figures are calculated. They are based on stamped rental agreements, which are not a true indication of the passing rent of a building at any given stage. They are based on the rent of a building but the passing rent is often different from an odd stamped agreement. Most agreements are not long term and, therefore, are not stamped. We will have to seriously examine this issue. The figures are available to be seen by all of us.

Senator Ray Butler: I agree with everything Senator Davitt said.

I wish to call for the Oireachtas to have a Diabetes Ireland open screening day which would involve cross-party and staff screening. The reason I call for it is that a World Health Organization report published two weeks ago states that 1.3 million people died of diabetes-related illnesses in 2016, the incidence of which is up 30%. A survey on diabetes, carried out in the midlands over a five-year period, found that 61% of people diagnosed will make life-saving changes to their lifestyles. A report was published on children's fitness levels in schools during the week. It was found that physical education classes for students were reduced to one class per week when, in reality, they should be increased to one class per day. It also found that in certain schools the play area was confined and children had been told not to run because of health and safety reasons.

I would like to thank Lidl Ireland and Diabetes Ireland for running a screening day. It was a huge success. Our lives and our eating habits have changed. As politicians, we have to lead by example. That is the reason I will be making representations to the Cathaoirleach and to the Ceann Comhairle to have an open screening day with Diabetes Ireland in the Oireachtas. It might save somebody's life.

An Cathaoirleach: There are two truly Independent Senators who are not part of any grouping, Senators Marie-Louise O'Donnell and Norris.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: Only officially.

An Cathaoirleach: I will bring them in as soon as possible and I have an opportunity now to bring in Senator O'Donnell.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I thank the Cathaoirleach for that. I would like to congratulate the National Museum, the Office of Public Works, the Cathaoirleach, the Captain, the ushers and everybody concerned with this new Chamber. I hope that our behaviour and level of argument will parallel the Chamber we have been given to debate legislation.

I want to raise the issue of post offices if some people would stop talking. I believe it is as big an issue as the water issue. With the demise of the rural post office under the Grant Thornton report, it is predicted that 450 to 600 of them will close. Meanwhile in the Lower House a Private Members' Bill on community banking was passed by 157 Deputies. I would like to know what is happening in respect of that Bill.

Community banking works very well in New Zealand. Does the Leader know that 95% of all banking in Ireland is commercial while 70% of all banking in Germany is community and only 12% is commercial. If 500 to 700 post offices are to close, we need some way out of this. I do not believe that putting up the price of stamps or even broadband will save us. We need to follow the example of the Kiwi PostBank of New Zealand. The postal banks are thriving in New Zealand, not as a historical artifact but as a popular new innovation. When they were instituted in 2002 it was not to save the post offices but to save New Zealand families from big businesses and big banking predators. We all know now that we do not even have people in the banks to talk to; we talk to machines. One's local post office can become one's local bank. I would like the Leader to let me know when the Minister, Deputy Naughten, might be able to coming in here to tell us what is happening regarding this matter because it is very serious.

An Cathaoirleach: I call the youngest Senator in the House, Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Over the weekend, I had the pleasure of visiting Poznań, Poland, the occasion being an LGBT pride event. I took part in a panel discussion alongside an Irish delegation on Ireland's road to marriage equality before parading in the protest march. I was struck by the number of people who repeatedly reminded us how much it meant that Ireland opened its doors to Polish citizens in 2003 and 2004 without the restrictions and attitudes that so many other countries - the old EU 15 - indulged in at the time. Census figures from 2011 and 2016 document Poland as the country with the most non-Irish nationals resident in this State. The 3,000 people marching in Poznań on Saturday, alongside a heavily militarised police presence, were impatient for change on issues such as abortion and marriage equality. I believe they deserve our support and our acclamation. Ideally, that support should come from the highest levels of the Irish Administration.

Ireland has a long history of international solidarity, stretching back to the United Irishmen of 1798. The change sought by Poland's LGBT community is inevitable, and Ireland must be a champion internationally for the change we have witnessed at home. We are being touted globally as a beacon of real social inclusion and diversity. Parallels between Ireland and Poland are striking in the context of a Roman Catholic-repressed society. I say all this because another Europe is possible. The major crises we face - be they economic, social or ecological - can be

tackled simultaneously together. We can tackle rocketing levels of youth unemployment, rising poverty and the threat posed by the return of fascism. I refer not to radical nationalism, the alt-right or far-right extremism but to fascism and the ensuing threat to human rights. To do what I describe, Ireland must be a champion for a social union. Again, Ireland is being touted internationally as an example of a state with social inclusion. I would like the Leader to convey that message to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, in the context of both Poland and the wider European Union.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: Clearly, the past couple of weeks have not been the happiest for Mayo football. While I congratulate the Dublin team, I pay tribute to the valiant efforts of the men and women from our senior football teams in Mayo. Their efforts have been a massive source of county pride and have given us unity of purpose. We look forward to next year.

What might be less known is that we took a national title home. By saying “we”, I imply that one of the Members of the House was critical in the process. Senator Paddy Burke was part of the winning team from Castlebar Golf Club that won the Jimmy Bruen all-Ireland championship of 2017 last Saturday. I congratulate him, the entire team and the club captain, Noel Burke, on this absolutely massive achievement. To begin with, there were 400 teams, and the winning team beat off stiff competition.

I join in calls for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, to be brought to the House in light of the survey, published in the *Irish Examiner* today and conducted by *cartell.ie* in conjunction with AA Ireland, showing quite astoundingly that over 10% of used cars are clocked and that 18% of imported used cars are clocked. Some 120,000 vehicles were surveyed. At a rate of 10%, that is about 12,000 vehicles. This is very serious and there can be an impact on road worthiness. If one believes one’s car has a lower mileage than it actually has, one might not change the timing belt and so on. AA Ireland has said it is a factor frequently found when it deals with people who need to be rescued at the side of the road. It is also a significant issue relating to the used car market. I would like the Minister to come to the House and talk about consumer protection, the protection of the used car market and issues pertaining to road safety. The findings in this survey are quite astounding.

An Cathaoirleach: I would have to clock the Senator as well.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: No need.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I join others in congratulating all involved in the presentation of this magnificent building. I wish to address the lack of inhalers in our schools. In October 2015, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, signed regulations that would allow for prescription-only medicines, including asthma-relieving salbutamol, to be administered by trained personnel in an emergency. Today, as our children return to school, not one school has received an asthma-relieving inhaler for their first-aid kits. I spoke to a number of principals recently who have not heard of the scheme or received any inhalers. They have received no information, no equipment and no training. It is one of the best-kept secrets of all time. Recently, the Asthma Society of Ireland highlighted how our children are at risk in school. Recent statistics from Great Britain indicate that a number of deaths have occurred in schools where children have had asthma attacks. Clearly, it is something that needs to be addressed. I ask the Leader to impress earnestly upon the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education and Skills the importance of addressing this issue. It simply is not good enough when one considers that one in five school-going children suffers from asthma. I ask the Leader to address this issue with

both Ministers in order that this can be resolved before it ends in a very sad story for someone.

An Cathaoirleach: I call the father of the House, Senator Norris, on the usual condition that he will be brief.

Senator David Norris: I will. I join my colleagues in complimenting the Office of Public Works on the refurbishment of this Chamber, in particular the majolica decorative panels around the door cases. I visited this place before it was refurbished and it was in a very sorry state. However, I do not quite share the ecstasies of my colleagues about the beauty of this place. It seems to me that it is a frigid Victorian barn and the sooner we are out of it, the better.

The other matter I would like to raise is the noxious impact of a section of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, against which I railed at the time it was introduced. I indicated that I felt that it was a self-righteous and smug approach on the part of middle-class people to the most vulnerable section of our society. I warned that there would be a danger to health, a spreading of disease and a dramatic increase in the number of attacks on people who provide sexual services. This has been confirmed recently by the issuing of a series of reports which indicate that attacks on sex workers have increased dramatically. One report claims that the law change has forced the trade deeper underground and put sex workers under greater pressure to put themselves in riskier situations. One group said that it had received 1,635 reports from sex workers who were concerned about clients, which is a 61% increase over the previous year. A total of 137 of these incidents involved violence, including sexual assault, while 79 incidents of violence were reported in the first five months of last year. Even Ruhama has said that it has seen a rise in attacks. The statement from Ruhama's spokesperson said that there had definitely been a spate of attacks. I am glad that the Act included provision for a three-year review, but in light of this evidence, it is important that the Minister advances this review to look at the disastrous impact on the health and welfare of a very vulnerable section of our society.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Hopkins. The Senator had a busy summer. She was not, like others, sunbathing. I believe the Senator got married during the summer. I congratulate her and wish her every success in her life and future.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I was not expecting that. Thank you, a Chathaoirligh.

An Cathaoirleach: It is the best bit of news today. Senator Hopkins still has only two minutes.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Today I want to raise huge concerns that I and many people in County Roscommon have about an external report on mental health services in our county. That report was commissioned as a result of serious issues which existed in the safe and effective delivery of mental health services. The report was published three weeks ago. I have raised my concerns with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health services, Deputy Jim Daly, and also with the Minister, Deputy Harris, but I will make a number of points.

There are 27 recommendations in this report. There are no timelines for implementation. We have had serious issues with regard to accountability. Almost €17 million has been returned to the HSE over a period of three years. That cannot happen again. We need to change the culture within mental health services. We need to ensure we learn from the mistakes of the past. We need to ensure that people who have to use the mental health services, their families and the wider public have confidence and trust in using those services which they need at very difficult times. However, we do not currently have that confidence.

From a further meeting that I had this morning with the chief health officer, Mr. Tony Canavan, I understand he has stated that there are a number of recommendations currently being implemented, particularly with regard to management engaging properly with staff, but there are huge communication difficulties, teamwork difficulties and trust difficulties within the mental health service in Roscommon and there needs to be close monitoring in terms of the implementation of these recommendations. We need strong leadership at every level, from Government right down to staff members, to ensure we deliver a better service for the people who need it. I will continue to raise the issue until we see improvements in those services.

An Cathaoirleach: That matter was raised already today during the Commencement debate.

Senator Máire Devine: I raised the matter this morning. To add to it, Senator Hopkins needs to push for the implementation group not to include those who have already been found to be ineffective in Roscommon-Galway.

I want to start with the Dubliner, Fr. Joe Mallin, son of Michael Mallin and the last surviving child of the 1916 Rising leaders. He is 104 and we celebrated his birthday in Dublin 8 last week. I would like the Seanad to send Fr. Joe Mallin a birthday card to wish him well, and to congratulate the double Dublin winning all-Ireland teams.

I wish to raise the issue of Dublin Simon Community's report on homelessness and health. It is, I suppose, the leading charity for health and homelessness in our city. The report was launched today by our Ard Mhéara, Mícheál Mac Donncha. Unfortunately, analysis has shown that the health funding for homelessness has dropped by 10% since 2008. In 2008, the health spend was over €36 million with 1,388 homeless adults using emergency accommodation. We thought we were bad then but we now have almost 6,000 people using such accommodation, half of whom are children. Children are being born into homelessness. The cost of homeless is growing. The current health spend in the area is €32 million. Homelessness has jumped by 170% since 2004 and yet the health budget is way below what it should be.

