



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

Business of Seanad	192
Commencement Matters	193
Agriculture Schemes	194
Water and Sewerage Schemes Funding	196
Water Services Funding	198
Respite Care Services Provision	200
Order of Business	202
Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2017: Referral to Joint Committee	217
The Diaspora: Statements	217
Housing and Rental Market: Statements	237

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 14 Samhain 2017

Tuesday, 14 November 2017

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline the plans he has, if any, to amend the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS II, to include funding for generators for agricultural use.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to confirm whether the Milltown sewerage scheme will receive the funding necessary to commence in 2018.

I have also received notice from Senator Rose Conway-Walsh that she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to provide an update on how he intends to implement recommendation 6.1 of the report of the Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services that equality be afforded to those on private and group schemes.

I have also received notice from Senator Colm Burke that he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the action proposed to make the nine respite beds at Fermoy Community Hospital fully operational.

I have also received notice from Senator Aidan Davitt that he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to ad-

14 November 2017

dress the direct threats to Irish foreign direct investment and jobs growth due to domestic policy decisions, the housing crisis and the current planning process system that are making Ireland an uncompetitive jurisdiction for retaining our current foreign direct investment footprint and attracting new investment.

I have also received notice from Senator Maria Byrne that she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to provide emergency funding for the repair of the Olympic Swimming Pool in the University of Limerick.

I have also received notice from Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill that he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to legislate in order to provide for timely responses, consistency across local authorities and substance in answers given to representations made by local elected representatives to their respective local authorities.

I have also received notice from Senator Máire Devine that she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for Mental Health and Older People to give an outline of his plans for a national telephone helpline for mental health.

I have also received notice from Senator Paul Gavan that he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister of State with special responsibility for Defence to address the amount of money being spent on the purchase of new ships for the Irish Naval Service.

I have also received notice from Senator Frank Feighan that he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection to outline the number of former miners who worked in Arigna and in other mines who have availed of disablement benefit due to work-related illness; and whether there are enough resources currently available to expedite existing applications from former miners seeking disablement benefit.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Lombard, Conway-Walsh and Burke and they will be taken now. I regret that I have had to rule out of order the matters raised by Senator Ó Domhnaill, on the grounds that the matter is an operational issue and the Minister has no official responsibility on the matter. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Commencement Matters

Seanad Éireann
Agriculture Schemes

An Cathaoirleach: The first matter is raised by Senator Tim Lombard. You have four minutes. I welcome the Minister of State to the House. Tá fáilte romhat.

Senator Tim Lombard: I thank the Minister of State and the Chair. Today I raise the matter of having the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme, known as TAMS II, include the generation capacity that is required for farmyards. As the Minister of State is aware, TAMS II has been a very successful scheme. It provided important funding for farm equipment in order to ensure expansion. Under the dairy equipment scheme, TAMS II has funded milking parlours, milk cooling equipment, water heating, and also in-parlour feeding systems. The anomaly in the system, unfortunately, is generation capacity, which is required when or if there is an outage of power.

In the middle of October this year, we had a weather event which was amazing in so many ways. The south west of Ireland was greatly affected. At one stage, 385,000 were without power. This included farms, businesses and the wider members of the public. The knock-on effect that had on the agricultural community was immense. There has been a large expansion in agriculture, particularly in the dairy herd. Over the last four years the number of dairy cows has increased by 300,000 to 1.4 million. With such a large expansion, there has been a major increase in plant size and capacity. Milking parlours and bulk tanks have all been expanded. At the back of that, the one thing that has not increased is the generating capacity. The hardship that farmers and animals went through during this unfortunate weather event was immense. It took ten days for some of these areas to have power again.

In many ways, for those of us that were affected, it is very hard to describe. There were situations where generators were being moved continuously in order that cows could be milked at least once a day. There was an article in the *Southern Star* a few weeks ago describing how one man milked 1,200 cows, moving a generator seven times in a 24-hour period. That was the level of work required to ensure that his cows, or the cows in his community were milked. People worked together.

What I am seeking here today is that TAMS II should be amended to include generators. Generators are a huge part of the industry. We have seen a deficit in generating capacity. TAMS II allows for so many things to help the agriculture industry to expand. I have mentioned milking parlours, cooling systems, store equipment, water heating and in-parlour feeding systems. It is certain that the anomaly is the lack of generation. We need to include that as an important part, so that the industry that is worth billions to us and to this economy can develop. It is, in many ways, the last piece of the jigsaw. I hope today that we can put on the agenda that the Minister of State can review TAMS II, to ensure the anomaly can be addressed, and that the generating capacity shortfall in the dairy industry, that unfortunately we have all seen, can be addressed as well. I thank the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank Senator Lombard for raising this matter and welcome the opportunity to outline the position regarding TAMS, known as TAMS II.

During 2015, a suite of six measures were announced under TAMS II. These measures were

launched under the Rural Development Programme 2014 to 2020 and are co-funded under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD. The measures provide grants for capital investment in physical assets to assist the Irish agriculture sector to respond to a range of policy challenges. The six measures initially launched were: the young farmers capital investment scheme; the dairy equipment scheme, the organic capital investment scheme, the animal welfare, safety and nutrient storage scheme; the low emission slurry spreading scheme, and the pig and poultry investment scheme.

Among the objectives of the scheme are to enable growth and competitiveness in the sector, addressing environmental and climate change issues, supporting the increased efficiency on holdings and improving animal health and welfare.

In addition to these objectives, the young farmers capital investment scheme aims to address one of the key structural issues in the sector by specifically targeting support at young trained farmers by offering them a higher rate of grant aid of 60% compared to the standard rate of 40%. In March of this year an additional measure, the tillage capital investment scheme, was added to the list of measures. One of the objectives of this scheme is to facilitate the tillage sector to develop a targeted and precise approach focusing on environmental dividends, efficiency and growth.

There is a huge variety of items available under the suite of seven TAMS II measures. As in all measures, applications and payment claims must be made online, either by the farmer or by an adviser authorised to act on their behalf. The financial allocation in respect of TAMS II for the full Rural Development Plan period will be in the region of €395 million. In order to encourage the drawdown of funding, provide increased budget certainty and to ensure that all farmers can avail of funding over the entire period of the Rural Development Programme, the length of time in which to undertake the works approved under the sixth tranche onwards was reduced from the three-year period in previous tranches to six months for mobile equipment and 12 months for fixed building works. The period for the completion of works approved or to be approved under previous tranches remains unchanged.

I am delighted that the scheme has proved to be so popular with Irish farmers with over 15,000 applications submitted to date. Of these, over 11,500 or over 75% have been approved to commence work. Approvals issue on an ongoing basis with approvals under the most recent tranche due to commence shortly. The figures are much lower, however, when it comes to submission of payment claims by farmers. It is open to approved applicants to submit an online payment claim as soon as they are in a position to do so. The timing of the submission of a payment claim, within the approved deadline, is entirely a matter for the individual farmer and it is up to them when they carry out the approved works. To date, only 2,670 payment claims have been submitted. The Department has actively encouraged all approved applicants to submit payment claims, including by contacting approved applicants individually by text message. I would urge all approved applicants who have completed their works to submit a payment claim as soon as they are in a position to do so.

To date, payments have issued to just under 2,000 cases amounting to over €27.8 million. Payment claims submitted are examined and paid as soon as possible after they have been submitted. Where issues arise with a payment claim the applicant concerned is contacted directly by the Department to resolve outstanding issues. All 11,500 approvals issued represent potential outstanding liabilities for the Department. As regards the addition of generators or any other investment, it is simply the case that until the existing approvals mature to payment stage

or the timeframe of the approval expires, then we must wait and maintain a budgetary provision to make payments. There is a commitment which we have made to farmers under the scheme and it is our full intention to honour this commitment.

At this point in time I am not in a position to add generators to the comprehensive list of investment items already approved under the suite of seven existing TAMS measures. I do appreciate the logic behind the Senator's case but I hope he will appreciate that until we know where we stand with the budget commitments, it is very difficult to commit to anything further.

Senator Tim Lombard: I will be very brief as the Minister of State spoke very comprehensively on the issue. It is amazing that out of 11,500 applications only 2,650 have submitted payment claims and only 2,000 have been paid. That suggests to me that by the end of the scheme not all of the 11,500 applicants might be looking for payment as they might not go ahead with the work as they could have changed their mind due to finance or a myriad of issues. In that scenario would the Minister consider adding generators? A suite of measures has been granted but there has been a failure to grant the back-up measure which is key to ensuring that the industry which is so vital can develop.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: As I said, a total of €395 million has been allocated for the scheme. Senator Lombard has seen for himself the very low rate of claims for payments submitted so far amounting to €27.8 million, which is less than 10% of the full allocation. The reason for changing from three years to one year was to try to speed it up so that there would be a more real-time assessment. Until we get to that point it will be difficult to commit but it is intended that the money will be spent. In future, there may well be an opportunity to revise the scheme further.

Water and Sewerage Schemes Funding

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Aire Stáit go dtí an Teach tráthnóna inniu. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy John Paul Phelan. He is very welcome to the House. I thank him for his presence. I wish to raise with him the Milltown group sewerage scheme which is located outside Monaghan town. I raised the issue with his colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, earlier in the year. We were hopeful the announcement would be made before the end of the current year, 2017. Milltown was one of six schemes identified for funding under the multi-annual programme 2016 to 2018. What we are dealing with here is a cluster of approximately 30 septic tanks that are causing some environmental issues and are a cause of concern. The case has been proven and it has been submitted to the Department, which is fully aware of the situation. In order for the scheme to proceed it is vital that 90% funding is secured. Otherwise, the scheme will not go ahead. Earlier in the year the Minister of State, Deputy English, gave a verbal commitment when he was in the House that that would be the case.

I commend the residents of the Milltown area on the significant work they have put into getting to this point. The work they had to do was exhausting and onerous. I acknowledge the contribution of Monaghan County Council in that regard also. What we are seeking this afternoon is an announcement from the Minister of State that the 90% funding has been ring-fenced and secured for this project and that the work will commence in 2018.

There are two other issues on which I would like the Minister of State to comment briefly, if he does not mind. First, could he or his Department indicate when the next scheme will com-

mence? The current one expires in 2018. Has he any proposal to announce a new one for 2018 onwards? I hope there will be an increase in the number of successful applicants. As he knows, only six schemes have been funded in the entire State over the past three years. This is a very low number. We are all conscious of the issues that septic tanks can cause for the environment.

Second, the scheme is very onerous on residents and communities. A considerable amount of work is involved for them in submitting an application. Those concerned have to form companies, become company directors and hire engineers. It is very onerous and unfair on people whose skills might not lie in this area. I would like to believe that, in the future, the relevant local authority will be funded and that it will manage the entire project from start to finish.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I thank the Senator. I am answering on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. With regard to his two final points, on a new scheme and the make-up of the current one, there are no firm proposals yet but the Department will be considering how the scheme worked and examining factors that the Senator mentioned, such as the workload for local communities before making any announcement on whether there will be a renewal.

The Department's new multi-annual rural water programme for the period 2016 to 2018 includes funding of group sewerage schemes through measure 4(d) where clustering of households on individual septic tanks is not a viable option, particularly from an environmental perspective. In 2015, the Department received sanction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to increase the maximum grant per household to €6,750, up from €6,500, to cover a limited number of new demonstration group sewerage schemes — two per year. In addition, sanction was given for these new demonstration group sewerage schemes in exceptional circumstances to avail of a supplemental grant subject to the Department's approval where the project represents the most economically advantageous option. Where a supplemental grant is approved, the overall funding from the rural water programme is limited to 90% of the cost per house, subject to a minimum contribution of €2,250 per house.

In January 2016, local authorities were invited to submit bids for consideration by the Department under the new multi-annual water programme for the period 2016 to 2018. In total, 83 bids were received from 17 local authorities for funding under measure 4(d) of the new programme. The proposed Milltown group sewerage scheme was included by Monaghan County Council in its funding bids under the new measure. The proposed scheme, with a then estimated cost of €280,000, was expected to cover 32 houses and have a unit cost of €8,750 per house. I understand that the Milltown group sewerage scheme proceeded to tender stage in 2016, with an estimated overall cost of €358,000, to cover 30 houses, giving a unit cost of €11,933 per house.

Under the new multi-annual funding framework, an expert panel was convened by the Department to examine the 2016 bids from local authorities for projects under a number of the programme's measures, including measure 4(d), and to make recommendations to the Department on funding. The panel recommended a priority list to the Department under this measure, including the Milltown scheme, at priority 5. The Department accepted the recommendations in full when approving schemes under the new programme and making funding allocations for 2016. As only two demonstration group sewerage schemes can be advanced in any given year, funding was not available to Monaghan County Council for the Milltown scheme in 2016 or 2017. The Department intends to make funding allocations under the programme to local authorities for 2018 early in the new year. Monaghan County Council will be advised on funding

for the Milltown scheme at that point.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for his response to the question. I stress again the importance of an announcement early in the new year to facilitate the residents in going ahead with the works involved.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: Where is Milltown?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: It is on the outskirts of Monaghan town.

The Minister of State mentioned at the outset that the Department would be considering new proposals in assessing how the scheme has worked to date. I ask again that he take into consideration that the responsibilities local communities must undertake and submit in the application in order to qualify are quite onerous. That is something that needs to be looked at.

Of course, I would like to see an increase in funding so that more groups could apply. The Minister of State said in his response that 17 local authorities applied. Only six were successful. It clearly shows that we have a problem with septic tanks that needs to be addressed.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I will bring back those points. They are fair and we could all agree with them.

Water Services Funding

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy John Paul Phelan, for coming into the House to update us on the Government's plans to provide equity and fairness for group water schemes.

The lack of information on this issue has been frustrating for those in group water schemes. At a time when Irish Water is actively informing all those who are due refunds, there is little detail available regarding how equality for other water users can be achieved. I am hosting a public meeting later this week in Mayo on the issue which reflects the frustration of those who do not yet know how their access to water will be provided and how it will be funded into the future. Even when the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, was introducing the Water Services Bill in the Dáil, he noted that the legislation provides clarity on public water and wastewater services but that there is still some distance to go in achieving clarity for the group water schemes.

As the Minister of State will be aware, the Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services reported earlier this year and stated that the committee recommends that the principles of equity of treatment and equivalent financial support should be applied equally between households on public water supplies and those on group water schemes, group sewerage schemes and those using domestic wastewater treatment systems and individual domestic water supplies. It is not good enough that many low-income households in rural Ireland have to continue to pay twice for water as matters currently stand. I ask why such a key recommendation of both the expert report and the Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services has not yet been implemented. The legislation being put forward at present should have included, as my colleague, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, stated, provision for group water schemes.

The key difference is that group water schemes receive an annual subsidy of €70 per household but it does not cover the full annual cost of accessing the water supply. Those connected to a public water supply who are currently customers of Irish Water do not pay an annual charge for accessing that supply and equity would mean that the State would cover the full annual cost of the group water scheme users accessing the water supply.

The submission of the National Federation of Group Water Schemes to the special committee showed the experience and extraordinary voluntary effort that goes into every scheme and this is often neglected in the debate around the water supply. These are friends and neighbours. They are not debt collectors. They have all of their own issues, their own household bills, their own health concerns, etc. These are volunteers and they find it increasingly difficult to collect payment for what is an essential service which should be supplied.

Another important matter is the need for a proper timely programme to be put in place to facilitate the takeover of schemes. This currently takes far too long and the schemes are left in doubt as to when the necessary upgrades and takeovers will happen. There is a need for clarity around that as well.

How far progressed is the review process on the subsidy and will the Exchequer funding in the form of subsidy payments be reflected in the provision of water to households on group water schemes in the same manner as the rest of the country out of general taxation? If the only clarity to come out of the Water Services Bill is that water is now paid for through general taxation, it is only fair to ask for the same regime to apply right across the State.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I thank Senator Conway-Walsh for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of my colleague, the Minister, Eoghan Murphy, who could not make it to the Chamber today.

Group water schemes is an issue close to my own heart. My late father was a founder member of the group scheme in our area, along with another local man. Both have gone to their eternal reward at this stage.

In regard to the specific question asked, in recommendation 6.1 of its report the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services recommended that the principles of equity of treatment and equivalent financial support should be applied equally between households on public water supplies and those in group water schemes and group sewerage schemes, those using domestic wastewater treatment systems and those using individual water supplies. It also recommended that the Department conduct a review, in co-ordination with the National Federation of Group Water Schemes and other relevant stakeholders, to quantify what additional investment will be required to equalise treatment between those availing of domestic water services and those availing of private services. It recommended that, following this review, identified investment should be provided.

I am happy to inform the Senator that the Department has already engaged informally with the National Federation of Group Water Schemes regarding the committee's recommendation for equal treatment for households on group schemes. The Water Services Bill 2017 is currently being considered by this House. Once the Bill is enacted, a working group involving the National Federation of Group Water Schemes and other relevant stakeholders will be formally established to advance the recommendation of the Oireachtas joint committee.

The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is committed to holding this review and to ensur-

ing we have a vibrant, sustainable future for the group water sector. The Minister assured the National Federation of Group Water Schemes of this when he recently met it and also when he addressed the recent rural water services conference. It is also worth highlighting that since domestic water charges for Irish Water customers were suspended, the operational subsidy provided by the Department to group water schemes has been restored to pre-2015 levels.

It is important to note that funding is currently provided to the group water schemes either through subsidy or capital grant, and this is provided for by section 16 of the Water Services Act 2007. Within this framework, the precise subsidy and grant arrangements, and associated eligibility, are set out in departmental circulars. Therefore, no legislation is required to change either the subsidy arrangements or the grant provisions.

To ensure a vibrant future, the rural water sector requires clear funding and governance structures and it was for this reason that the Government reformed the way it funds the sector. The aim of the new multiannual rural water programme 2016-18, with its more scheme-based or project-based approach, is to provide enhanced funding certainty for priority investment needs in the sector. This year, the Department allocated €17.8 million in funding for the rural water programme. In addition to this capital investment, the Department is providing operational subsidies to the group water sector and an amount of some €20.5 million is being provided in 2017. The Department is also engaging with the sector on an ongoing basis on a range of other issues, including improving water quality, supporting a viable future for the sector and facilitating a strong voice for the sector in the national dialogue on water issues. I can assure the Senator that this active engagement with the sector will continue into the future.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I welcome the initiatives that are being taken in terms of the discussions that are ongoing and the formal group that will be set up. It is very important there is ongoing communication with the volunteers on the group water schemes so they know what is happening and that there is also a line of information to the local authorities so they are able, in particular, to facilitate those schemes that want a takeover and to ensure the investment is available.

I am glad to know that a change in legislation is not required and that, therefore, all it takes is a budget allocation or an allocation to make sure the funding is there for the schemes that needed to be upgraded, so they can be taken over in a timely manner. I ask that the Minister of State keeps this front and centre of all the discussions around water so people in rural Ireland have equity around this very important issue.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I assure the Senator that as long as I am in this office and dealing with the Department in regard to group water schemes, while it is not my direct responsibility, this will have an advocate in me because I know the work that goes into maintaining these group schemes.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister of State.

Respite Care Services Provision

Senator Colm Burke: I raise this issue in the context of Fermoy Community Hospital. While this facility is not in my own area of Cork North-Central, it does in fact accommodate some patients from that area for respite care. I understand that there are nine respite beds avail-

able in the hospital but that difficulties have arisen around GP cover there. I know that the hospital and the HSE have done everything possible to get new GPs on board, but what seems to have happened is that GPs who had been providing back-up support in the hospital have since retired.

The availability of respite care is extremely important both for elderly people and for families who are providing care at home and who need a break from this work that they are doing on a voluntary basis. I understand that a restriction was placed on the use of the facility and I would like to hear what efforts are being made to bring it back into full use and make the services there fully available to the people of Cork East and indeed of parts of Cork North-Central.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank Senator Colm Burke for raising this very important health issue. I am taking this matter on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Jim Daly, Minister of State with special responsibility for mental health and older people. The overarching policy of the Government is to support older people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. This is clearly what older people want and only those in genuine need of residential care should go down that route. Short-term beds including respite and rehabilitation beds contribute to the provision of an integrated model of care for older people enabling them to return home following a period of hospital care or postponing admission to long-stay residential care.

The Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of health and personal social services, including those at facilities such as St. Patrick's Community Hospital, Fermoy. St. Patrick's provides long-term, respite, convalescent and palliative care. It was registered with the Health Information and Quality Authority on 28 June 2015 for a period of three years. The hospital normally caters for people over 65 years of age but also provides care to a number of young chronically ill sick patients and palliative care to adults. These are important services.

The Senator will be aware that the five-year capital programme announced last year includes refurbishment works at St. Patrick's Community Hospital. Challenges have emerged in the last few months, however, in respect of medical cover at the hospital which is provided by three local GP practices. One practice provides this service three days a week. The remaining two practices provide the service on the fourth and fifth days. Following the resignation of a medical officer in 2017, the Health Service Executive managed, with great difficulty, to engage another GP to provide the service. However, in September 2017 a second medical officer retired. Despite strenuous efforts to engage another GP in the area the HSE, unfortunately, has been unable to source GP cover for the fifth day. This is the core problem. Contact was made with GPs in and around Fermoy and as far as Glanmire and a general email to all GPs in the GP training scheme was also sent out through UCC. To date, no GP has expressed an interest in the post as they are unable to commit to the time involved due to the demands in their own practices. Nor has the HSE been able to get agency cover.