We know of the detrimental impact of homelessness such as the anxiety and the physical impact of losing one's home, one's community, the school for one's children and going into precarious bed and breakfast accommodation or situations. Research has told us that but we do not need research to tell us. I would like the Leader to ask the Ministers, Deputy Eoghan Murphy and Deputy Simon Harris, to discuss this and resolve it and to try to get an adequate health budget for these areas. The budget is way below what it should be considering that homelessness in this city has increased by 170%.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome everyone back after our summer break. I am sure we were all doing clinics and were very busy. I want to raise the matter of local government funding. As Senators are aware, the 31 local authorities are preparing for the budget. We are also aware that each local authority has to have its local property tax budget meeting over by the end of September. I have massive concerns about that. I think it is unfair. Most local authorities are looking for increases in this tax. I am concerned about the funding of local government. I will give some statistics. If one looks at Carlow for 2016, we got just a little over €2 million from central Government. Kilkenny got €3.5 million; Leitrim got well over €6.5 million; Longford got €6.5 million; Laois got €4 million; and Sligo got nearly €6 million. If one looks at our figures, Carlow has had an increase in population of 4.1% since 2011. Carlow town is the 14th largest urban area in Ireland. If one looks at the figures, one will see that Longford

received 52% more funding than Carlow, yet it has a 29% lower population. Leitrim received 55% more Government funding, even though it has a population 42% less than Carlow.

I have major concerns about this because local authority budgets impact so much on people's lives, whether in the form of housing, grants, roads or community funding. If this local government funding is not distributed evenly to each local authority, it is unfair. It is not right. The Government needs to be accountable for why the local authority in Carlow got only €2 million when most other local authorities were getting €4 million in local government funding. The Minister needs to be brought into the House to account for this.

Senator Colm Burke: I too join with others in congratulating everyone involved in preparing this Chamber. The facilities are clear evidence that there was a very good team effort between the people here in Leinster House, the planners, contractors and everyone involved. I congratulate them on the work they have done.

I would like to raise the very good and welcome announcement today of €350 million to be spent by UCC on developing new facilities, which are the Cork University Business School at a cost of €100 million, student accommodation at €64 million and €37 million for a dental school.

I raise this in connection to the development of third level education and our association with other organisations. Over the past few months, I have raised the fact that Ireland is not a member of CERN, the huge European organisation for nuclear research. It has great opportunities for Irish graduates in research and development, whether in technology, science, engineering or maths. Ireland is not a member of CERN. Some 21 European countries are members of CERN and the only country from outside Europe is Israel. Some 22 countries are involved. The big disadvantage from an Irish point of view is that as well as excluding graduates from research opportunities, we are also excluding more than 200 Irish companies which would gladly tender for contracts that are available every year. More than €300 million is available in contracts from CERN every year. Irish companies are not allowed to tender because Ireland is not a member. We are not even an associate member. I do not understand it. I ask the Leader to invite the Minister to the House to set out clearly the programme that will be put in place for Ireland to become a full member of CERN. It is important for our graduates. We talk about growing our universities. This is a chance to give them an opportunity when they finish in our universities and go on to further studies. I ask for that time to be given for full debate.

An Cathaoirleach: The normal time for the Order of Business is up but five further speakers have indicated. Given the day that is in it, our first day in this new building, I will use my discretion to allow everyone in.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim féin leis na focail atá ráite cheana féin faoin athchóiriú agus an suíomh breá álainn seo atá anois againn ar feadh tréimhse.

I echo the sentiments that it is important, especially after Guy Verhofstadt's address last week, for us to receive an update regarding Brexit from either the Taoiseach or the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

I want to draw Members' attention to the seven days of action announced by An Dream Dearg which works closely with Conradh na Gaeilge and Irish language organisations across the country. An Dream Dearg is calling for seven days of action this week. Yesterday, it asked that everyone would add a filter to their profile picture on social media. Today it is encouraging people to engage with the Irish Government on the matter of a stand alone Acht na Gaeilge

in the North. The campaign has been a youth-led, diverse, colourful, inclusive, active, visible, loud, joyous one but it is one that has been frustrated which is understandable when one considers that people are asking for rights and entitlements that are available to people in this State, and in Scotland and Wales. I encourage Members, including the Leader, to participate in the campaign. An Dream Dearg is making a very modest call. On Friday it is asking people to wear red to work. Two of my Fianna Fáil colleagues have got the memo early and have taken a lead on this. Fair play to them. I will circulate the details and hopefully, just as the majority of parties in the North - 50 of 90 MLAs support the call for a stand alone Irish language Act - we will see every party and organisation in this House also back the call.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá ar an ócáid speisialta seo. I am more than pleased with the result of the renovations. It is a beautiful building and it is appropriate that we have a collection Yeats's poetry outside in the atrium since he served as a Seanadóir and his son served as one of the Cathaoirleach's predecessors.

I join the Cathaoirleach's words of congratulation to all those concerned in the project, to the Ceann Comhairle, the Office of Public Works, the National Museum board, the contractors, the Oireachtas staff and everyone involved. As a member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, I wish to highlight in particular the work of our staff, the Clerk of the Seanad, Martin Groves, and the Clerk Assistant, Brigid Doody, the Cathaoirleach's adviser, Aisling Hart, and the Cathaoirleach. The Cathaoirleach cannot give himself a clap on the back but I am more than well aware of the work that he has put into the project over the past 12 months. God knows, he is busy enough without it. It is a credit to him.

In July 2016 it was decided to set up a Citizens' Assembly to look into aspects of the eighth amendment. It was also decided that on conclusion, its report would be handed over to a joint Oireachtas committee of which I am a member, under the excellent chairmanship of our colleague, Senator Catherine Noone. What is bothering me, and what I hope the Leader will bring to the Taoiseach's attention, is that the Taoiseach and several senior Ministers have been speaking out regularly about their intentions related to the holding of a referendum on the eighth amendment and are apparently now putting dates on it. What is the point of this Oireachtas committee? I ask myself what I am doing on it if it is to be gazumped and the Government is moving on regardless. Any Oireachtas committee is entitled to the respect of giving it enough time to complete its business and, God knows, we do not have enough time, as we have to report before Christmas. It is like sending out a meitheal of sleánsmen to the bog when the turf has already been brought home. It is time the Government left the committee to do its work unhindered for the next few months.

Senator Paul Coughlan: I agree very much with much of Senator O'Sullivan's commentary, in particular, in concurring with the Cathaoirleach's earlier remarks complimenting the OPW, the Ceann Comhairle, the National Museum, the Clerk of the Seanad, the Clerk Assistant of the Seanad and their staff regarding this fine room we have on a temporary basis. It will serve us well.

I refer to the matter raised by Senator Mulherin. Despite the perception that Mayo had a poor year sportswise, the county won one all-Ireland, namely, the Jimmy Bruen all-Ireland golf championship. As she said, one of the stalwarts on that team was Senator Paddy Burke. He ensured success for his side in the final against Warrenpoint. Well done to him.

I respect the Cathaoirleach's view and he will not want me to get into matters regarding the

Seanad reform Bill. I will not blame Senator McDowell. He was merely giving expression to a report in Bill form but we will have another day to get into that and all its flaws.

An Cathaoirleach: To synthesise, the Senator is saying the proposed reform of the Seanad has flaws and Senator McDowell can interpret that in his own way.

Senator Paul Coghlan: We must not subvert the Constitution. It will have to be referred back to the people in a referendum.

An Cathaoirleach: Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Ó Clochartaigh.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Chathaoirligh, agus bhúr gcéad fáilte ar ais. Cuirim fáilte roimh an bhfógra atá déanta go mbeidh reifreann againn maidir le cearta vótála do na himircigh Éireannacha. I welcome the indication that we may have a referendum on the voting rights of the diaspora, which is long overdue, and I look forward to debating the detail around that because it is important. There was a great deal of criticism during the recess by spokespersons such as Niall O'Dowd and Ciaran Staunton about issues relating to members of the diaspora who wish to return. We have had many promises regarding what will be done about that but I reiterate my call for the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Cannon, to come to the House as soon as possible to debate this.

It is interesting that we are discussing referenda. What is the Government's stance on the referendum called by the Catalan Parliament, which is to be held on 1 October? It is worrying that when a decision has been taken by democratically elected politicians in a parliament, public representatives are being arrested for taking the decision along with civil servants; policing powers have been taken over by the Spanish Government and the website of the Catalan National Assembly, *L'Assamblea Nacional Catalana*, a civil society organisation, has been closed down. Where does the Government stand on this issue? Has this been raised with the Spanish Government? Does our Government support the Catalan Parliament in its right to self-determination and to hold a referendum on that issue on 1 October? It is worrying that parliamentarians are not being given the right to express their opinions on these issues. The leader of the parliament was arrested and a number of others suspended from office. I would welcome a statement from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and possibly the Taoiseach on these issues to see where the Government stands on our behalf.

An Cathaoirleach: Finally, I call Senator Swanick. He is last but not least. He was first to contribute in the House today on his Commencement matter. He made a little bit of history.

Senator Keith Swanick: I echo the sentiments of my colleague. Democracy is sacred and from it flows all other rights and freedoms. The peaceful co-existence across the EU and the senseless carnage of two world wars remind us that democracy, elections, and dialogue are always preferable to war and violence. The Catalan Parliament has called a referendum, to be held on Sunday, 1 October, with a simple binary question on whether people want Catalonia to be an independent country in the form of a republic. The response to the proposed referendum has been a General Franco-style crackdown by the Spanish Government, with the seizure of 10 million ballot papers, the arrest of referendum activists and the threat of arrest for any mayor who facilitates the holding of a vote. It appears Madrid may be reverting to the type of dictatorial regime that Franco perfected; the type of regime perfected by Castro in Cuba and Pinochet in Chile, where dissent ensured a person disappeared or was put up against Castro's infamous firing squad walls. Today, thousands of people in Chile are without loved ones because they

had the audacity to look for free and fair elections. In the case of Castro's Cuba, people were sent to prison work camps because they were Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexual or deemed by Castro to be out of step with the Communist ideology. This is what happens when democracy is eroded and dialogue stops. This is why freely elected leaders should be careful in their use of language and their praise for deceased dictators.

The recent independence votes in Scotland in 2014, Montenegro in 2006 and Québec in 1995 have inspired the Catalan people to have a referendum. In the spirit of the EU and in the interest of dialogue and understanding, I call on the Seanad to invite President Puigdemont of Catalonia to address us. We have a precedent in Seanad Éireann, offering a warm welcome to Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of the Scottish Parliament. We need to hear about what is taking place in another EU member state. We need the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Taoiseach to condemn the attempts to curtail democracy in another EU state. Let us bear in mind that in this Chamber and elsewhere in Ireland there were expressions of outrage about the democratic election of the current US President. How about we find our voice now in relation to the attempt by the Spanish Government to close down and intimidate a democratic vote for the Catalan people?