The HSE has assured the Department of Health that efforts are continuing to source a GP. In order to protect the 54 long-stay beds, respite service affecting nine beds in Fermoy has been curtailed for the moment. This service is now being provided by local nursing homes. The local public health nurse is liaising with families to accommodate their relatives in alternative facilities while efforts are ongoing to source GP cover. The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, has asked me to reassure Senator Burke that the officials from the Department will continue to monitor this position carefully and I have asked the HSE to keep me updated on progress. I will bring the Senator's concerns back to the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, as well.

Senator Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. This is a major challenge. There are nine respite beds not in full use. I am not clear about it but I know some people have had to transfer to Mallow and other areas for respite care. It must be prioritised. We are facing into the winter season and families face major challenges now. It is important that the respite facility that was there is restored. Is whatever is being offered to GPs to provide that cover adequate? Perhaps we should review why we can only get GPs for five days and how we can cover the final two days. It must be given priority because we cannot afford for this service to be curtailed in any way, especially with the large number of elderly people in the area, right up to Cork city. People are being looked after by their own families and they need a level of support. It is very important that we prioritise this.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank Senator Colm Burke and I agree that it is a major challenge. We must consider this matter in Fermoy seriously. The Senator raised the point about respite care, and that is something the Government must prioritise, particularly in the severe and cold winter months. I reassure the Senator that while there is a crisis, cover comes from local nursing homes. I agree that we must examine this as a priority.

I will bring the Senator's other point back to the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly. It considers why it is difficult to get GPs, particularly on the fifth day. We must think about this as there is a broader debate in my Department about social care workers; I want to ensure there are well-paid, high-quality social care personnel working with people with disabilities. The same idea applies here. Is there an issue with payments or cover? I do not know the details but we must find out and see if the position can be improved. On a positive note, the local health nurse will work very closely with families in the local area to try to accommodate people and bring up alternative facilities. In the meantime, I will bring the Senator's concerns straight to the Minister of State.

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

Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion re the horse and greyhound racing fund regulations 2017, referral to committee, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, statements on the diaspora, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude no later than 6.15 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no fewer than five minutes to reply; and No. 3, statements on the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government entitled, The Impact of Short Term Lettings on Ireland's Housing and Rental Market, to be taken at 6.15 p.m. and to conclude no later than 8.15 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no fewer than five minutes to reply.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome Mr. Barry O'Brien to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. He is a personal friend of our esteemed Leader and is more than welcome.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I wish to convey my sympathies and those of the Fianna Fáil group to the families of the 400 killed and the thousands injured on the border between Iraq and Iran, especially in the western provinces. It was one of the largest earthquakes to hit the

region in the recent years measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. It is a major humanitarian crisis for the area and it will leave many sleeping out in the cold for another night. Their homes have been absolutely destroyed and many of their relatives have been killed or severely injured. Our thoughts are with the Iranians and Iraqis at this time.

The main issue I wish to raise today relates to rising rents and house prices. A report from *daft.ie* shows rents have risen by 11% so far this year. We know that up to 55% of people's monthly income goes on rent, a vast amount of money. We see house prices increasing by up to 20% and it is difficult to see how people can save fast enough or as fast as houses are going up in value. Ultimately, the big issue is the supply of housing and how we ensure supply is increased. We speak about this issue almost every day in the Seanad, yet we have not really seen a solution. We have seen homeless figures increase dramatically, yet the Government does not seem to be taking this seriously. We need to see a proper affordable housing scheme, like the scheme Dublin City Council has provided in Poppintree. However, that has not been forthcoming.

I know the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government is coming to the House later today and there will be a wider discussion on the matter but I wish to put on record that it is absolutely unacceptable that we have continued like this. Every meeting that I have attended, whether at Dublin City Council or in the Seanad, has related to housing, yet nothing has been done.

I wish Martin O'Neill and the Irish team the best of luck tonight. I hope that we make it to the World Cup and that we have a good time celebrating.

An Cathaoirleach: You are optimistic, Senator.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: She is right though.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to extend my sympathies to the wife and family of Kevin Dawson, the renowned journalist who died the other day at the age of 57 years. I will explain how I came in contact with him first. He was a brave young journalist who, 25 years ago, first broke the story in the *Sunday Tribune* relating to the drug trials on children in State institutions when no other newspaper would touch the article and no national broadcaster would touch the issue. At that stage, it was denounced and people thought it was all a fixation of his imagination and the imagination of others. We know there was a subsequent tribunal of inquiry and that everything he said was correct.

It is important that we mark the passing of this man. He had a 35-year career in print and broadcasting. He was a freelance journalist who worked initially for *Magill* and then the *Sunday Press*, *The Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*, *The Sunday Business Post* and RTÉ. I wish to convey my sympathies to his family, especially his wife, Brianóg, and his children, Colm and Anna.

We saw in him an outstanding, exceptionally brave and courageous journalist. He was an exceptional man who really epitomised everything that is exemplary in public life, broadcasting and commentary in terms of political and social affairs. I wish to remember him today. May he rest in peace.

I wish to thank all the people involved – I know this involved all Senators across the House – who campaigned for better pay and conditions for county councillors. This has been to and

fro with various people. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the Minister and Minister of State in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. I wish to acknowledge the work of the Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, who advocated greatly for the PRSI improvements and the small improvement of an additional allowance in expenses. I wish to acknowledge this on behalf of all sides of the House. A committee of the House worked well on this matter. We will see a statutory instrument signed and I understand a circular is to be issued today to the chief executives in all 31 local authorities. Although this is a welcome step, it is only the beginning. I hope all of us will continue to work together in this House for better pay and conditions for all the 900 or so councillors in this country who do exceptionally hard work and have a vast workload and major responsibilities. Their remuneration should reflect their workload and responsibilities.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Eligible students are being refused seats on school buses in rural areas. This applies particularly to students repeating their leaving certificate who do not know their exam results until after the deadline for the school transport application. I know people who have decided to repeat their leaving certificate, and well done to them, but who cannot get a seat on the bus. I do not know what the school transport system is in North Korea but the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, should consider this because cases are going from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to the Department of Education and Skills and back again. In the meantime young people who are trying to access education in rural areas cannot get the transport they are told they are eligible for. It is not because a bigger bus is not available because it is, but because it is too costly to use for the children who are eligible.

I ask that Deputy Halligan come to the House for another debate on school transport to examine these anomalies which deprive students of transport and access to schools. It not only affects the student but the whole family. In some cases the students' siblings are on the bus but they are not allowed on the bus. Mothers or fathers then have to give up their jobs in order to drive their children to school. This is a very serious issue in rural areas and I would like it to be addressed immediately. I ask that, as a matter of urgency, the Minister of State come in here and answer some of these questions to save parents being sent from Billy to Jack without getting any answers.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Will the Leader convey our concern that people who often live from payment to payment, week to week, have been told they cannot access their pensions without a public service card, despite an answer from the Minister this week in which she assured us that An Post did not require the public service card of people accessing pensions and other payments? The Data Protection Commissioner is conducting an investigation into the legality of how the public service card has been rolled out. Can we have a moratorium on requirements being increased for presentation of a public service card when we do not know whether the system being introduced is fit for purpose and properly designed?

I share the concerns of many on seeing the issue of housing in Ireland being diminished by suggestions that our figures are less than some, more than others, are average. There has been concern at the expressions used not simply by the Government but by a former head of the Housing Authority, which is very serious, like the poor are always with us.

There is another level to that concern. In the past week some Ministers have spoken of how we need to be very careful about our refugee issues and other areas, such as health and housing. The urgency of the housing issue is given as the reason that we cannot perform other good, necessary and moral actions needed in our society and at the same time we are told housing is

not a problem. I am concerned, first, at the diminishing of this issue and, second, at the idea that it be maintained in some way at some level where it can be used against others. We have heard a lot of talk in recent months about this group versus that group. Which do we want? We have to make these hard choices. It always seems to be vulnerable groups which are being set against others when these hard choices are being made. We do not tend to drag in, for example, the massive tax relief systems. If we are having a positive narrative, it is important that we be honest about problems and own them and that we ensure we never use a problem in one area of society to diminish progress in another. I say this having come from the World Forum for Democracy, at which I spoke last week. We can see the very dangerous consequences when groups which are marginalised within society are, in any sense, set against each other or encouraged to take the perspective that they are competing. I say this to the Leader knowing that he is very committed in dealing with all of these issues. Can we be very careful about our political narrative? We are at a dangerous time and what might seem like an easy way to dismiss a problem now will store up greater problems. We have seen the fascists on the streets of Poland this week. It is of major concern to everyone across Europe. We need to lead by providing a responsible political narrative. I appeal to the House and the Minister via the Leader in that regard.

Senator Ivana Bacik: On behalf of the Labour Party, I join Senator Catherine Ardagh in expressing sympathy to the survivors and families of those killed so tragically in the earthquake in Iran. I understand more than 400 people were killed and about 7,000 injured. It was an horrific earthquake. I also join Senator Victor Boyhan in expressing sympathy to the family of the late Kevin Dawson who was a pioneering journalist.

I ask for a debate on the issue of gender equality in the workplace, in the light of a number of recent developments. On Friday we marked Equal Pay Day when the National Women's Council, IMPACT and others noted that women in Ireland worked for free on a Friday, given that, on average, they earned 14% less than their male colleagues. Last Friday was designated as Equal Pay Day across Ireland. It would be worth having a debate on the issue. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, who dealt with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Gender Pay Gap Information) Bill introduced by the Labour Party. He said the Government would accept the Bill. The Taoiseach also mentioned it in his speech on Friday. I am delighted to see-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am glad that the Senator was listening.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It was reported to me. I did not listen directly.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator is most welcome.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I was glad to see some positive signs of something which was often, rightly, disparaged, namely, new politics. Gender equality in the workplace goes beyond equal pay. In recent weeks there has been momentum on issues to do with sexual harassment in the workplace. I commend Grace Dyas, a brave young woman, for coming forward to highlight issues to do with sexual harassment in Irish theatre, most notably the Gate Theatre, to which the issue is not confined. Since her actions, other women have come forward to talk about harassment in other spheres across the arts and other sectors. Some years ago a law study showed that this was an issue across the legal profession. The Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, rather than the Minister of State, Deputy John Halligan, is probably the appropriate Minister of State to come to the House to discuss equality in the workplace, including gender equality,

and how we can combat the problems, given the recent decision of the Workplace Relations Commission. Today we published a toolkit, a resource for those experiencing harassment in the workplace, to inform them of their legal rights. A number of us worked on it. We need to inform those who are experiencing sexual harassment and other forms of bullying in the workplace of such toolkits.

I welcome the decision of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charles Flanagan, to allow family reunification which involves, I understand, 430 persons, in the light of the defeat of the Government last week in the Seanad on the Civil Engagement Group's Bill. However, it does not go far enough. More needs to be done to ensure people can have close family members join them, in particular those who have fled the conflict in Syria.