An Cathaoirleach: I acknowledge the head of a Catalan delegation, Sergi Marcén, who is in the Gallery. I call on the Leader to respond to the Order of Business.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the 29 Members of the House who contributed to the Order of Business. Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom, ar nós an Chathaoirligh agus na mBall eile, fáilte a chur roimh gach éinne go dtí an Teach seo. Ba mhaith liom mo fhíorbhuíochas a ghabháil le foireann Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí, Teach Laighean agus Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann as ucht na hoibre atá déanta acu. Tá an ceart ag an Chathaoirleach nuair a deireann sé gur lá iontach, speisialta agus stairiúil atá ann. In welcoming everybody to the Chamber I am mindful of the words of Albert Reynolds. I hope it is a temporary little arrangement and that we can go back to our home, which is a very fine Chamber in itself. Today, in the Ceramics Room, we are paying tribute to the museum but our own Chamber is also an extraordinary Chamber, and it is a privilege for all of us to be here today as Members of the Upper House to mark the opening of our temporary home.

I thank everybody who has been involved in allowing this to happen, from the board of the museum to the museum staff, and I want to allay the fears of the museum staff. We are here as temporary custodians and we want to continue to work with them to ensure a smooth transition. I pay tribute to the team under Superintendent Conway of Leinster House. The officials from the Office of Public Works did tremendous and Trojan work during the summer recess. I also pay tribute to the Cathaoirleach and the staff of the Seanad Office for the work they have done, along with the Ceann Comhairle and the staff of Leinster House. I look forward to a very successful tenure here in this Upper House.

We are in the decade of commemoration, and it is important that when we commemorate the first Dáil in 1919 that we do so in our own home, in the Seanad Chamber. It is important that the Houses of the Oireachtas, the OPW and the Government spend money on ensuring the working environment of members of staff, Members of the House and our personal staff is always upheld. This is not a vanity project. As we all know quite well, this is about ensuring our Parliament, the Houses of the Oireachtas, is suitably located in Teach Laighean. It is about ensuring we have a Parliament that can represent the people in the decade of commemoration we are now celebrating.

I will now respond to the multiplicity of issues raised by the 29 Senators. Senator Ardagh raised the issue of Brexit. I assure the Senator that the Government is not being passive or an idle passenger in the car: it is very proactive. The Taoiseach was in London yesterday to meet with Prime Minister, Theresa May, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, and Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, have been travelling around Europe and the world outlining the Government's proposals. All of us welcome the movement by Prime Minister, Theresa May, in her speech last Friday and recognise that this is an evolving situation. At the risk of sounding a politically discordant note, the British Government and the Tory Party in particular are moving their position as the process moves on. Following on from the remarks made in the Dáil last week and by Mr. Barnier yesterday, it is important that we allow Government, in tandem with all, to pursue and promote the Irish interest. This is about protecting the peace process. It is about ensuring that we do not have an economic border, that we do have a common travel area and that the Government recognises the importance of all of this. We will work to ensure that our position is heard not only in the United Kingdom but across Europe, as we have been doing.

In regard to the issue of homelessness and housing, all of us, from our clinics and communities, know people who have had the harrowing experience of living in hotel rooms or poor accommodation. These constituents are not just statistics, they are people, some of whom we know and are our friends. I remind Senator Ardagh that her party, Fianna Fáil, cannot be absolved of blame in this regard. Fianna Fáil was in government for 14 years.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: We are talking about the future now. What is the Government going to do?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The collapse of the banking system and the decimation of the construction industry happened on its watch. For Fianna Fáil Senators to point the finger at the current Government when it was party to all of that is incredible. Fianna Fáil needs to accept responsibility. That said, I accept that we have a road to travel. It is important the Rebuilding Ireland project results in people being taken out of homelessness and, equally, that we build houses that are not only private houses but social houses. I share the Senator's concern in that regard and I will work with her through Government to ensure a solution is found to the housing crisis.

In regard to health and hospital waiting times - I am not familiar with the issues in the Senator's area - the Government has increased HSE funding. Spend in terms of the health budget for the HSE is now the highest it has ever been. It is important this is recognised. That said, I am happy to request that the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, come to the House to address the issues raised by the Senator.

Senators McDowell, Higgins and Bacik raised the issue of Seanad reform. I have with me a copy of Senator McDowell's newsletter which was distributed in many parts of the country. I was particularly interested to note it referenced Ranelagh. I am sure Senator Humphreys and Deputies Murphy and O'Connell will have something to say-----

Senator Ivana Bacik: I received one to my home.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator McDowell is, perhaps, rekindling his Dáil ambition and is not really concerned about reform of the Seanad but is using it as a political weapon. The Senator might clarify that issue another time.

Senator A: It also mentions Ringsend.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I assure Senator McDowell that the Government is committed to reform of the Seanad. It is not a one-trick pony in terms of Seanad reform. As Senator Coghlan said, there are disparate and different parts of that wheel which is the key part of Seanad reform. Senator McDowell will be pleased to hear that the Taoiseach is anxious to come to the Seanad to outline to Members his views on how we can expedite the Manning report. I look forward to that engagement taking place in the coming weeks.

Senator Coghlan is correct that there are different viewpoints on Seanad reform. If one were to take a straw poll of the 60 Members of this Seanad one would not get one view on it. The Cathaoirleach referenced Senator McDowell's Bill. There are some who believe it is flawed. As Leader, I do not have an opinion on that. I am anxious to work with the Senator in the pursuit of reform. We will have a debate on the issue. As per Senator Humphreys's request prior to the recess, I have spoken to the Taoiseach and asked him to come to the House and we are working on a date in that regard. It will happen in due course.

It will not be an elongated invitation, it will be in the coming weeks.

In respect of the issue of legislation, which I believe Senator McDowell mentioned, sometimes legislation is published well in advance and is available for us to peruse. Other Bills are brought forward as a matter of urgency, but by and large it is important that we have good debate in the House and I am happy to work with all Members to ensure that.

Senator Conway-Walsh raised the important and harrowing issue of the gas incident which befell the community of Erris last week. It is worrying. The Commission for Energy Regulation is carrying out a full investigation. If there is any issue or any improvement in communication between different people and organisations which could be made we should certainly have it investigated and looked at. It was handled well. From talking to people I know in the area there was a lot of communication. There were notices on local radio and in local newspapers and there was a very proactive campaign. I will, however, take the Senator's views on board. The Senator also made reference to the issue of maternity leave for public representatives. Her point is very valid.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: On a point of order, Senator Conway-Walsh is not here.

An Cathaoirleach: Members come and go from this House. I want to rule on this because it has come up before. There are days when Senator O'Donnell may not be here.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is true but-----

An Cathaoirleach: No, it is for the Leader to decide who to respond to.

Senator Paul Gavan: That was a cheap shot.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is not a cheap shot. If people ask a question of the Leader, they should stay for the answer.

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader. He has discretion.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is not a cheap shot.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is disgraceful in fact.

An Cathaoirleach: I will make a point generally. I do not like people referring to somebody who had to leave the Chamber for whatever reason - whether he or she is sick, at a committee meeting or something else - because today was exceptionally long. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is waiting and will probably have to wait at least another 15 minutes because-----

Senator Paul Gavan: The Senator is at a committee meeting.

An Cathaoirleach: -----we were delayed. I was trying to let everybody in. It is the Leader's discretion and that is not a fair point of order.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: If I may address the point which Senator O'Donnell raised, to be fair Senator Conway-Walsh told me she had to leave for a meeting of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. The point the Senator makes is that some Senators do not do that. She at least had the courtesy to come to me and say that she was leaving, but I think Senator O'Donnell raises a valid point in terms of how people interact. I am not being precious.

Senator Higgins raised the issue of the budget, Seanad reform and equality proofing in budget 2018. I certainly hope that Government will take cognisance of the sustainable development goals and that we will see equality proofing in budget 2018. Perhaps the Senator can advance that with the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach or even here as a Commencement matter with the Minister.

Senator Bacik also raised the issue of employment, the precariat and the issue of precarious employment. I would be happy to have the Minister, Deputy Fitzgerald, come to the House in that regard. Regarding referenda, the Government today announced a series of indicative dates for referenda. I do not have the list of the referenda or the dates to hand, but there are eight or nine indicated over a two-year period.

Senator Paul Coughlan: It might be preferable to discuss that tomorrow.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will try to come back with a note for Members on that issue over the coming days. I commend Senator Bacik for her role as chairperson of the women's suffrage committee which is celebrating women's right to vote. To be fair to the Senator she has shown huge leadership on this matter along with other Members of the House. I commend her on that and congratulate Trinity College on its 425th birthday today.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeannaire.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: There is only one university, Trinity College. I have never heard of UCD or DCU.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I know that the Members of the House elected by Trinity College graduates - Senators Ruane, Bacik and Norris - represent the graduates of that university with distinction in this House.

Senator Joe O'Reilly raised the issue of buses and public transport in Cavan. He has been

very vocal on the matter.

An Cathaoirleach: We are running very late and it is unfair on the Minister of State, who is waiting. Will Senators please allow the Leader to conclude?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, will be busy after the Order of Business today I am sure, given the demands and requests made of him. I have 29 people to reply to. I will try my best to get to everybody to be fair to those who raised matters. It is important that we encourage public transport.

I join with Senator Clifford-Lee in commending the principal, an tUasal Ó Tuachaigh, for his leadership in the school community in respect of the issue which she raised. The provision of defibrillators is a very important matter. In our communities, we know there are many of them in public places, whether in sports hall, in community grounds or on the streets of our own cities. I would be happy to have the Minister, Deputy Bruton, address the matter. I know he has made comments on the matter and that there is an issue between the Department of Health, the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills as to who provides them. The matter of defibrillators, however, is one which should not be used to divide or as a political tool. I am not saying that is what the Senator is doing. The issue which the Senator has raised is very important and I would be happy to have the Minister come to the House to discuss it.

Senator Boyhan raised the issue of driver tests. I would be happy to have the Minister, Deputy Ross, come to the House on that matter. There is an inordinate delay in certain parts of the country. For some reason there seems to be an increase in the waiting times. I would be happy to facilitate the Minister coming in. We have a debate on housing on Thursday. I am sure the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, will address the matters the Senator raised in that respect as part of the debate.

Senator McFadden raised the issue of Jadotville and medals for the surviving members. To give Senator McFadden credit, she has been very proactive on this matter. The Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, has responded to the requests of this House. I will ask him to come to the House to present a report to the Chamber on that matter.

Senator Gavan raised the issue of direct provision. His remarks which compare us to Nazi Germany are a bit unfair and are totally disingenuous. The two cannot be compared at all and his remark was a cheap shot.

Senator Paul Gavan: Direct provision.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: This Government is committed to bringing the McMahon report to its finality in terms of implementing its recommendations, as was the previous Government.

Senator Paul Gavan: The Leader has obviously not read the article.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is important that we continue to advance the rights and conditions of the people. We all agree that this is not the way to house people.

Senator Paul Gavan: Then the Leader should do something about it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It ill behoves the Senator to take cheap shots at people and to use this as a political weapon.

Senator Paul Gavan: Cheap shot?

An Cathaoirleach: Please allow the Leader to respond.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I thank the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am very much of the same view as the Senator. Direct provision is a blight on our-----

Senator Paul Gavan: The Leader should do something about it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We are doing something. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, has been before the House. The Senator knows full well there has been a litany of changes made by the Government. He should advance those changes rather than come to the House with the Sinn Féin script, opposing everything.

Senator Paul Gavan: People have a right to work.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Dolan raised the issue of disability and young people in nursing homes. The point he made on the number of young people in nursing homes is one on which we should actively promote change. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, for coming to the House today to discuss the disability strategy. I gave the Senator a commitment to have this debate early in the term and to be fair to the Minister of State, and not just because he is here, he is very much of the view that he should come here to debate with us in respect of issues relating to his Department. I thank him for that.

Senator Noone raised the issue of VAT on sun beds and sun cream. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, or the Minister, Deputy Harris, would have a view on that. We must reduce the numbers of people who develop skin cancer. The prevalence of skin cancer is increasing. We need to be very vigilant and very strong in sending a message in respect of that issue. Senator Noone's point is valid.

Senator Humphreys raised the issue of breast feeding and the initiative which the HSE has ended. We have one of the lowest rates of breast feeding in the world. Even in the city of Dublin there is a disparity between south, north, east and west. There are discrepancies across the country, between urban and rural, and east and west. We need to examine why that is happening. I am of the view that the HSE's five-year action plan needs to be reviewed and, if necessary, updated and changed. I cannot give the Senator an explanation as to why the initiative was stopped, but I would be happy to have that debate, if possible, in a couple of weeks' time.

Senator Davitt raised the issue of the rates of valuation. That is continuing and we are seeing, in some cases, a positive change, although in other cases we are not. I would be happy to have the Minister come to the House.

Senator Butler raised the issue of diabetes and the need for an open day in Leinster House. I am sure the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission will be anxious to work with all of us to ensure that we get the message out about diabetes, along with skin cancer. We can play a role in that. The Government is looking at the issue of a sugar tax and we have also seen the issue of school meals being addressed by the Government in recent days. It is important to recognise that. We can make a change ourselves in respect of diabetes and our eating habits, collectively and individually. Senator O'Donnell raised the issue of the post offices, which is a very important issue. The heart of our communities used to be the post office. That is no longer the case

in some areas. We have had the Bobby Kerr report. We have also had the implementation strategy, which needs to be implemented now to preserve the vitality and protect the future of post offices. If that means community banking, changing how we do business, then let us be open to that. It will require leadership and it will require, if I may say, someone of the calibre of Senator O'Donnell, who did a very fine report on death and dying, to perhaps become the spokesperson and ambassador, along with all of us. There is a need for a quantum shift in opinion as to how we can continue to have our post offices at the heart of our community. I would be happy to have that debate again in the future. It is one that we cannot ignore and cannot walk away from.

I thank and congratulate Senator Warfield on going to Poznań at the weekend and for his stellar role as a promoter of human rights across the world. We all share his view regarding the issue of fascism and the issue of different viewpoints around the world. We must challenge the views of some people in the pursuit of human rights. I hope to go to Iran next week, and I certainly will not be found wanting in the promotion of human rights and in the call to have LGBT rights recognised around the world. If that is unpopular in certain parts of the world then that is the risk we must take because we cannot be silent regarding human rights. I commend the Senator on that, and I would be happy to have a debate with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, in the coming months.

Senators Mulherin and Coghlan made reference to the all-Ireland success of the Castlebar Golf Club and the role of our iar-hCathaoirleach, friend and colleague, Senator Paddy Burke. I am glad that we have had one all-Ireland success from Mayo this year. I pay tribute to Senator Burke for his leadership in that team. For those who do not know, the Jimmy Bruen Shield is a very prestigious tournament in the golfing world.

Senator Máire Devine: Well done Dublin.

Senator Paul Coghlan: It is all-Ireland for a reason. Dublin was not involved in the final.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is the first time in the 107 year history of Castlebar Golf Club that it has won the Jimmy Bruen Shield, and it is one that many people aspire to win.

I congratulate Baile Átha Cliath on its successful retention of the Sam Maguire and its ladies team, which also won the all-Ireland last weekend.

Senator Máire Devine: The team is in the Mansion House tonight.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I also congratulate Tipperary on winning the intermediate title, Galway on winning the all-Ireland hurling final and Cork on winning the all-Ireland camogie final. The one thing we see on Sundays in August and September is that our country is united in sport. We put aside our county rivalries and are united in sport. It was fitting to see the young player from Derry last weekend getting engaged on the field in Croke Park. Is it not great that on an all-Ireland final day we can have revelry and sport and love along with competition?

Senator Mulherin also asked that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport come to the House to discuss the issue of the clocking of cars. The figures she gave were worrying, namely, that 18% or 12,000 cars have been tampered with. We need to see action taken on this issue.

Senator Gallagher raised the issue of a school asthma programme. I am not familiar with the issue he raised, but I would be happy to have the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, come to the House.

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Senator Norris raised the issue of the sexual offences Bill and the attacks on sex workers. They are vulnerable and are victimised, and I would be happy to have the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, or the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, come to the House for a debate. There are diverging views on that Bill. Senator McDowell had a very strong line on that Bill. The Bill is a good one and will achieve what it set out to do. We will have that debate to review it.

I congratulate Senator Hopkins on her marriage to Francis and wish them many happy years of married bliss together. I join with her in calling for a debate on mental health and the report concerning Roscommon. She is correct that there is a need within the HSE for a cultural change around how it does its business, in this case in relation to mental health services.

I am very happy to join with Senator Devine and all Members of the House in congratulating Fr. Joe Mallin on his birthday today.

Senator Máire Devine: It was last week.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: As the only surviving child of the executed leaders in 1916, it is important we recognise, acknowledge, pay tribute and thank him. I wish him lá breithe sona dó.

Some Senators do not like to hear good news, but on the issue Senator Devine raised regarding the Simon Community health report, I make the point again that this year the Government has given an additional €2 million to the HSE to expand in-reach services across temporary accommodation facilities. In addition, the HSE has been given an extra €1.5 million in funding this year for services for people who are homeless, to assist them and to support their lives. Furthermore, those vulnerable homeless people who have mental health and addiction issues are being given access to a range of health care services and supports, such as GPs, case management and nursing services. The Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, is committed to seeking additional funding in the Estimates for 2018 which will bring an increase in spending in the health care services and supports for homeless persons to €36 million, in line with commitments in Rebuilding Ireland. This will represent an increase of 16.5% on actual expenditure. That is no small amount of change. The Sinn Féin narrative is sometimes-----

Senator Máire Devine: This is the Dublin Simon Community's narrative.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: -----the one dimensional speech that the politburo issue and it cannot change.

Senator Máire Devine: That is the Dublin Simon Community narrative. Correct the record please.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Perhaps the Senator might acknowledge that money is being spent.

Senator Máire Devine: Correct the record. This is the Dublin Simon Community's narrative.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator should speak through the chair, please.

Senator Máire Devine: I apologise. This is the Dublin Simon Community's narrative, not Sinn Féin's.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Murnane O'Connor raised the issue of local government budgets and cited different budgets. The Senator will know that it depends on a variety of factors as to where and how that distribution of local government funding is done, and I am sure the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan, who shares the constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny with her, will not be found wanting in the allocation of funding for that area.

I join with Senator Colm Burke in congratulating University College Cork on its announcement today of its €350 million strategic plan and give him a commitment that we will have the Minister with responsibility for nuclear research come to the House. I cannot give him an answer as to why we are not a member of the European Organization for Nuclear Research, CERN, but I am happy to have that debate in the House.

Senator Ó Donghaile made reference to Act na Gaelige and the seven days of action. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, must be commended on his leadership in showing that the Irish language is very important to us as a society and as a nation. This Government has shown that the Irish language is important, and I commend all involved. I am always happy to wear red, as a Corkman, but I do not believe that we should use the Irish language as a weapon because it is important we inculcate in all our citizens, North and South, a love for our language and our culture, and we should bring people on a journey as well. That is something that we can do.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: That is part of it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Ned O'Sullivan referenced the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which I am a member of, and I join with him in congratulating Senator Noone. The Taoiseach is perfectly correct to outline that we will have a referendum on the eighth amendment, although he has not said what that referendum will be about. Preparation for the referendum forms part of the work of the committee. There are different viewpoints regarding whether to repeal, replace or keep it. That is fine, but we should have that national conversation. Senator Noone is chairing in the committee and Senators Devine and Ruane are members of it. It is important to allow for the fact that Government must prepare, and today it has given an indicative date for the different matters that will be put to the people.

Senators Ó Clochartaigh and Swanick raised the issue of the independence referendum in Catalonia. I welcome their commitment to the minority position in Catalonia. I am not sure that Government has a position regarding-----

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The majority of parliament voted for it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am not sure if Government has a position regarding the referendum in Catalonia nor am I sure that the Catalanian people want to opt out of Spain, and I am reluctant to get into a debate on the matter. Sometimes it is good to listen to all sides of the debate. A decision was made by the courts at the weekend that must be upheld and supported, and I am not going to get into a debate on it today.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: It was a democratic decision by a majority of parliament.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I recognise the right of all sides to have an opinion. In Spain there are certain conditions which must be met to allow for a referendum but reading the situation from afar, these have not been met. It is important, however, to allow people to have their

voices heard.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Could we invite the Minister in to discuss it?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will ask the Minister to come to the House but it might be more judicious to raise this as a Commencement matter. It might be quicker in terms of getting the Minister in because I know that he will be away next week on Government business. It might be an idea for the Senator to raise it as a Commencement matter this week if he can but I will try to get the Minister to come to the House.

I thank Members for their endurance today and I also thank everyone involved in getting the Chamber ready for today. I apologise to the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, for holding him up. I also apologise to those in the Visitors' Gallery but the 29 Members of the House deserve to have a response to the matters they raised on the Order of Business.

Order of Business agreed to.

Oireachtas Committees: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That:

(a) the Select Committee on Rural and Community Development is hereby appointed—

(i) pursuant to, and to perform the functions set out in, Standing Order 70A, in respect of the Department of Rural and Community Development, and

(ii) with the Orders of Reference of Select Committees contained in the Order of the Seanad of 21st July, 2016;

(b) the Committees listed in column (1) of the Schedule below are re-named in accordance with column (2), to perform the functions set out in Standing Order 70A in respect of the Government Departments listed in column (3), in accordance with any changes in Departmental administration and Ministerial functions;

(c) the Committees shall otherwise continue in being, with the same membership, Chair and Orders of Reference;

(d) pursuant to any changes in Departmental administration and Ministerial functions, papers shall transfer as appropriate between Committees, and, notwithstanding any previous Orders of Referral, Bills and motions shall stand referred to the Committee performing the functions set out in Standing Order 70A in respect of the relevant Department;

Provided that where a Committee has made substantial progress in the consideration of a matter which would, pursuant to this Order, cease to be within that Committee's remit, and it has resolved to make a report on the matter, it may, having given notice to the Committee to whose remit the matter now relates, complete its consideration and make such report not later than 31st January 2018.

SCHEDULE

(1)Current Committee name	(2)New Committee Name	(3)Government Department
Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation	Business, Enterprise and Innovation	Business, Enterprise and Innovation
Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs	Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Social Protection	Employment Affairs and Social Protection	Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government	Housing, Planning and Local Government	Housing, Planning and Local Government

Question put and agreed to.