I join others in wishing the Irish team well in the crucial match against Denmark.

Senator Ray Butler: I also express my condolences to the Iranian people following the earthquake. There were heart-wrenching pictures in a newspaper of a mother holding in her arms her baby daughter who had been killed in the earthquake.

The census figures for 2016 which were released last week showed how small towns had been hardest hit by the recession in the past ten years, while Dublin had been the least affected. The data show, too, that the capital has benefited disproportionately from the upturn in the economy, while small rural towns have felt the worst effects of the recession in the years since it ended. I refer, in particular, to the retail sector in rural towns. My local newspaper, the *Meath Chronicle*, reports that there are 95 vacant units in Navan town which has a population of 30,000 people. The reasons for this pressure on retailers include paid parking, an out-of-town shopping centre and the new show in town, rates revaluations. In other counties the majority of small businesses have seen an increase in rates of 16%. These are the people to whom we should have given a medal for staying open during the recession. In many cases, they did not pay themselves a wage in an effort to keep their businesses going, but they are being submitted to these revaluations. If more small shops are lost in rural locations, we will have no communities. We know what has happened in the United Kingdom, where people have to travel several kilometres to purchase the basics such as milk and sugar. The civil servants in Dublin must be told that we need a plan of action for rural Ireland. Will the Minister for Rural and Community Development come to the House and put forward his ideas for action in that regard? When we see a town like Navan in which there are 95 retail units vacant, we can only wonder what the situation is in smaller towns in more rural areas. The Minister must tell us what plan of action he proposes to implement to assist the retail sector in rural areas.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: A major anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement has just passed. A wonderful commemorative event took place last week when marvellous speeches were made by people like Mr. Seamus Mallon, Mr. David Trimble and my neighbour, Mr. Dick Spring. The late Albert Reynolds was, of course, notable by his absence. It was a great and joyous occasion but also an extremely sad one. Most of us thought when the Agreement was signed that we would see a shift in behaviour and politics in the North of Ireland that would bring the two communities closer together and see a dismantling of the walls of bitterness and division between nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, but the sad news is that we have actually gone into reverse. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. James Brokenshire, is today introducing in the House of Commons a budget for Northern Ireland. There will not be a single Irish nationalist voice taking part in that debate, which is a huge backward step. The proud tradition of nationalist parliamentary involvement in the House of

14 November 2017

Commons dates back to the time of Daniel O'Connell and includes the great Parnell, Redmond, Dillon and all of the other parliamentarians who engaged in a constant grind to achieve more independence, including Home Rule, for the Irish, but now it has come to a shuddering halt. Is it only a matter of time before we see a Cabinet of British Ministers appointed to administer matters in Northern Ireland? It seems inevitable, unless politicians on all sides in the North - I am pointing the finger at no one - see sense and work together to tear down the so-called peace walls, come out of their ghettos, engage with each other and behave as elective representatives are meant to do to get good deals for the people who voted them into power. The two major parties have huge mandates, but it seems those mandates are not being respected. All of us here in the Irish nationalist tradition have a lot to be worried about today as we have seen ourselves moving from an ever-constant grinding down of British rule and British authority on this island being dramatically reversed while all the good work of those great people I have mentioned looks like it is turning to ashes. I am from Kerry, which is a long way from the North but I have as much feeling for the North of Ireland as anybody in this country. I appeal from my heart to the politicians in the North to get together and to work out a deal, like Martin McGuinness or Peter Robinson were able to do. It is not beyond them.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Two weeks ago I had the privilege of meeting the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, in Waterville when I was able to thank him for the work he did with the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Deputy Kehoe, in securing the Jadotville medal. This weekend I learned to my disgust the treatment by the Department of Defence of the Jadotville heroes who are to be awarded their medal on 2 December. They are to be denied a proper military service or military parade.

A daughter of one of the Jadotville heroes wrote to me today. She writes of her father as follows:

[My father] a man who believed in justice and equality. He knew what it was like to feel segregated long before the Congo. He knew what injustice was and how it felt to be treated unfairly by some locals and outsiders! In fact, he knew this from a very young age, even though he was born on Irish soil he could have joined the British Army, but instead, decided to join the Irish Army. But what a mistake! As once again he was segregated, treated like dirt and left to die, not by the people of the Congo ... No! ... but by his own! When he returned home he was called a coward again by ... his own comrades, Government and the Defence Force. He also died in the care of the Defence Forces and left a young wife and five children, one of which never got to know him! When his friend [...] asked what happened to [and she names her father], [they were told] "keep your mouth shut or your career will be on the line!" I wonder why????? I don't need the word bravery, honour or hero written on a piece of paper or engraved on a plaque to tell me who or what this great man was! Because I already [know]. He was the man that held me when I was sick as a child, he was the man that sat and held me in his big strong arms and told me I'd be alright! He was the man who gave me little surprises on pay day. He, in the blink of an eye was the man that was there no more and no one cared then or now!

I beg the Leader to go to the Taoiseach today and ask him to reverse the awful decision by the Department of Defence. It is wrong in every way. Those heroes are entitled to have their comrades stand by them when they receive a medal that is 56 years overdue. I served with those men and never knew they were in Jadotville. I knew nothing about it because it was hidden. There is no disgrace in what they did. They are heroes. They deserve to be given their medal in front of their former colleagues and with a full military parade.

Senator James Reilly: I echo what Senator Ray Butler spoke about, namely, rates, and the fact that business is only recovering now from those hard years of recession. Having survived that, to be faced now with what looks to be an increase in rates is very worrying for people, especially in towns such as Balbriggan and Rush which have struggled through the recession but are coming out of it.

The reason I rise here today is to commend Fingal County Council on good news. The council yesterday voted to allow the CEO of the council, Paul Reid, to enter into negotiations with the European Investment Bank to seek up to €70 million, which could be matched by Government funds. I will strongly support that and I will lobby the Government to make sure that happens.

I congratulate the council because I believe it is the first mover on this issue. The European Investment Bank exists to offer affordable loans to allow infrastructure to be developed. In an area such as Fingal, the obvious part of Dublin that will allow for the expansion of the population and badly needed housing, it seems opportune to invest in advance in the infrastructure people need. For once in our history we will have the infrastructure in place before the housing is built and families arrive. This includes important infrastructure such as the greenway, which is a no-brainer in terms of the jobs created and tourism generated, an issue about which I have spoken in the House before. I refer also to connectivity, including roads, particularly near Dublin Airport where planning permission was recently refused for five tower blocks for offices only on the grounds that there was inferior and insufficient road connectivity. The lands have been zoned. We need to develop these things.

There is a possibility to be a leader in other areas. A former major waste disposal area for Dublin city, Balleally dump, had a huge amount of work done on it. It now has the potential to be a wonderful community park, with fabulous views from the top of the man-made mountain. There are many other areas in which there could be investment to improve the lives and well-being of the locals. Swimming pools, for example, could be constructed. Fingal, Swords and Balbriggan should seriously consider developing swimming pools for their populations.

I really believe it is important to acknowledge this opportunity and that we acknowledge Fingal County Council for its forward thinking. I wish it well in its negotiations with the European Investment Bank and, subsequently, the Government. I hope there will be a successful outcome some time in December and that we will be able to look forward to investing in projects and infrastructure, including parks, for our ever-increasing population and the youngest in the country. In other parts of Europe the European Investment Bank has also invested in hospitals.

Senator Máire Devine: Will the Leader update us on the Government's plans to protect young people from the grips of the gambling industry? My party has been extremely active on this topic, about which I am seriously concerned. The Department of Justice and Equality has a plan for a gambling control Bill, although it is fair to say and everyone agrees that it is long overdue at this stage, especially as it will include some provisions aimed at child protection. I have outstanding concerns about free games which are targeted at children online and encourage risk-taking and gambling within them. The outcomes of such games set the perfect landscape on which monetary gambling may take hold in early adulthood. At least in the United Kingdom there has been action following a report or research last year which indicated that

500,000 children from four years and upwards were gambling. The story is similar here. The Gambling Commission in the United Kingdom has acted swiftly and recently ordered over 550 gambling sites to be removed immediately to remove the cute, cuddly games targeted at and designed exclusively for children. There is the deliberate design of child-oriented games which are free to play. It is an effective sales pitch to sell children the concept of gambling. If the Leader was to clarify how the Government planned to address the issue, I would appreciate it.

Come on, you boys in green.

Senator Maria Byrne: Last week I referred to the Threshold report and the issue of rising rents. Today we read that rents in Dublin, up to September 2017, had risen by over 11%. In my city of Limerick they have risen by 10.5%. It is frightening because the report shows that rents in Dublin city centre can be anything up to €1,800 per month. In many other cities they can be €1,100 or €1,200 per month. There is a need for a cap. Rent caps and rent pressure areas have been highlighted by the Minister, but he needs to come into the House to address the issue.

The other matter I would like to raise, following on from Senator Reilly, is the signing with the European Investment Bank in Limerick on Thursday of €85 million that we are borrowing from it in the form of a low-interest loan. This will help towards the economic development of the city. It is the official signing of the contract for the so-called opera centre site in Limerick where we will have businesses and office spaces. The student population is also moving into the city centre in the form of faculties from both the University of Limerick and the Limerick Institute of Technology. I also welcome the European Investment Bank to both Limerick and Ireland, especially on Thursday next when the contract will be signed in Limerick for what one might call this partnership between Limerick City and County Council and the European Investment Bank. I would encourage, as Senator Reilly has, many of the other local authorities to look at these low-interest loans and partnerships with the European Investment Bank.

Senator Paul Gavan: Today, I raise the issue of section 39 workers. There are 10,000 of these workers working in our hospices, in the community hospitals and in the Rehab facilities. Some one-in-ten workers in the intellectual disability sector are section 39 workers. They do exactly the same work as HSE workers but they are paid less. They are paid less because in 2010 Fianna Fáil when in government cut their wages and since then they have been ignored. Whereas HSE workers have rightly been winning pay restoration, section 39 workers have not. The 8% pay cut that was imposed on them is still in place. As a result - I must declare an interest in that I represented a number of these workers in St. Anne's in Roscrea and the Daughters of Charity in Limerick - these workers are now voting with their feet; they are leaving. They are people who work in incredibly challenging situations with some of the most vulnerable people in society and do an amazing job. They go above and beyond the call of duty.

What is disgraceful is this Government line that they are not directly employed by it. They were not directly employed in 2010 when their pay was cut. That is not an excuse. There are 10,000 of these workers across the State. SIPTU representatives met the Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Finian McGrath, who told them he would lobby at Cabinet level. That tells us that the Cabinet is refusing what it must do, which is to restore pay and fairness for these workers because they do exactly the same work as their colleagues. I ask the Leader to arrange a debate as a matter of urgency with the Minister of State. I also ask the Leader his own view. I would like him to state clearly for the record that these workers should get their pay restoration without any further delay.

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: I acknowledge Senator Craughwell's passion for what he has spoken about here today. I fully support his passion for the Defences Forces. I feel the same. We all feel the same sense of pride in the Defence Forces.

With that in mind, it is important for us to note that the decision to award the medal to these Jadotville heroes was a consequence of the Government wanting to recognise that they should get full recognition and that what happened to them in 1961 should never have happened.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Hear, hear.

Senator Gabrielle McFadden: That is why this ceremony that has been organised for the Jadotville heroes, which I have no problem calling them because that is what they were, is being organised in the same way as any other military medal presentation ceremony. A working group was set up, with civil and military personnel on it, to organise this ceremony. I have no problem with any of the arrangements so far, except in the following regard. Athlone, I believe, is the right venue for it and Custume Barracks is the right place for it. There is not a building within Custume Barracks large enough to hold everybody. If we wanted a building big enough, we would have had to take it out of Custume Barracks. It is fitting that it stays within Custume Barracks, which is why there will be a marquee erected for the ceremony which will only hold 390 people. Some of the people who will be there on the day will have to be in the officers' mess watching it on a big screen, which is not ideal. I would very much like everybody to be able to be with their family on the day but that is not possible. I agree with Senator Craughwell that the Minister of State and the Taoiseach should be asked to have a look at the fact the veterans are not going to be there in numbers. It is very important for the families and the surviving members that their colleagues would be there to salute them on the day. It is a very poignant moment. Some of the families tell us their fathers came home from Jadotville and that some soldiers turned their backs on their colleagues in Custume Barracks in 1961, which was soul-destroying for them. It would be very fitting if the same veterans could stand up at the ceremony and salute their colleagues. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister of State or the Taoiseach to intervene on this occasion.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: As a follow-up to that, I want to thank Senator Craughwell for his very emotional contribution to the Order of Business this afternoon and to our colleague-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Excuse me, I cannot hear the Senator.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I will repeat it. I want to thank Senator Craughwell for his very emotional contribution on the Order of Business this afternoon in regard to the Jadotville survivors and, indeed, to Senator McFadden, who gave us a brief update on the situation regarding the presentation of these long-overdue medals. These men, who have been regarded by some in the hierarchy of the military as cowards for over 56 years, are heroes, not cowards. They have been treated as second-class soldiers for far too long. Quite a number of them have passed on to their eternal reward and the very least we can do in memory of those who have passed on, and for those who survive to this day, is that we make this presentation of medals. This has been fought for on all sides of this House, including by Senators Mac Lochlainn, McFadden, Craughwell, myself and others, who have raised the issue on many occasions. I want to pay tribute to the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, and the Minister of State with responsibility for defence, Deputy Paul Kehoe, who brought about the day that is about to happen.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Hear, hear.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I appeal to the Leader to not take away from this long-overdue day. We must ensure these people are given proper recognition at this medal presentation and that the Army band, the Minister of State and the Taoiseach are there to honour them. I ask that this be carried out. We must not take away from this very important day for these heroes.

I support Senator Gavan in regard to his comments on the section 39 workers. They have been ignored and that should not be allowed to continue.

Senator Frank Feighan: Following on from Senator Ned O’Sullivan’s remarks regarding the stalemate in Northern Ireland, I suggest we have to look at these things from a positive point of view. We are in a much better place in the last 20 years because of the Good Friday Agreement, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Downing Street Declaration. I was privileged and honoured to have been in Enniskillen last Sunday with the Taoiseach for the commemoration of Remembrance Day. We were in St. Macartin’s Cathedral, where there was a very dignified and solemn service. I remember that one of the preachers referred to “the sons and daughters of Ireland” and it was wonderful to see Monsignor O’Reilly come across the street from the Catholic Church to commemorate these fallen people. We have come an awful long way.

I want to point out that up to 30,000 of those young men - and it was mostly young men - came from the Twenty-six Counties. To take my own county of Roscommon, which is a county of only 50,000, up to 500 young men died. We must accept that we airbrushed them out of history, although we have come a long way. While I understand there are aspects of these symbols that are difficult, I think that to have the poppy symbol set on the background of the shamrock provides a certain atmosphere whereby we can recognise the sacrifices of those young men and also recognise the sacrifices of the men of 1916. We have come a very long way and can go further still. I hope things will work out in the coming weeks. I understand there has been much negotiation and hope for the sake of the people of Northern Ireland and the people of the Republic of Ireland that the Assembly at Stormont will get up and running again soon.

When we were in London last week there were many politicians of Irish extraction there. I would love to see Sinn Féin MPs take their seats at Westminster, although that is, of course, a matter for them to decide and perhaps we should not comment on it, but there are many politicians drawn from the Irish diaspora in Britain who are filling the vacuum and representing nationalism in Ireland. One such example is Mr. Conor McGinn, originally from south Armagh but now a Labour Party MP for St. Helen’s North. He is doing considerable work with the all-party parliamentary group on the Irish in Britain. I understand the Sinn Féin MPs are working at Westminster, although they do not, in fact, take their seats in the chamber. I met Senator Paul Gavan there about a year ago and believe a lot of work is being done.

Next week, on 18 November, it will be 30 years since Gary Mackay scored that wonderful goal for Scotland against Bulgaria that sent the Republic of Ireland on its way to the 1988 European Championships in Germany. On 12 June next the Irish soccer team will be 30 years undefeated by England. We should remember that fact this evening.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator who might tog out himself tonight. I now call Senator Fintan Warfield, not Senator Colm Burke who does not look remotely like Senator Fintan Warfield.

Senator Colm Burke: My apologies.

An Cathaoirleach: Ar aghaidh leat, Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: RTÉ has announced that it will carry out a review of the operations of its orchestras. It currently operates the National Symphony Orchestra and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, each of which consists of approximately 40 musicians. There has been a total of 25 vacancies in the orchestras in the past seven years and there are fears the number may rise to 40, the number required for one stand-alone orchestra. Voluntary exit packages have been offered to musicians who have left the employment of the orchestras and those who have left or retired have not been replaced. Is RTÉ winding down one of the orchestras? That is my concern and that of the Musicians Union of Ireland, MUI. If RTÉ attempts to do so, it will be breaking the provision outlined in the Broadcasting Act 2009 which calls on it to establish and maintain orchestras, not “orchestra” in the singular. Both orchestras have to be maintained in their current format and at their current numbers at the very least. They have had artistic importance since the 1940s in line with the importance of the national cultural institutions. I ask the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, and the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, to protect the orchestras, realise the Taoiseach’s commitment to double the funding for the arts and prevent RTÉ from merging or winding down the orchestras or operating two orchestras from a single pool of musicians. The National Symphony Orchestra and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra are not interchangeable. They are national orchestras and should be facilitated in returning to education, outreach and national touring initiatives. Anything less than this cannot be considered if they are to be in any way “national”. I think RTÉ is carrying out the review in the hope of reaching a certain result. It should instead act in the spirit of its own commercial slogans, “RTÉ: Supporting the Arts” and “Love your Orchestras”.

An Cathaoirleach: I now call Senator Colm Burke.

Senator Colm Burke: I again apologise to Senator Fintan Warfield. I was not listening properly when the Cathaoirleach called him.

I refer to the report, A Future Together: Building a Better GP and Primary Care Service, which was launched yesterday at Trinity College Dublin. It is a very comprehensive report that highlights a number of crucial issues. I know that there will be statements on health care tomorrow, but this is a matter that needs to be prioritised. We are spending approximately 4.5% of the total health budget on GPs and primary care services when we should, in fact, be spending twice that figure. We have been dealing with the issue of a new GP contract for quite some time. It is a matter that should be prioritised. There are a number of other matters in the report that clearly identify where we need to prioritise actions. We have the Sláintecare report, but there must be a combination of everybody working to bring about change. I do not understand the prioritisation that has occurred over the past two to three years. The Health Service Executive took on an additional 2,000 administration and managerial staff while we seem to have made no progress in dealing with the GP matter. It is something to which we need to attach priority and we need answers from both the Department and the Minister. It should not be left to continue *ad infinitum* without any final decision on the matter. I hope that tomorrow when we deal with the statements there might be some clarification. I look forward to it. It is something I will revisit and there is clear evidence from this report published yesterday of the need to prioritise this matter to build a better health service for everyone.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I apologise to Senator O’Sullivan for missing his contribution but I share his concerns, from what I hear he said. At the same time, as Senator Feighan noted, we have come a long way in recent years with the various agreements and so on. I was at Westminster recently with Senator Feighan and others and there is no doubt that there is tremendous

14 November 2017

goodwill over there for Ireland and our cause, even with Brexit and despite the difficulties in the British Cabinet. Members of Parliament such as Mr. Stephen Hepburn and Mr. Conor McGinn, along with others, are working hard in our best interests. The reception over there was tremendous.

Once Sinn Féin is over its conference this coming weekend and the Democratic Unionist Party-----

Senator Máire Devine: The Senator is invited.

Senator Paul Coghlan: Perhaps I could be an external delegate. I have no problem with it, no matter what people think.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is a long step for the Senator.

Senator Paul Coghlan: We are all getting used to long steps around here. We will see what happens once these matters are out of the way. I have been told the back channels are quite busy. I would travel in hope. They know as elected people what they must do and they are aware of the agreements. They are as committed as the rest of us to them. They have their own agendas now. Give them a little more time and space and I would be hopeful about the process.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the 18 Members for their contributions to the Order of Business. I join all Members in extending our sympathies to the Iranian and Iraqi people on the very tragic loss of life in the earthquake at the western province in Iran. I join Senator Ardagh in her comments about the international agencies required to engage and be involved in what will be a major humanitarian aid project. The loss of life in this tragedy is to be lamented. I hope we, as a House, can convey through the Cathaoirleach to the Iranian ambassador our deepest sympathies on that loss of life.

I join Members, led by Senator Boyhan, in extending our sympathies to the family of Mr. Kevin Dawson on his tragic death. As has been rightly noted this afternoon, he was a very brave and courageous journalist who brought high integrity and standards to his work. To his wife and family we offer our deepest sympathies. We hope they will remember and take pride in his work and the admiration that so many people had for him on the occasion of his very sad passing.

Senators Ardagh, Higgins and Byrne commented on the ESRI report on the affordability of housing, which was published yesterday. We will have statements later on housing. Undoubtedly, supply is the biggest issue and there is an urgent need to increase supply not just on the social side but on the private side. The Government is committed through Rebuilding Ireland to investment of €6.6 billion in the construction of housing. We understand that the affordable housing issue needs to be addressed as well.