Sectoral Employment: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That, subject to the agreement of the motion regarding the change of name of the Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Committee to the Business, Enterprise and Innovation

Committee, the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order

(Construction Sector) 2017,

a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 22nd August, 2017, be referred to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, in accordance with Standing Order

70A(3)(k), which, not later than 12th October, 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.

European Regulation: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under

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Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following

proposed measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2016/794 for the purpose of establishing a European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS),

a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 18th August 2017.”

Question put and agreed to.

Designation of Major Events: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017,

copies of which Order in draft were laid before Seanad Éireann on 22nd June, 2017.”

Question put and agreed to.

National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: We will now move on to statements on the national disability inclusion strategy. I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, Deputy Finian McGrath, to the House. Group spokespersons have eight minutes while all other Senators have five minutes. I must apologise again to the Minister of State for the elongated Order of Business.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Members for the opportunity to address the Seanad in its new premises. I wish all Senators the very best for this term. I welcome the debate this evening about the work that is under way on the implementation of the new National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 which I published on 14 July and the range of related initiatives, including in the employment sphere, that are under way at present. Through eight key themes, consisting of some 114 actions, the strategy seeks to significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities in a practical sense and also to create the best possible opportunities for people with disabilities to fulfil their potential. We have not wasted any time in starting the implemen-

tation of the strategy. I chaired the first meeting of the strategy's steering group, comprising Departments and stakeholders, on 24 July and we meet again this Friday, 29 September. The work has begun. The steering group will publish an annual report on progress for each year of the strategy and we will have a mid-term review, which will involve public consultations, in 2018.

The Department of Justice and Equality is also leading on the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. This seeks to address the under-representation of people with disabilities in the labour force. This is an issue I feel very strongly about and we must act on it. The purpose of the strategy is to ensure that there is a concerted, cross-Government effort to address the barriers and challenges that impact on employment of people with disabilities. As part of this effort, we will increase the public sector employment target of persons with disabilities from 3% to 6% and will embed this target into all public service workforce planning and recruitment. This work has already begun and some Departments are moving more quickly than others. Implementation of the strategy is under way and is co-ordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality. An implementation group consisting of relevant Government Departments and stakeholders meets regularly and is engaging in discussions with large public sector employers such as the Public Appointments Service, PAS, and the Health Service Executive, HSE, to progress the commitments outlined in the strategy.

I want to mention the task force on personalised budgets established in 2016 to make recommendations on a personalised budgets model. The aim of these personalised budgets will be to give people with disabilities more control in accessing Department of Health-funded personal social services, along with greater independence and choice in accessing services which best meet their individual needs. I understand that the task force is on schedule to submit its report to me before the end of the year. I met Mr. Lynch a number of times over the summer and I know that this work is progressing very well.

The key issue regarding the disability inclusion strategy is setting worthwhile targets and ensuring that Departments and agencies work together to deliver on them. This is not just about money, or extra money, but of course money is important too. The Government, through the HSE, is committed to protecting front-line services for people with disabilities, with targeted improvement in identified priority areas. As part of budget 2017, a further €92 million was allocated towards priority areas. The priority areas for these additional resources include: the allocation of an additional €10 million in 2017 for the provision of services for 1,500 young people leaving school and rehabilitative training this year; the development of alternative respite models, with €1 million targeted funding; the reconfiguration of residential services, supported by €20 million in capital funding and to be further supported by the service reform fund; quality improvements to increase compliance with national standards for residential centres for children and adults with disabilities; and over 1,950 inspections of residential centres for people with disabilities conducted by the Health Information Quality Authority, HIQA, since regulation began in November 2013. I have visited many of these residential centres myself.

As of 1 June, approximately 10,000 children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, who did not previously qualify were awarded medical cards. These children are now entitled to the following services free of charge: inpatient and outpatient hospital care; GP care; prescribed drugs and medicines, subject to a co-payment; dental, ophthalmic and aural services; and medical aids and appliances.

The Make Work Pay for People with Disabilities report was published in April 2017 and

examines the complex interaction between the benefit system, including the medical card and the net income gains in employment. The excellent report makes 24 recommendations with defined timelines for implementation. At the launch of the report it was announced that a number of changes would be implemented immediately. First, people in receipt of a long-term disability payment who move off the payment to get a job will retain their free travel pass for a period of five years. This measure goes beyond the recommendation of three years contained within the report. This has been achieved. The report also recommended a fast-track return to disability allowance or invalidity pension for people where employment does not work out and this is in progress. This is an attempt to address a complaint that is made to the Department regularly. Another recommendation was that we would dispense with the requirement that work be of a “rehabilitative nature” for the disability allowance earnings disregard. This means that a report from a doctor is no longer required before commencing work and that the focus is on capacity rather than incapacity. Legislation to give effect to this change is included in the forthcoming Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2017. The Department will review its communications with specific focus on the needs of people with disability. This, too, is making progress. There will be regular reviews of policies to ensure their effectiveness. Recommendations 9 and 10 of the Make Work Pay report seek to promote early intervention by introducing a new process to ensure that individuals who wish to work can engage with appropriate support systems at the earliest possible times.

At the launch of the Make Work Pay report, the current Taoiseach specifically acknowledged that any changes - this is important - to the disability allowance or the domiciliary care allowance could only be done with the support of the disability sector. He also signalled, and I support, the need for a consultation around these specific proposals.

Senator Martin Conway: Hear, hear.

Deputy Finian McGrath: To this end, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has embarked on a wide-ranging consultation process with people with disabilities, their families and their representative stakeholder groups. To ensure that this process is as inclusive as possible a cross-section of the disability sector has been invited to a Make Work Pay stakeholders focus group. This group has begun the process of agreeing the format and content of the wider consultation process. This wider process will then take place over the period October to January and it is anticipated that the consultation process will conclude by the end of the first quarter in 2018. I emphasise that people with disabilities will be at the heart of this process.

I know that Senators will be interested in the progress on the ratification of the UN convention. Ireland signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and, since then, successive Governments have emphasised Ireland’s strong commitment to proceed to ratification as quickly as possible, taking into account the need to ensure all necessary legislative and administrative requirements under the convention are met. I assure the House that ratification of the convention remains a high priority for me as Minister as well as the Government. Considerable progress has been made to overcome the remaining legislative barriers to Ireland’s ratification of the convention. The Assisted Decision-making (Capacity) Act 2015 was signed into law on 30 December 2015 and is a comprehensive reform of the law on decision-making capacity. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 has reformed section 5 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1993 to facilitate the full participation in family life of persons with intellectual disabilities and the full expression of their human rights. The Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 was published immediately prior to Christmas and completed Second Stage in February 2017. The primary purpose of the Bill is to address

the remaining legislative barriers to Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Work is ongoing on all the other issues set out in the previous Government's roadmap for ratification published in October 2015, and these will be progressed as Committee Stage amendments. The Bill will be progressed to enactment at an early date to facilitate ratification of the UN convention as soon as possible. We have sought the Attorney General's advice on how this process can be accelerated, but I should make the point that the precise timing of ratification now depends on how long it will take for this Bill to progress through the enactment process and on issues relating to the commencement of deprivation of liberty provisions, which will be included in the Bill on Committee Stage, and of the Assisted-decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015.

The major issue at this stage, which I would like to explain so as to reassure people, concerns the deprivation of liberty in the case of, for example, persons in nursing homes whose capacity to consent may be in doubt. This is a sensitive and important issue and we must get it right. Unfortunately, it is taking longer than expected, which I have found frustrating, to develop a proposal that is constitutionally sound and operationally effective and reasonable. The Department of Justice and Equality continues to engage with the Department of Health to assist with that work, but there is still some work to be done on the issue. While Ireland's not having ratified the convention is a recurring point of criticism by the UN as well as domestic civil society, non-governmental organisations, Senators and Deputies, it is important to note that, in terms of quality of service and the actual position of people with disabilities in society, Ireland is in many respects in advance of other EU states. This is not to be complacent and we continue to take practical measures to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

The report of the Make Work Pay group was published earlier this year and already action, as announced at its launch by the then Minister for Social Protection and now Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris and myself, has been taken on its recommendations. As I mentioned, we have a comprehensive employment strategy in place and we have published the national disability inclusion strategy, which contains a wide range of practical commitments to improve the position of people with disabilities. This is an ongoing and inclusive process. At the heart of the decisions are three key stakeholders: the person with the disability, families and carers. We want to ensure that we reform and invest in disabilities services but, above all, to ensure that we respect the rights of the person with a disability and is at the centre of all the services.

Senator Keith Swanick: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I am glad to see on Twitter today that #MakeWayDay has been trending. Stickers have been placed on objects which have obstructed access for people with disabilities. As a society, we all have to be more mindful of this.

Fianna Fáil welcomes the publication of the new strategy but, at the end of the day, it is the Government's ability to deliver it and improve significantly the lives of people with disabilities that will be the only metric that matters. Progress must be made as quickly as possible with regards to implementation. Many disability groups are rightly sceptical about delivery and a convincing effort is required on the part of the Minister of State and the Government. This scepticism is understandable when we consider that we are still awaiting the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Similarly we have long waiting lists for many essential therapies, especially for children. Nor are people with disabilities having their right to an assessment of need vindicated within the statutory timeframe. These are all challenges that must be addressed if we are to significantly improve the lives of

people with disabilities in a practical sense.

During the week an article popped up on my Twitter account. It was written by Tom Clonan and titled: “Leo knows we get up early in the morning to bathe, toilet & spoonfeed our loved ones”. Tom takes care of his son Eoghan who suffers from a rare neuromuscular disease. I, along with more than 40,000 others, read this most harrowing article. In it he talks about the deep fear he has for the future and, when he allows himself, he asks the most frightening questions: Who will do his physio and stretches when I die? Who will hold him and lift him? Who will dress him in his favourite Leinster rugby top and Abercrombie & Fitch tracksuit bottoms? Who will look after his most intimate care needs? What kind of hands will be placed upon him? This is heartbreaking stuff. In his words, it is “[t]oo frightening to contemplate” the answers to these questions. His son Eoghan is one of approximately 600,000 Irish citizens living with a disability. These are an invisible community which has been living for the most part in silent suffering as its members cope with the day-to-day struggles and poverty that generally accompanies disability in Ireland.

This new strategy cannot let Eoghan and people like him down. It aims to significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities in a practical sense and also to create the best possible opportunities for people with disabilities to fulfil their potential. Eight themes were identified as central to the success of the strategy: equality and choice; joined-up policies and public services; education; employment; health and well-being; person-centred disability services; living in the community; and transport and accessible places. In this sense we will all have an opportunity to follow the progression and we will be watching carefully. This cannot be an “all talk and no action” strategy. The Government says it is intended as a living document, and further actions will be added where necessary. Key commitments include a review of transport supports to determine the cross-departmental transportation options that will best help people with a range of disabilities to get to and from their workplace and the implementation of the most viable proposals. Also included are the development of proposals to address the issue of access to, or the affordability of, necessary aids, appliances and assistive technologies required for everyday living for those with disabilities whose entry, retention or return to work could be jeopardised by their being unable to afford them; the development of proposals for attaching conditions regarding the wheelchair accessibility of passenger licensed services and notification times of travel with transport service providers for people with mobility difficulties who require assistance; full implementation of the access and inclusion model of supports for children with disabilities to allow every child to participate meaningfully in the early childhood care and education scheme; and full implementation of the Transforming Lives programme. Other key commitments are the examination of the recommendations of the Make Work Pay working group with a view to introducing meaningful reforms that will make it financially worthwhile for a person with a disability to take up employment; implementation of the comprehensive employment strategy for persons with disabilities; the examination of the recommendations made in the report of the personalised budgets task force with a view to introducing the option of availing of a personal budget as one approach to individualised funding; and the development of codes of practice to support implementation of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015.