I wish to make the following points in response to Senator Higgins. The Government has not diminished the issue of housing and it does not divide society but the language being used by some has been very polarising. The job of Government is to be responsible for the construction of social housing and ensure that a roadmap to develop private housing is put in place. As the Taoiseach said at the weekend, the Government is on the side of people. Let us be honest, the Government through the policy document entitled Rebuilding Ireland, and I will not list all the different initiatives that have been put in place since we came to Government, but the Government is leading. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy

Murphy, has put in place a suite of measures to enhance rent pressure zones. If the measures do not work then let us revisit them. When I heard Deputy Barry Cowen speak on the radio this afternoon I closed my eyes and wondered had he and his party ever been in government. I recall that we had the worst recession ever, the construction sector was decimated and the banks closed. Now the banks are obliged to work with developers. We need developers, landlords, social housing and to adopt a combined approach that ensures we increase supply. I hope that we will see all of that happen.

I join with Senator Boyhan in thanking the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and his Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, for their announcement about the rate of pay for councillors that they made at the weekend. I know, mindful that it is a beginning, that some councillors are disappointed while others are quite happy. We have started a process. It behoves all of us, as Members of the House, to collectively work on behalf of the councillors. They do a huge amount of work that goes unnoticed in some cases and very much inconveniences their families and their family life. Their job of work is done in an extraordinary and commendable way. I worry that we will reach the point where many councillors will walk away from local government. Therefore, I believe we should pay them a full-time salary and reward them accordingly. That might be a step too far for some but the Minister and Minister of State have made a step forward with the initiative, for which we commend them.

Senator Conway-Walsh raised the issue of school transport and the eligibility status for repeat students. I presume she means the leaving certificate examination so the number of people involved must be very small. I advise her to table the issue as a Commencement matter. I am happy to invite the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, Deputy Hailigan, to discuss the issue that he raised.

Senator Higgins made reference to the public services card. There has been a lot of commentary in the ether about the public services card. I wish to state that card helps customers to easily access a variety of public services and it was first introduced in 2011. It is not a national ID card. There has been no gargantuan cover-up by the Government or no attempt to do anything other than ensure that people can access services. Last August, the Department issued a four-page clarification on the matter and I urge the Senator to consult the paper. I am happy to invite the Minister to the House to discuss the matter. Again, it might be quicker for the Senator to table a Commencement matter on the issue. To be fair, her remarks are well intended.

Senator Bacik raised the issue of gender equality in the workplace. I was very much struck by her ability to remember that last weekend the Taoiseach, in his Ard-Fheis speech and as part of our document, gave a commitment to make this a “republic of opportunity” and that we are committed to establishing a commission on the status of women in Ireland. The Senator is right that the issue concerns much more than just pay. It is also about a variety and a suite of issues that need to be tackled and put on a very proactive basis.

I join with the Senator in commending Grace Dyas and others who have come forward as part of the discourse on the issue, not just of sexual harassment, but how women are treated, and how all people are treated in the workplace let me add. We should debate the issue. I know that the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Humphreys, has had meetings with the Arts Council. As the Senator has said, this matter does not just revolve around the arts community but society in general and how we address and view the issue. I am happy to arrange a debate on the issue in the coming weeks.

Senators Butler and Reilly made reference to small towns in terms of retail and rural Ireland and rates. I am happy to invite the relevant Minister to the House to discuss the matter. Senator Butler has long championed the matter. The matter must be addressed and considered in the context of the national development plan, Ireland 2040, in terms of how we can promote rural Ireland in the future.

Senators Ned O’Sullivan, Coghlan and Feighan, in a variety of guises, referenced the Good Friday Agreement, the North and the budget that was announced yesterday in the House of Commons. We have waited since the start of the year for the Assembly to be re-established. There is an obligation and duty on all political sides to overcome the obstacles and have the Executive and an Assembly re-established. Senator Ned O’Sullivan is well intended and very correct in his remarks. It is disappointing that we do not have nationalist input into a budget that is now being passed for the North. It is disappointing that there is no nationalist voice at the Brexit negotiations other than the Government. We need to see that rectified in the coming weeks. I appeal to the Senators from Sinn Féin who are representatives of their party to implore all sides, but especially their own party to go back. I know there is ongoing engagement, as Senator Coghlan said, but the people of the North gave a mandate to the largest two parties to be in government. It is about time we had an Executive and an Assembly returned.

Equally it is important that we commend people such as Dick Spring, the late Peter Barry and Garrett FitzGerald for the work they did in terms of the Good Friday Agreement. It was the stepping stone, the beginning, which was derided by many at the time, but was the template used to build peace and be a bridge. I commend Senators Feighan, Coghlan, Gavan and others who were involved in reaching across the political divide. It is about ensuring, as has been said by Senator Ned O’Sullivan, that we break down the divide. I hope there will be movement and it will happen quickly.

Senators Craughwell, McFadden and Wilson raised the issue of the Jadotville medal presentation ceremony. It is upsetting to hear Senator Craughwell’s reading of the letter. I want to praise Senators Craughwell, McFadden and Wilson for the work they have done in bringing us to the point where they will be a full military ceremony. Veterans are the focus of the ceremony. The Minister and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces will be in attendance. For too long the service of the men involved in Jadotville was unrecognised. It was the Minister of State, Deputy Paul Kehoe, together with the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, who ensured those men would be recognised as heroes. I should commend Senator Mac Lochlainn as well for his remarks.

The Minister and the Government took a decision to honour these brave men with full military honours. I am told the ceremony is being organised hand in hand by the Department and the Defence Forces who are working to ensure that the tradition of all other military ceremonies with the focus on the surviving members and the family representatives of the deceased members will take place in Athlone. Senator McFadden is correct that Athlone is the appropriate venue. The civil and military working group has been established to prepare for the ceremony. I will communicate the views of Senators McFadden, Wilson and Craughwell today. From my understanding the Minister of State is very much of the view that this will be a full military ceremony, but I am open to correction. It would not be the intent of Government to dishonour anybody, quite the contrary. I will bring that issue back to the Minister of State.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I accept that. I know that neither the Taoiseach nor the Minister of State would want to do anything less.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My information is that this will be a full military ceremony in keeping with other military ceremonies. I am not sure where Senator Craughwell's information is coming from but I will be happy to bring it to the attention of the Minister of State at the Department of Defence.

I congratulate Senator Reilly because he was very proactive in pushing for the European Investment Bank. He has been able to announce the good news in terms of Fingal County Council. Equally both Senators Reilly and Butler have been to the fore in raising the issue of the local authority rates.

Senator Devine raised the very important issue of gambling and the Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, Deputy David Stanton, has been very active in meeting the different stakeholders in progressing the Gambling Control Bill 2013. As the Senator rightly said, technology is changing the face of gambling daily. The face of gambling is being changed daily by technology. Just yesterday, I was walking on the streets of Cork and overheard a conversation between a couple. They were talking about what they could get back from a €10 stake on their phones. It left me boggled. It was a conversation between two people on the streets of Cork about gambling. It set my mind thinking about the effect this issue was having on their lives. If they were having a conversation about online gambling on their phones, what effect was it having on them? I join with Senator Devine on that issue. I will have a debate in the House and an update from the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, in that regard. We need to address the issue of gambling as a matter of urgency. We saw the House almost united on the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015. We need a similar approach on gambling. It needs to be addressed urgently and I join with the Senator on that issue.

Senator Maria Byrne also raised the issue of rents, Limerick and the European Investment Bank. I commend her on her work on the issue. I know tomorrow will be a good day in Limerick. Senator Gavan raised the issue of section 39 organisations. It is an issue with which we are all very preoccupied. I think he will join with me in supporting the FEMPI legislation which will reverse pay cuts and which I am sure will have a beneficial effect on members of staff in section 39 organisations. My view is very simple. The workers deserve equal pay and deserve to be treated fairly. I will work with any Member of the House to ensure that happens. Government has increased funding to section 39 organisations. It is for all us to ensure that those organisations, institutions and charities ensure that their workers are properly paid accordingly. I am happy to work with anyone to see that happen.

Senator Paul Gavan: Can we have a debate on the issue?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Yes, by all means. Senator Wilson also raised section 39 organisations. I praise Senator Feighan for his ongoing work and commend him for his interview on "The View" last week. I praise all sides, in Westminster and in the Oireachtas, for the work they are carrying out. To address Senator Colm Burke's contribution, we will have a debate tomorrow on GPs, during which we can have a discussion and I hope we will get clarity around the whole issue. I have not read the report from Trinity College but we will debate the issue tomorrow.

Senator Warfield raised the issue of RTÉ's review of its orchestras. I certainly hope that RTÉ does not do anything as part of this review which would diminish or curtail the role of the orchestras because they are a very important part of RTÉ. It is something which many of us who pay our licence fee are happy to support because, first of all, they provide employment

14 November 2017

and, second, they bring culture and joy to our country. The orchestras bring a uniqueness and a sophistication. I certainly hope that RTÉ will continue to support the arts through its orchestras. Senator Paul Coghlan also made a contribution regarding the North.

Finally, I wish our soccer team every success tonight in the Aviva Stadium. I hope that the streets of Ireland will be rocking to the sounds of “*Olé, olé*” at the conclusion of the match. We had a good result last weekend. Tonight will be a very challenging occasion but with the spirit of Roy Keane and the captaincy of David Meyler, I am sure the Cork element will lead Ireland to success. On a serious note, I wish our team and the FAI every success. As Senator Feighan rightly said, we remember Gary Mackay’s great score back in the 1980s. I hope that we will have similar joy tonight and can look forward to a summer of soccer next year.

Order of Business agreed to.

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2017: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

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

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2017,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 13th November, 2017, be referred to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in accordance with Standing Order 71(3)(k), which, not later than 28th November, 2017, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 4.40 p.m. and resumed at 4.45 p.m.

The Diaspora: Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister of State is most welcome. I have pleasure in calling on him to lead the way.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the importance the Government places on the diaspora, or global Irish. I have worked in this important area since my appointment as Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora and international development. Those present who know me well will be aware that I have a deep personal commitment to the global Irish. I am passionate about engaging and connecting with them and providing support and assistance for them where required. Since my appointment I have been working for and with our communities abroad. I have met various groups and organisations in Ireland, London, Leeds, New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, Tanzania and South Africa. I have been struck by the vibrancy and commitment of our communities abroad and the individuals, young and old, who do such

incredible work in sustaining and growing those communities.

There is a strong commitment to our global nation which is shared by many, if not all, of my colleagues present. I will include in my remarks updates on several issues to do with the diaspora that Senators have raised previously with me and my predecessors. These issues include the emigrant support programme, returning emigrants and the barriers to returning, voting rights in presidential elections and our undocumented citizens in the United States.

Through the emigrant support programme, the Department provides almost €12 million to Irish organisations abroad each year, which is a tangible expression of the strong and enduring commitment of the Government and the Irish public to the global Irish. Our priority continues to be supporting the most vulnerable members of our community abroad, with 70% of funding going to organisations which provide front-line welfare services. I have seen the real difference that this funding makes in the lives of our people abroad. Recently in London I met representatives of the very impressive array of organisations across Britain who receive emigrant support programme funding. I would like to take the opportunity once again to commend the contribution of such organisations, their workers and volunteers in sustaining and supporting vibrant Irish communities across the world. Our relationship with the diaspora goes far beyond welfare. We also provide support for the many other aspects of Irish culture that bind us, including music, sport, business and cultural networks and the Irish language.

Our support is not just a question of funding. The emigrant support programme also nurtures a wider sense of connection to home and reaffirms the sense among Irish people abroad that we really value them. In this regard, I was extremely concerned at incorrect suggestions recently that the Government had somehow cut our funding to the Irish abroad in the budget. It is important that I highlight the correct position to confirm that the Department's overall current expenditure budget for Programme A: Our People, which covers the diaspora and the emigrant support programme in general, has actually increased by €2.2 million from €69.6 million in 2017 to €71.8 million in 2018. Not only has the Government not cut funding for our diaspora this year but also we are delivering better, more innovative services that benefit our citizens at home and abroad. For example, since March of this year citizens can renew their passports online. In the case of citizens abroad, this has reduced processing time from a number of weeks to ten days plus postage time to wherever the applicant is located. At the moment the average processing time is four to five days, and more than 100,000 passports and passport cards have been already delivered. This commitment to innovation in the delivery of improved customer service was recognised in last week's customer experience insights, CXI, survey which placed the passport service as the top ranked Irish public sector in terms of customer experience.

In May, the Department hosted the second Global Irish Civic Forum at Dublin Castle, which several Senators also attended. This was an extremely important opportunity for the Government to hear from the global Irish and to get their input to inform future policy development. One key theme to emerge at the civic forum was youth engagement, and this will be a priority area for the emigrant support programme next year.

In Global Irish, Ireland's diaspora policy, the Government committed to work to facilitate the return of Irish people living abroad who wish to return to live in Ireland. The Government continues to deliver to ensure the economic conditions which will allow those who have left Ireland return, should they wish to do so. Separately, significant funding and support is also provided by the Department to support returning citizens. Over the past decade more than €4 million has been allocated to Irish organisations working with returning emigrants. Through

chairing the interdepartmental committee on the Irish abroad, I have been both working to ensure joined-up delivery of the Government's diaspora policy and examining issues affecting the Irish abroad and those wishing to return. Addressing these so-called barriers or any other disproportionate administrative burdens negatively affecting Irish emigrants who wish to return to live in Ireland remains a high priority for me. I have also commissioned an independent socio-economic report outlining what can be done to reduce red tape and overcome other obstacles facing returning emigrants. This report will inform the work of the committee into next year. In addition, since my appointment I have met Crosscare Migrant Project and Safe Home Ireland, both of which are engaged in this area. I took part, with Senator Lawless, in a very useful forum on that issue in Galway, organised by Ciaran Staunton, and I have had several meetings with the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland and Insurance Ireland on making practical improvements regarding mortgage and insurance difficulties being reported by returning emigrants. Earlier today I met again with Insurance Ireland and I am glad to report that car insurance is one priority area on which significant practical progress has been made to facilitate industry recognition of safe driving records abroad for the benefit of those who have lived abroad. In addition to working to ease difficulties, my Department is always looking for new and innovative ways to assist Irish people abroad and those returning. I recently launched Back for Business, an exciting new initiative to support entrepreneurial activity among recently returned immigrants. A period spent living abroad increases entrepreneurial inclination. However, time spent out of the country can often result in the loss of local knowledge, contacts and networks. Back for Business is designed to bridge that gap. We have had a very strong response from interested applicants. The programme will begin later this month. Importantly for me as a representative of a rural constituency in the west, it will have a very strong regional dimension. Returning immigrant entrepreneurs have a very important contribution to make to make to communities across the country, not just in our main cities.

Voting rights is an issue many Senators are interested in and active on. Together with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, I am strongly committed to extending the right to vote in presidential elections to citizens outside the State. This will be another tangible expression of our commitment to ongoing engagement with the global Irish.

In September, the Taoiseach gave indicative timelines for a number of upcoming referendums, with the referendum on voting rights now likely to take place in the summer of 2019, concurrent with the local and European elections. That gives us a very important timeline to work towards. I am in regular contact with Senator Billy Lawless and others who are very active on this issue. Significant work is ongoing at official level between the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, my Department and other Departments, given the complexity of some of the issues involved.

There is general acceptance that even if a referendum was held immediately and passed, it would not be feasible to have comprehensive arrangements in place for an extension of the franchise to have effect for the upcoming presidential election to be held before 11 November 2018. This will require, among other things, modernisation of the voter registration process and the introduction of arrangements to facilitate those eligible to vote to exercise that franchise from outside the State.

In this regard, the Government has agreed that work should commence to effect improvements in the process with the registration of voters. Preliminary work has commenced on the modernisation of the voter registration process, which will examine all aspects of voter regis-

tration, including the provision of registration information and practical experience from other countries which already provide voting arrangements for non-resident citizens.

On the issue of undocumented citizens in the US, the Government's objectives remain constant, namely, to achieve relief for the undocumented and to facilitate greater pathways for legal migration to the United States. We do not, however, underestimate the size of the challenge. This policy area has been a deeply divisive issue within the US political system for decades, with pronounced disagreement, even within the same political parties, on the best way to deal with an issue which directly affects over 11 million undocumented people in the US.

The Government has consistently engaged with both parties in a bipartisan way to address our longstanding concerns and this continues to be our approach. During our visit to New York for the UN General Assembly in September, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and I met representatives of the four Irish immigration centres in the region and a representative of the US-wide Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers, CIIC. It gave me the opportunity to hear from those working at the coalface with the undocumented Irish as to the current situation and the problems they are encountering.

The Minister, Deputy Coveney, further emphasised the Government's commitment to this issue when he travelled to Washington DC from 3 to 5 October and met senior members of the US Administration and members of Congress, including the Congressional Friends of Ireland group. It was also useful that Deputy John Deasy, the Government's special envoy to the US Congress on the undocumented, who was appointed by the Taoiseach to that position last June, was able to accompany the Minister to those meetings. His appointment was another important statement of our intent and seriousness regarding this issue.

Our ambassador in Washington DC, Dan Mulhall, hosted a round table discussion on the issue on 25 October with key stakeholders, including the CIIC, which brought together Irish immigration centres from across the US. Our embassy in Washington DC and our six consulates across the US continue to work continuously with Irish immigration centres in order to provide vital services to the undocumented in the United States.

The Government remains wholly committed to working with the US authorities to resolve the plight of the undocumented Irish. The Government will continue to articulate to the US authorities our keen interest in this area while respecting the right of the United States to set its own immigration policies. I can assure the House of the Government's continued commitment to pursuing these matters on behalf of those Irish citizens in the US who are affected, and our continued openness to routes and policies which will provide relief for the undocumented.

In addition, through the emigrant support programme, we continue to support welfare and advice services that are uniquely tailored to the needs of the undocumented.

The Government's strong commitment to engage with and provide support for our communities abroad remains. I will continue to advocate and deliver for our diaspora across this wide range of areas and issues. I am particularly committed to increasing our communication with the global Irish. We recently introduced a more dynamic Global Irish newsletter, and I ask for Members' assistance and support in publicising the Global Irish Twitter handle and the Global Irish hub website. These are all important modern resources that help us to keep our diaspora informed on current issues of interest, and encourage them to keep us informed. Significant global digital networks are being established among

5 o'clock

our diaspora and it is vital that we in the Oireachtas are able to communicate with them in that particular sphere and to do so in a meaningful way that allows them to engage with us and feel supported no matter where in the world they reside. Social media has a vital role to play more broadly in keeping the Irish abroad culturally connected with home. That is an area we must focus on and exploit in the future. A recent survey of the Irish diaspora in the United States, based on a representative sample of some 3,500 people, indicated conclusively that the main method of communication for that cohort is through social media. That is how Irish people in the US and elsewhere interact with each other and it is vital that we are capable of and proactive in finding new ways to engage them on that platform.

Senator Mark Daly: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank him for outlining some of the Government's policies in respect of the Irish overseas. Given that the first policy paper in this area by any political party was published as recently as 2012, we can see where the issue was positioned in terms of political priorities. The fundamental reason for this lack of prioritisation is that the Irish abroad do not have a vote. People who have votes are listened to, while those who do not tend to be ignored. I thank the Minister of State for his comments on the forgotten Irish in Britain. The organisations that provide those people with a degree of support do receive some funding, but a lot more needs to be done for the generation who left in the 1950s and 1960s, many of whom did not get married, are now unemployed or retired and find themselves isolated in areas where communities of Irish no longer live and socialise.

The Minister of State also outlined the issues in regard to the undocumented Irish in the United States. I note he did not refer to the figure of 50,000 of which we hear so much. There is some dispute as to the exact numbers of undocumented Irish and there are difficulties in arriving at an accurate figure. However, the organisations working with undocumented Irish in the US are adamant the number is approximately 50,000. Senator Lawless and I would be delighted to share information on these matters with Deputy John Deasy, the Government's special envoy to the US Congress. Deputy Deasy has a great knowledge of Capitol Hill from his time working there and knows how the legislative process in Washington works. We all hope the undocumented Irish will be accommodated when some type of emigration Bill eventually goes through both Houses of Congress. Ciaran Staunton and the Irish Lobby for Emigration Reform worked hard to ensure Irish interests were reflected in the McCain-Kennedy Bill which nearly got through Congress. The subsequent legislation which went through the Senate but not the House of Representatives did allow for visas specifically for the Irish. A great deal of work remains to be done on that issue.

I am concerned that the Minister of State did not refer in his opening statement to the various initiatives that were put in place during the crisis and which now seem to have gone by the wayside. These include the Global Irish Parliamentarians Forum, which encouraged parliamentarians of Irish descent across the world, members of both national and regional parliaments, to come to Dublin. Senator Ó Clochartaigh and others attended the discussion that took place with those international parliamentarians in the Dáil Chamber. It was a great initiative, developed by the then Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, Jimmy Deenihan, to connect Irish-affiliated decision makers around the world, but it has not been developed further. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, consider reviving that forum, as an annual or at least biennial event?

Another useful initiative was Ireland Reaching Out, based in the Minister of State's part of the world, which encouraged people, including those living in non-traditional tourist areas, to research their past, locate descendants of relatives who had left Ireland many years ago and

invite those descendants back to see the home place. That type of initiative can be done relatively inexpensively but, again, it is not getting the Government support to allow it to flourish. ConnectIreland is another initiative that has not been adequately developed. The conclusion of the contract underpinning the programme was debated hotly in these Houses, with an acknowledgment by many that this was a worthwhile initiative which engaged members of the Irish diaspora and provided an outlet to allow them to contribute to economic development in this State. The programme was put in place during the crisis but IDA Ireland does not seem to want it and the Government seems unable to hold onto it. It continues, nevertheless, to provide jobs in areas where IDA Ireland does not traditionally look to secure employment opportunities. The Global Irish Economic Forum and the Global Irish Civic Forum are still there but, again, are no longer considered a priority because, now the crisis is over, we no longer need the diaspora. Of course, what we should be doing is engaging consistently with the Irish abroad, not just calling on them in our times of need. It comes back to the fundamental question of why the Irish overseas were ignored for so long. When I was appointed spokesperson for the diaspora for my party in 2012, it was the first such appointment in the history of party politics in Ireland. The lack of engagement by the political system with the Irish abroad is, as I said, because they do not have a vote.