Ireland has yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN-CRPD, and it is critical that we do so soon. The Government did publish a Bill at the end of 2016 to give effect to it, but Fianna Fáil was disappointed that the Bill had been published incomplete, with many significant sections to be provided through Dáil Committee Stage amend-

ments. Eight months after the Bill went through on Second Stage in the Dáil, the amendments still remain to be published. The Bill, as published, contains six substantive sections and, judging by what is being proposed for discussion on Committee Stage, at least another six sections are in the offing. It appears that, in order to meet the programme for Government commitment on ratification, it was imperative to publish a Bill come what may. That is disappointing. However, to publish what is essentially half a Bill is hardly the best way to honour ratification of the most important UN convention. The failure to ratify the UNCRPD is a black mark on the country's name. The failure to ratify it is clear evidence that people with disabilities continue not to be seen as a priority.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State. I do not doubt for one moment his commitment, but the reality, on which I want to be clear, is that there were great expectations for him on entering the Department. He had had an enormously long track record in the disability sector, but there was great disappointment. He says he is frustrated. I spent the past two weeks visiting a number of people who have been really wonderful advocates for the disabled. My final conversations culminated in a meeting with a councillor, Councillor Miriam Murphy, in Arklow last Thursday with a colleague of hers, an advocate in the disability sector in Arklow. We laughed, cried and shared so many stories. They, among many others, touched on a range of issues, including housing, planning, access to services, the provision of social supports and the lack of access officers in some of the 31 local authorities, and generally felt things were not moving. I share their view which I can pick up from the Minister of State who said he was frustrated. He is the Minister of State and frustrated, but the people to whom I am referring are absolutely frustrated.

It is a great shame that we have not ratified the UNCRPD. I believe this is the only country that has not done so and the Minister of State did not state once that it would be ratified. He said he was endeavouring to achieve it and that there were targets, but we have no deadlines or timeframes. Earlier today I spoke to a number of my colleagues about the lack of legislation coming from the Lower House to the Seanad. There will be huge gaps in the legislative process in this House between now and Christmas. Therefore, we have time in both Houses to have meaningful dialogue and legislation. When one speaks to people with disabilities and learns that they do not feel empowered and believe they have no control over their lives, one has to wonder what the Government is doing.

I commend an article which appeared in *The Irish Times* yesterday. It referred to two people with disabilities who had spoken at a conference about the right to life, the right to respect for them, the right to be consulted on their sexuality, sexual practices and sexual orientation, their right to remain in congregated settings, if they so wished, despite Government policy stating they must all be got out of such settings. It is about choices and rights, not about what someone sets out in a strategy entitled the national disability inclusion strategy. I welcome the strategy and want to be positive as it is good, but I am making the point that there are unique aspects to choice and people believe they do not have a say and power.

Let me draw the attention of the House to some details. Some 1,200 young people, clearly under the age of 65 years, are permanently living in nursing homes because community supports are not provided. That is an indictment of the system. There are people who are waiting for access to social housing who cannot get it. There are local authorities stating they do not have adequately designed social housing to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Legislation needs to address the planning process for designed for purpose fit-outs for people with disabilities. There are those who cannot find meaningful employment without being penalised.

There are those who do not have full-time personal assistants but who absolutely need them. That is really important.

I should have said at the outset that for many years I was a director of Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind. There was a pilot scheme for people who were blind, children who had no eyes in their sockets and were given two hours of home schooling per week. That is the reality. I appeal to the Minister of State to examine specifically the pilot scheme in Munster operated by Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind on behalf of the health service to determine how we can beef it up to fulfil our obligations to children to enable them to realise their full potential. They need that support and assistance.

When a Minister says to me on a corridor that there is no problem and asks to be sent a name and address and that he or she will sort it out - I am not referring to the Minister of State - I am not really interested in any of that. I am interested in setting the foundations of a policy that will stand the test of time way beyond the term of office of the incumbent Ministers and Senators. I am referring to real policy. I do not want to be negative but to acknowledge absolutely the work taking place, but it is not happening fast enough. I am echoing the words of the Minister of State, not mine, this very day in this very Chamber. He told us he was frustrated by the lack of progress in ratification. They are his words and he can play them back and listen to them later. I share that frustration and can understand why the Minister of State expressed that view.

Issues arise about the reinstatement of the mobility and transport benefits. I have talked about personal assistants. We need to prioritise access to social and affordable housing. The living alone allowance needs to be addressed to offset costs associated with meeting disability needs. There needs to be a sizeable ramping up of resources for education and training. The number of people with disabilities living in poverty and isolation who do not have access to supports to have a meaningful and full life in their community is noteworthy. They do not have the opportunity to be fully authentic, to be empowered to be themselves and to play their role in their community rather than in some institution. They should be able to commute, live and work and enjoy and gain access to all services in their community, including sports, the arts, public services and facilities. That is what is meant by real inclusion.

The Government has a strategy, which is important, and the work to meet many of the objectives is ongoing, but the timeframe for delivery is not tight enough. I am quoting the Minister of State and note that he is throwing his head up a bit. However, the reference is to “ongoing”. I have the timeframes in front of me. If the Minister of State can contradict me and tell me something else, so be it, but I am just telling him what has been clearly documented. I do not wish to say anything simply because it is coming into my head but because I took the time to meet and engage with advocates in the disability sector, those who are suffering with disabilities and those who are frustrated at the lack of progress and want change and action. It is time the Government made this issue a priority. What people want is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to be implemented and a timeframe for its implementation. They do not want more excuses. If there are financial and legal implications in adopting it, as there must be and which I can understand, the Minister of State should tell us because I believe that is the real story. What are the legal, financial and political implications in ratifying the convention? If that is what is delaying its implementation, we need to hear it. I thank the Minister of State for his great work on the issue. I do not want to be patronising in saying he is committed to dealing with it, but I want to acknowledge the fact.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome an tAire Stáit. We are in a new Chamber and I hope

we will be here for 12 to 18 months while work is continuing in the other Chamber.

I would like to inform the House of my perspective of this issue as someone who suffers from a serious vision impairment. Senator Victor Boyhan spoke about people who had no eyes in their sockets. As my eyes are 84% faulty, I have 16% vision. When I speak about disability issues, particularly vision impairment, I like to think I know what I am talking about.

I commend all those involved in the new Chamber project. It is certainly much more user-friendly for me than the other Chamber. It is much brighter, airier and convenient. There is much more natural light compared with the other Chamber, although I can manage well in it. I encourage the Houses of the Oireachtas in the renovation of the other Chamber to ensure it will be much more user-friendly for people with a vision impairment, including those who will come after me. I question how user-friendly this Chamber is for members of the deaf community because there is a significant echo. Thankfully, in this Seanad, to my knowledge, there is no Member with a hearing impairment. However, in the overall context, that is an indictment of the system because a person with a serious hearing impairment has never been elected to either Houses of the Oireachtas, but I hope it will happen in due course.

I salute the work the Minister of State has done in the recognition of Irish Sign Language. I also salute him for his work in dealing with a structure that is traditional and archaic in promoting the rights and lifelong ambitions of people with disabilities, but the fact that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has not been ratified is a little black mark against his name. I have no doubt, however, that it is probably something beyond his control. Knowing him as I do, I believe that if he could have had it ratified, it would have been done a long time ago. Having him in office is our best chance of seeing the convention ratified. Its ratification is a priority of those at the top in government. On the day Deputy Leo Varadkar became leader of Fine Gael and Taoiseach-elect he said in his first speech in the Mansion House, an event I attended, that one of his priorities was ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Obviously, there are significant institutional and legislative challenges that have to be dealt with to get the convention over the line to ratify it.

The last thing I want to see happen is the convention being ratified without provision of the proper backup supports and resources to ensure it will be meaningful and make a genuine difference to the lives of people with disabilities. We have had too many talking shops. The last thing I want to see happen in nurturing and developing the hopes, dreams, aspirations and ambitions of people with disabilities nurtured is ratifying the convention without the proper backup supports to make it a reality in their everyday lives. We all have to be patient and have faith that a genuine Minister of State will ratify the convention when the time is right and the proper protocols, procedures and resources are in place. People in the media and disability circles will talk and criticise. I am not saying any of my colleagues will, but there is no point in adopting a convention unless we have proper backup supports in place.

We are in a new Chamber that facilitates reflection. I can reflect on the opportunities I have been by the State. I attended integrated education classes in the west where there were no resource teachers or special needs assistants, but there were good-hearted individuals working in the education system who helped me. They could see that I was bright and had the ability to progress and went the extra mile to put resources behind me. That meant I did not have to attend special education classes or a school for the blind in Dublin away from my family at the age of four or five years. There are a great number of good people who do great work that is not recognised. There are no conventions, resources or facilities in place, yet they do what is right.

That is why I am in this Chamber. It is a credit to them that I am a Member of the Oireachtas. As a member of a Government party and a Senator who proudly represents a party in government, I can tell Members that the Government has done more than any other to promote equality of access to education and opportunity. It has been difficult for the past five years and very difficult choices had to be made, but a great number of the difficulties have been reversed. We have new plans and strategies in place and, for the first time in the history of the country, there is a Minister of State sitting at Cabinet who has specific and total interdepartmental responsibility to deal with disability issues. I am quite happy to debate issues with anybody, but I also want fair play. I want people to recognise what the Government has done for people with disabilities. It is a work in progress. Rome was not built in a day; nothing ever is. It is a programme which involves incremental achievements. I have no doubt that if the Government lasts its full term, the lives of people with disabilities will be far better than they were when it came into being in 2016.

Senator Máire Devine: The Minister of State is trying to do something positive in bringing this strategy before the House. However, given the evidence of previous strategies, I remain to be convinced and I am unconvinced by it. The national disability inclusion strategy is, at best, a naive and half-hearted attempt to address the most serious issues facing people with disabilities. It shows little ambition to tackle the extent of the core issues in a professional and cohesive whole-of-government way. Senator Martin Conway spoke about need for time to facilitate the introduction of the legislative measures required to permit ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I respect him, his experience and story, but ten years is a long time to wait. To add insult to injury, the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill which is needed to ratify the UN convention is awaiting Committee Stage in the Dáil, yet the strategy indicates the timeframe as being 2017, of which three months remain. The Government is notorious for kicking legislation to touch. Therefore, I have zero confidence that the Bill will pass all Stages in the Dáil or the Seanad this year. The Minister of State confirmed this when he mentioned 2018 and my heart sank. Policies should be coupled with strong legislation. I am disappointed, therefore, that there is no new legislation on services for people with disabilities in the Government's autumn legislative programme.

The health (transport support) Bill is there but it has been on the legislative programme before and did not get anywhere. What is to say that it will not have the same fate this time? I fear this indicates that this strategy is another empty Government promise. One of the biggest omissions from the strategy is the lack of any real outline for reducing and ultimately eliminating poverty among disabled people. This is a huge issue and I do not understand how it could be left out of a strategy.

The CSO survey on income and living conditions published in February 2017 showed that 53% of people who are not in work due to a disability or illness experience enforced deprivation. The same survey showed that while there has been some improvement in overall general poverty rates in Ireland, it is worsening among those living with a disability. It is estimated that living with a disability in Ireland can bring extra costs of €276 weekly. The €5 increase in the disability allowance in the last budget was an insult to all those who cannot afford the basics and need to provide for extra costs on top of that. They have minimal opportunities for social inclusion.

I welcome the mention of social housing but sadly, there are no real action plans or timelines. Some 4,500 households that qualified for social housing in 2016, are linked to enduring

physical, sensory, mental health or physical disability. That is an increase of 13.7% on 2013 figures. These figures show that the last strategy failed completely and gives no weight or confidence to this renewed plan.

I am Sinn Féin's Seanad spokesperson on health and well-being and I am especially concerned about the weakness of section 8 which addresses transport needs. Access to transport can mean the difference between inclusion and exclusion for people with disabilities. Almost 50% of people living with a physical disability experience difficulty in just going outside the home. I acknowledge that this strategy commits to the improvement of both urban and rural transport and this is welcome, however it is cause for concern that no specific details are provided for many plans regarding how these goals will be achieved. It cannot be the case that the aims set out in this document fall to the same fate as the goals of the previous disability strategy. I urge the Minister of State to take seriously the issue of transport for those with a disability. I know too well the effects that social isolation has on individuals and communities and it would make a real difference if they were addressed by real positive changes in transport.

I congratulate the Disability Federation for its Make Way day which highlights obstacles and physical barriers to them participating in life that we take for granted. Our job in this House is to analyse and scrutinise legislation and to make statements, sometimes *ad nauseam*, on issues and with that comes the need to acknowledge positives, so it is great to see commitments on joined up working and collaboration, the promised review of make work pay proposals, the commitment to changing the model from one of care and dependency to one of support and independency, and a commitment to Irish Sign Language. The plan also makes commitments to further implementing existing employment strategies. Currently, 31% of working age people with a disability are at work compared with 71% of those without. We should be careful to ensure this must be fulfilling employment.

Inclusion Ireland has said that the plan is short on vision and does not go far enough to address the inequalities. The national disability inclusion strategy has been a long time in development and the final product covers a large number of actions aimed at promoting inclusion, however most of these are vague. Specific timeframes are needed to avoid the implementation failures of the last disability strategy.

The Minister of State referred to the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 and noted it was an major issue. We still await it. I was with an 18 year old young man who is disabled and in a wheelchair. He was in hospital after a shocking diagnosis. After many months, with beds needed in acute hospitals, the only thing that he was offered was a place in a nursing home. He has gone there now and it seems he will be there for the rest of his life. It has torn his family apart. There is nowhere else for them to go. He is only one of 1,200 younger people in nursing homes facing a very bleak future. That is a deprivation of liberty, lack of consent and it is a matter shame for us that we let it happen for the sake of funding home extensions or adaptations or practical community supports.

This is a very important period as the budget is coming up. There will be grappling for everything among everybody. The budget will be a litmus test of the Government's commitment to people with disabilities and I believe a large part of the available spending should go to seriously address the national issue of our disrespectful disgrace. I hope this strategy is the one that will deliver genuine positive change to the lives of those living with a disability but as it stands I will wait to congratulate the Minister of State.

Senator John Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State.

I thank the Leader for ensuring that this new strategy was on the clár on the first week the Seanad was back after recess. Regardless of our views on the strategy, that is a very important thing and I welcome it. I also welcome the initiatives, moves and improvements that have been made over the last year or so by the Minister of State.

He and the Government have mistakenly put their faith in this strategy. It is the road to further doom, gloom and loss of any hope for people with disabilities, more than 640,000 of them. There are serious and fatal fault lines in the design and make-up of the strategy. These can be addressed but I will first set them out.

First, page 1 of the strategy states that the enactment of new or amended legislation is required prior to the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. I am not confident that the Minister of State understands what ratification is about. It is simply about a Government having a programme of progressive realisation, progressive improvement for the UNCRPD. If we are fully compliant, we do not need the UN convention. If we have nothing to do towards it, we are there. We need to just get on with it and start doing the work.

Second, pages 2 and 3 of the strategy set out 13 initiatives that the Minister of State says will, in their cumulative effect, be life changing for very many people. Of these, six, almost half, are processes such as examining the recommendations of the make work pay working group with a view to their introduction, reviewing transport supports. We find the development of proposals are there twice and the development of a code of practice for support. These are planning and preparation tasks, they are not delivering for people. Showing people the menu when one has no food to give them is frankly misleading.

Third, post-ratification is mentioned twice on page 11 without any commitment to a date for ratification of the UN convention even in the 2021 deadline. Is this a misprint or an attempt to mislead? Did the Minister of State hear the following statement: “As a Government, we are renewing our commitment to ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities this year and to improving services available to people with disabilities”? That was said by our newly elected Taoiseach in the Dáil just after he said that the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath remains Minister with responsibility for disabilities across several Departments. Does the Minister of State not trust what the Taoiseach said in the Dáil? That was on 14 June. This strategy was published on 14 July and there is not a hint of that commitment in the strategy, high up or low down.

Fourth, there is an issue of trust and confidence between the Minister of State and some of those staff who advise him. In an interview with Áine Lawlor, the Minister of State said on RTE Radio One earlier this year that he was misled regarding the date for ratification. He said that when he came into Government, he was clearly misled regarding doing it in a shorter timeframe. Áine Lawlor then asked him who he had been misled by. He replied that people within the system told him that it would be done by Christmas. That was the Minister of State’s reply. As of now, the Minister of State has refused to put the Taoiseach’s commitment into this and furthermore, he has officials advising him whom he has stated publically he does not trust. I am now asking the Minister of State about what he has done regarding these officials who are known to him. Has he raised this matter with the Secretary General, the former Minister, Deputy Fitzgerald, or the current Minister, Deputy Flanagan? Why does this strategy not con-

tain the commitment given to the Dáil by An Taoiseach front and centre?

I will move to good news. This strategy is in need of what I call fairly major rehabilitation but it can be done successfully and quickly. The section on disability in Ireland on page 5 sets out a range of damning statistics outlining key challenges. Fair play for actually putting them upfront - poverty, unemployment and low participation in education. Yet those 1,200 young people living in nursing homes or the increase in the already high levels of social housing need do not figure. These are recent Government figures. The strategy demonstrates little or no ambition to address these critical matters. Ambitious outcomes for people's lives are not in this plan. What can be done and what is the solution? A couple of things can be done straight up. Let us take this document back, amend it, insert the Taoiseach's commitment to ratify, set out the extent to which services will be improved and place the Department of the Taoiseach at the centre of ensuring that this whole-of-Government strategy is ratified and implemented fully. Yes, there is a continuing and important role for the Department of Justice and Equality in terms of continuing necessary support.

Budget 2018 is critical to the other side - real and practical outcomes for people and key outcomes to be delivered. It is the third year of this Administration. The liberty of the forgotten 1,200 who have already been mentioned by Senator Devine is denied. They are deprived of it. We do not need to go to any barristers to sort that one out. We should take the funding that is going into keeping them in nursing homes and put it back in the community. They are already being funded to basically stay in captivity so we should ensure that not one more young person goes into a nursing home.

That is the first aspect. In parallel, we should commit to returning the 1,200 young people over the next three or four years on a phased basis in keeping with the convention. In respect of housing, we should commit on a phased yearly basis to provide social housing. I can name 800 people on the waiting list. Does the Minister of State know that the figure of €178 million that is being given back to people who paid their water charges would actually fund that? We should make the housing adaptation grant more available and accessible. There is a lot of talk about the restoration of pay. Let us have the restoration of income to people on means-tested payments - disability allowance, which has already been mentioned, to give them back the €1,047 they lost over the past five years. Surely to God, that has to be the first call on a Government that has a heart. These people were on means-tested incomes. In respect of employment, there is a strong commitment to move from 3% in the public sector to 6%. I note that the conclusion date for that is out to 2024, which is a long time away.

The priority in the budget can be and needs to be disability inclusion. Responsibility for addressing these issues impacting on people with disabilities rests first and foremost with An Taoiseach, Ministers and the budget. The budget needs to be a game-changer. I know so well that the Minister of State wants this strategy to work. Everybody else wants it to work. I am sad to say that as it is, it will simply flounder.

I have one question for the Minister of State. Could he tell us when he first saw the Attorney General's advice or when the Attorney General's advice was sought as to how the process of ratification could be accelerated?

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. It is a particular pleasure given that in all his years in public life, he has been a passionate advocate for persons with disabilities. Now he is a very proactive Minister of State who has hit the ground running

and is getting results in this sector. We now believe we have a Minister in place who has a true passion for and a real belief in the importance of his work. I know this from private meetings with him and groups and from a tour of my constituency where we visited special centres. The Minister of State knows what he is doing and cares about it.

I welcome the national disability inclusion strategy. It is an excellent holistic document with very good aims and ambitions and realistic ambitions that will be acted on. I will focus on a few aspects of the strategy and a few areas I am concerned about. The ambition to increase employment in the public sector to 6% is hugely welcome. I have anecdotal evidence that in some instances, local authorities and various bodies have been including people who get sick within their organisations in their disability quotas. As people naturally get various illnesses, these bodies have been distorting the figures that way. Quotas should be used in addition to dealing with internal matters. Could the Minister of State address that matter? I have good evidence to support that and I will discuss it privately with the Minister of State if he wishes. I would like to see some action on that.

I am delighted that we have the employment support schemes and the grants for employers for adaptations. I am afraid that they are not universally known, are not marketed adequately and that there is insufficient buy-in by employers. I know a large number of employers who are not employing people with disabilities when their jobs would lend themselves to employing them. More needs to be done to advertise, push out and market those schemes and to get employers to buy in. Perhaps more personnel are needed on the ground to call in to employers. As a public representative dealing with issues like this on the ground, I think it is not functioning adequately. There is much more potential within the private sector than is being realised. It merits mentioning that the income of disabled persons is less than half the income *per capita* of people without a disability. This is hardly acceptable.

Another aspect of the strategy came up at a meeting I attended last night which I would like the Minister of State to address in his reply and take on board. I recall that during his visit to my county of Cavan, he discussed this on a number of occasions. The issue concerns waiting lists for assessment for children with special educational needs and others. At a party meeting in Cavan last night, a woman said publically that it took her four years to access occupational therapy services for her child. This is a horror. The Minister of State is right to be appalled by that because it is appalling. If there is that kind of wait for occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and indeed assessment, the intervening period amounts to a lost number of years in terms of intervention. Any of us who have taught, and the Minister of State is a teacher by profession, know that the earlier the intervention the better.

I am not happy with the number of persons with disabilities, at a quarter of the total number, going to third level. It is impressive in one way but it is way below the rest of the population. It needs addressing in every proactive way that we can.

I have discussed the following matter privately with the Minister of State. I had an excellent meeting with the Cavan-Monaghan deaf persons grouping for those experiencing deafness and their families. Arising from that, I had a couple of meetings with the Minister of State. I am delighted that in the 2018 budget there is a commitment of funding for sign language interpreters and for quality assurance in that sphere. I am delighted that we could get funding and make progress on that and I ask the Minister of State to elaborate on that in his reply.

I would like to see more done in the area of carers and home care packages. I believe there

is much more potential here to keep people out of institutional care than is being realised. There is a cost issue and it was correctly alluded to by Senator Dolan and others. Home is also where people want to be, which is the critical issue, but it is also less expensive to keep people out of institutional care.

I support the view that we can do more in the adaption grant area, although my personal experience in my county of the housing adaption grants has been quite positive and they have done a lot of great work there. Any more potential that could be there should be realised to ensure people are able to live in their own homes.

Lastly, Senator Dolan has a view in relation to the convention. I am very conversant with this through my work in the Council of Europe. It is the practice in quite a number of European states to ratify conventions in advance. They ratify the convention and one thinks all is hunky-dory, but, in fact, nothing is done. We have a tradition in Ireland, not only in relation to this convention but to a lot of conventions, of realising the targets and subsequently ratifying when we have shown earnest and good intent and proper action. My contention is that the Irish position is correct. It is better. There are a number of states in Europe which ratify conventions and then one hears anecdotal evidence from their parliamentarians and reports that nothing has happened on the ground. That is far more reprehensible. I would slightly take issue with my good friend, Senator Dolan's, view, while I note his sincerity. Let us get the blocks in place, let us do the work and then the ratifications and celebrations can take place. In my humble opinion, it is actuality we want and real results for people.

Acting Chairman (Senator Michelle Mulherin): Before I call on the Minister of State to respond, I would like to say I had hoped I would be down in the Chamber myself and in a position to address him. I am limited in what I can say here. I will raise issues, particularly in the area of persons with intellectual disabilities, with him again. The Minister of State came to the Chamber to reply to a Commencement Matter in my name where there was a problem with adults with intellectual disabilities accessing services in the Ballina area. Indeed, one individual had been waiting several years. There was some movement and that movement seems to have stopped. I would ask the Minister of State to have a look at it again.

On one other point, in the same vein that Senator Boyhan alluded to, which is the issue of persons with intellectual disabilities who have grown up in institutions being forced into community settings, there needs to be more consideration of the feelings of the individuals and the individual impacts because community settings are not suitable for some who have been institutionalised all their lives and are happy in that setting. That needs to be acknowledged by the experts. I say that having worked with persons with intellectual disabilities in an institutional setting for a time.

I have probably gone further than I should. I will get to speak to the Minister of State again. I call on him to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank the Acting Chairman. I am happy to meet any Senator on any of these issues. Any of the Senators would know for the last year and a half that, as Minister, my door is open.

I sincerely thank the Senators for their contributions to the debate today, and particularly for their interest. It is genuine interest, as I know from talking to them privately, in advancing the position of those with disabilities in Irish society.

In relation to their concerns, I am on the same page. Of course, they have genuine concerns about the implementation but, as far as I am concerned, I will give them a commitment it is full steam ahead on this national disability strategy.

We are making real progress on the implementation of the disability strategy and in addition to the various matters I mentioned earlier, I might add that the Department of Justice and Equality has taken responsibility for setting up two subgroups to look at the number of issues key to the implementation of the strategy. The first group will develop proposals to address access to and affordability of necessary aids and appliances or assisted technologies required for everyday living for those persons with disabilities whose entry, retention or return to work could be jeopardised due to being unable to afford these items. The second group will conduct a review of transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for persons with disabilities. These are issues the Senators have all raised today in their contributions.

I will respond to individual Senators. Senator Keith Swanick focused on the ability to deliver on the issue of the UN convention. Senator Boyhan quoted me voicing my frustration at the delays in the final ratification of the UN convention. However, one also must accept that the Government is doing a lot in relation to disability services. I was at a conference on special education in Carlow on Friday last and €1.68 billion is being put into special education services for children with disabilities in the primary and secondary schools. On our social care disability plan, there is €1.588 billion in HSE services. As I stated, that involved an extra €92 million. During the year, we had the restoration of the carer's grant, which is €1,700 per family, and 121,000 families are now collecting that grant which is not means-tested. Then there are the 10,000 children on a medical card for children on the domiciliary care allowance. A number of Senators mentioned housing adaptation. Last week, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, announced an extra €12 million for housing adaptation grants. Finally, there is the €10 million programme that I announced on Friday last for young people, to try to get them into employment. What I am saying is there is a lot to be done but there also has been a hell of a lot going on over the past 12 months. It is wrong to say that nothing is going on.

My frustration, to respond to Senator Boyhan, relates to moving matters along and implementing them. I am trying to ensure that these issues are moving along. I have come from a meeting with the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, on the points Senator Dolan raised about housing. It is a scandal, and it is unacceptable, to have young people in a nursing home. I accept that. There is no row about that. I listened to the ideas of Senator Dolan, particularly as he is a member of the steering group on the implementation of the decision support service as well. What I am saying is we are trying to drive those kind of issues.

I will be straight about the UN convention. For the last number of months, we meet every week. All of the Departments, including Health and Justice and Equality, are involved. The Department of the Taoiseach is involved. I am in regular contact with the Attorney General on all the issues.

Over the summer period, we made major progress. For example, we had a job getting the person to fill the job of director of the decision support service. It was advertised. I sent it out there to every disability group in Ireland and let them know about it. Eventually, we got the director and she will be starting on 1 October. That is an important part of the UN convention. What I am saying is we are making progress.

The legislation is slow. I expect some movement over the next week or two, and that is why I am holding back. I do not want to say something in the Chamber here tonight and then, all of a sudden, it will be held up for another two weeks. I am not going down that road. I made that mistake in the past and I put my hands up. Of course, the end of this year is my clear target. The Taoiseach and I are on the same page in that regard. We are trying to drive this but on issues such as the deprivation of liberty, it is difficult. I am just making that point.

On the other issues raised, Senator Conway made the important point that the new Seanad Chamber is more friendly for the visually impaired. I commend Senator Conway. I always listen to what the Senator says because he means it from the heart and he also has an ambition of improving the services, and also attitudes in the broader society for all those with disabilities.

Senator Devine harped on about the convention. The Senator should keep harping on.

Senator Máire Devine: Did the Minister of State say I harped on about it?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Yes. The Senator should keep plugging that issue because I will also need support.

Acting Chairman (Senator Michelle Mulherin): It is a compliment.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is a compliment.

I do not agree with the comments of Senator Dolan in relation to doom and gloom. There is much to do but we are doing a lot of work and keep harping on about it. We will get on with it. The Taoiseach's Department is very involved and it is very important that we keep that focus on it.

Senator O'Reilly mentioned a number of important matters such as employment figures and their distortion. We will discuss that on Friday at the group. There are concerns and I also have fears in that regard. I will tackle that head-on on Friday because there are serious questions in that regard. We are talking about new jobs and the employment of persons with disabilities and not positions where people are out sick. The Senator also mentioned the issue of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and so on. When I had my first meeting a few weeks ago with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, therapies, emergency cases, emergency residential care and so on were on my list. I am pushing those issues. The Senator mentioned the issue of third level. It is very important that is developed. Trinity College Dublin is developing fantastic education programmes for young people with disabilities. I have been to Trinity College on several occasions over the past 12 months, meeting the students. I attended a very interesting conference there last week which involved 150 young people with disabilities attending courses. There are also radical new arts programmes for people with disabilities.

I thank Senator Mark Daly and other Senators for their support on Irish Sign Language. We are near the end of the process in that regard. It is very important that we ensure it is moved forward. There was a delay in regard to some of the talks but Senator Mark Daly and Department officials have worked very hard over the summer and an agreed suite of amendments is to be presented on Report Stage so the Bill can be signed into law by the President before the end of the year. That has taken a lot of work, is very valuable and will make a difference to the deaf community. The issue was also raised by Senator Conway. It also meets the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is important that is said.

Did I leave out any Senators?

Senator John Dolan: The Minister of State did not answer my questions.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I will revert to Senators whose questions I did not address. I thank the House for the opportunity to address it and I look forward to being back here in a few weeks' time to discuss the Irish Sign Language issues and the details.

A Senator mentioned a conference at the weekend and it was said that I do not care enough for persons with a disability. I totally reject that criticism. I have three objectives in my policy, strategy and vision for people with disabilities. First, I want to reform services; second, I want to invest in services; and third, and most importantly, I want all future services to be designed for people with disabilities. I mentioned the task force but many other things are also taking place. Senators mentioned different services and there are many currently available. I mentioned the €1.688 billion being spent on services and the increase of €92 million. There are problems and I accept Senators' criticism in that regard. There are also problems in regard to money. Parents of children with disabilities have told me that money is not being spent in the proper way. I want to examine that issue because between 8% and 14% of those with disabilities are open to the idea of personalised budgets. Families have also told me that while the service being provided to them might cost €60,000 to €70,000 per year, they have suggestions for a more effective and local service. We are considering that.

Several Senators mentioned congregated settings. It is important to recognise that there is a choice. So far in 2017 we have bought 50 houses in the community. Four adults with an intellectual disability or some form of disability will live in a house. I want to do more and am looking for more money but we have started the process. In response to the point made by Senator Boyhan, the process has to be in consultation with those with disabilities and their families. Many are very excited about this. I was in a couple of residential services over the summer where I met young people in their 30s or 40s who kept asking the staff when they would be moving to their new house. That is going on but I absolutely want to do more.

In regard to the transport support scheme, 4,700 people are still getting the monthly payment of €208 while the Government is trying to progress the health (transport support) Bill. Negotiations are ongoing between me and the Departments of Health and Public Expenditure and Reform. There is a slight disagreement on the figures. One set of negotiators believes the Bill could cost €80 million while other believes it will be far cheaper. That is a broad summary. I am pushing that issue.

I thank Senators for their support. If Senators wish to raise any individual issues or any persons with disabilities or their families or friends want to meet me, they are always welcome in my office.

Senator Keith Swanick: Will the Minister of State keep Members of both Houses updated in regard to progress on signing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I apologise; I did not hear the Senator's question.

Senator Keith Swanick: Will the Minister of State keep Members of both Houses updated in regard to progress on signing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I will give Members a written update on the issues involved.

If Senators want me to come back to the House for further discussion of the issue, I would be delighted to do so.

Senator Keith Swanick: I thank the Minister of State.

Senator Martin Conway: I am privileged that tomorrow I will launch a report on the economic cost of sight loss, carried out by the National Council of the Blind and the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. I meant to mention the extra cost burden on those with sight loss who engage and are part of the workforce. The Minister of State should consider that issue.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Senator.

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

Senator Martin Conway: At 10.30 a.m. tomorrow.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.40 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 September 2017.