I thank the Minister of State for outlining the issues in regard to the forthcoming presidential election. Next year we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of women securing the right to vote in this State, and this year is the 188th anniversary of Catholics obtaining that right. Forty-nine years ago, meanwhile, people marched in Derry for the right to vote. We are now talking about extending the franchise to citizens of this Republic living abroad.

The most fundamental right of citizens of any state is the right to participate in the democratic process. There are some 1.7 million Irish citizens living overseas who do not have the right to vote in elections here, not including the nearly 1.8 million living in the North who, under the Good Friday Agreement, are entitled to Irish citizenship and are, therefore, eligible to vote in elections here. We have the equivalent of the populations of the cities of Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Waterford and Cork who, although citizens of this State, are not entitled to vote because they do not live within the boundaries of the State.

Nothing more clearly points to the fundamental unfairness of the current system than the fact that if one happens to be a degree holder from Trinity College or the National University of Ireland and living in Australia, one has the right to vote in a parliamentary election in Ireland, while another Irish person - a plumber, say - living in Australia or anywhere else abroad who did not attend one of those institutions does not have the same right. A true republic does not treat citizens unequally.

We had hoped there would be a right to vote in the upcoming presidential election for all Irish citizens regardless of where they live. We must ensure that change is implemented before the following election. I accept that bringing it about will necessitate a complicated process in terms of ensuring it is cost effective and also that it is a referendum which can be won. I was at the meeting of the civic forum where the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government outlined the complexities of the situation. We accept there are legal and technical issues, but many people in this country who have loved ones living in Australia, Britain and the United States would argue that those relatives should have the right to vote, at least to elect the first citizen of the State but also to have representation within this Parliament. What does the Government hope to do with initiatives such as ConnectIreland, Ireland Reaching Out, the Global Irish Civic Forum and the Global Irish Parliamentarians Forum? They appear to

have been put on the shelf now that the crisis is deemed to be over and the Irish overseas are no longer required. That is not the way we should treat Irish citizens overseas.

Senator Billy Lawless: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, to the Seanad and the opportunity to speak about the diaspora. We do not yet know whether there will be an electoral contest to decide who the next President will be, but it is certain that if an election were to be held, tens of thousands of Irish men and women would have no say in the outcome. Recent estimates suggest there are approximately 130 nations and territories that allow their citizens to vote, regardless of where they live in the world. In Ireland, however, the electoral register is judged not by the Irish nation but by the residential location of the voter. In respect of inward investment and even, most recently, our courageous attempts to attract the Rugby World Cup to Ireland, we speak of Ireland as a global community with a global diaspora, yet for many in that diaspora community, this is a one-way conversation - ask not what Ireland will do for the diaspora but what the diaspora can do for Ireland.

I again commend the work and engagement to date of the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora and his predecessor. My comments seek not to devalue the importance of the engagement of the Minister of State and other Ministers but to emphasise just how important the referendum to allow members of the diaspora to vote in presidential elections is to those whom I represent. True connection with the diaspora is about more than Ministers attending St. Patrick's Day parades or lobbying on behalf of the undocumented. It should be a two-way conversation in which the diaspora we exploit for their economic and social reach have a voice in the affairs of the State. It is clear that the authors of the Constitution believed deeply in the importance of the Irish abroad, codifying that recognition in Article 2 which recognises that the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage. I acknowledge that there may be some in the country who fear that those who may wish to vote in presidential elections do not fully appreciate or understand the Ireland from which they departed or from which they derive citizenship. I hope to be part of a national conversation in which those fears can be firmly put to rest. For that reason, I welcome this valuable opportunity for Members of the House to speak about the diaspora.

Emigration has changed vastly. Emigrants come and go, with multiple departures and returns. They are permanently tuned into what is happening in Ireland on a daily basis through social media and instant communication methods. We live in a globalised world, yet our democratic system, even for the largely symbolic office of the President, does not reflect this modern reality. All of the modern mechanisms for organising elections and encouraging voter participation which other EU nations and western democracies have been using for years remain untapped in Ireland. They include absentee ballots, postal voting, automatic voter registration - for example, registering to vote when one obtains a driver's licence - and the elimination of time restrictions for citizens living abroad.

France has 12 constituencies worldwide. For example, French citizens living in Ireland are in a constituency that includes the United Kingdom, the Baltic states, Norway and Sweden. In the case of Italy, there are four external electorates, comprising Europe, South America, North and Central America and a large electorate combining Australia, Asia, Africa, Oceania and Antarctica. In Italy 12 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and six in the Senate of the Republic are reserved for citizens living abroad. They are distributed among the four overseas electoral zones in proportion to the number of Italian citizens resident in each zone. The European electorate which includes Italians resident in Ireland has six seats in the Chamber of Deputies and two in the Senate of the Republic.

On the eve of the Easter Rising in 1916 only one in six Irishmen with enough wealth was qualified to vote, a total of 15%. The rebels rejected this limited vision of representation and made universal suffrage for all men and women a core principle of the rebellion. By 1923, all citizens over 21 years of age living in Ireland, numbering nearly 1.8 million men and women, could vote. Even in the midst of a bloody civil war, the founders of the nation made sure suffrage was expanded to meet the ideals of the Easter Proclamation.

Ireland is undergoing great changes in economics and demographics. In the years ahead we will have to come to terms with Brexit, a changing European Union and the possibility of a new constitutional relationship with Northern Ireland. These challenges and many more will demand much from our democracy. In the coming decade the people will be asked to vote on issues that will define Ireland for the rest of the century. This will only be accomplished fairly if we have a modern democratic electoral system that will be inclusive, encouraging and grounded in the principle of equality that is universal suffrage. We must be willing to embrace a more expansive Irish electoral register for presidential elections and recognise that the Irish nation extends beyond the Irish Sea.

Ireland has a choice - either to expand and modernise the franchise to meet the European Union's standards for voting and citizenship or accept the *status quo* that over time will continue to make us less democratic, less equal and a more insular nation. The Taoiseach is a young man with energy, who has urged the people to think about the long term and prepare for the future. I sincerely hope that when those eligible to vote in the referendum are given a chance to vote, they will do so with a mind that is open to creating an Ireland that will have a President with a mandate from not just the State but from the nation.

Senator Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am speaking on behalf of Fine Gael as its spokesperson on foreign affairs cannot be present. He is leading the Irish delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and asked me to convey his apologies. He also gave me a few ideas for my contribution.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, for the zeal with which he has taken to his new office. I have followed him extensively and he leaves a favourable impression everywhere he goes both of himself and, most importantly, the country. This demonstrates the vital importance of his office since it was established by the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, in the last Government.

I also thank Senator Billy Lawless for his work. His appointment as spokesperson for the diaspora has been immensely valuable not only in the debate we are having but also in dealing with the many issues the world is experiencing, be it the election of Donald Trump in America, the Brexit vote or how Ireland as a small island nation is seeking to reposition itself on the global stage. I had the good fortune to visit Chicago just over a year ago for a certain rugby match and saw the work Senator Billy Lawless was doing, both formally and informally, in the Irish community in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States. It is a credit to him and the previous Taoiseach that he is in the House to contribute to this important debate.

There is much to discuss. To a large extent, Senators Billy Lawless and Mark Daly focused on the importance of the forthcoming referendum. While I appreciate its importance and agree with many of the comments made, given that the issues involved have been covered in such depth, I will focus on some other issues. The Minister of State has also commented on the matter in detail and probably will do so again in his reply. It is not that I take the issue lightly, but

there is much else to discuss. Much of this feeds into overall Government policy on foreign affairs and our place in the world. It is exciting and timely that the Taoiseach has said his ambition for the Government and the country - it is not a party political matter - is to make Ireland an island at the centre of the world. That is vital when so much of the world is turning its back on other countries, populations abroad and new populations coming into their countries and embracing what are disgusting policies of rabid nationalism and protectionism. Ireland should be bold and brave enough to state it sees itself playing a much more important role in the world, not just for our own selfish interests and those of the Irish abroad but also for the nations of the world and the nations with which we seek to work across Europe and beyond. The Minister of State raised a number of issues which feed into this and on which I will ask him to elaborate further.

The first one is the Back For Business campaign. Now that we have come out of the depths of the recession and austerity years we are not where we need to be as an island. The way Ireland and our economy will continue to grow is as a small trading nation open to global markets, prepared to utilise our diaspora, but also to make the most of our diaspora, to be welcoming and open and to make this a warm place for our diaspora to return to do business but also to use our diaspora as key links to developing existing markets be they the US or Australia. I know an extensive trade mission accompanied the presidential visit to Australia and New Zealand last month but we must also look into new markets. The Minister mentioned the Irish diaspora in South Africa. It is a small, recent but powerful diaspora. There are also growing levels of Irish diaspora in countries where Europe and the EU have identified potential trading agreements. Ireland plays a vital role in those markets in South-East Asia with Japan, Malaysia or Vietnam or indeed into the Mercosur regions where there is a little bit of controversy but it is worth noting that the largest Irish diaspora of a non-English speaking country is of course Argentina. There is much to look into there and there is much that we can find common traits with to make sure that any future trading agreements between the Mercosur region, looking at Argentina and Brazil, and the EU is done so that it does not damage Ireland's indigenous producers but that we use those ties to the best advantage.

When it comes to the returning emigrants programme, I would like the Minister to go into a bit more depth about some of the important things he mentioned such as car insurance, and indeed some social needs but also the economic tools that are available for that entrepreneurial spirit, the real graft. How are we bringing together the various Government agencies, including the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, but also the local enterprise offices and those on a more local level? It might not necessarily be people looking to bring 200 or 2,000 jobs to parts of this country but maybe two jobs or one job or they themselves seeking to do business in their home place.

One country that maybe did not get the necessary attention, even though I did mention it when we had this debate with the Minister of State's predecessor, Deputy McHugh, is the Irish community in the United Kingdom. We must put together a really meaty strategy on the Irish community, be they recent emigrants who went over in the last couple of years for economic reasons, those who went over in the 1980s or indeed my uncles and aunts who went over in the 1950s and 1960s and moved into very different communities across the UK. The Minister of State rightly mentioned the centre in Leeds that he visited. I believe London was the first place the Minister of State visited in his new role. That is really heartening because post-Brexit Ireland is now going to have to develop new and different relationships with the UK.

Where we are at a distinct advantage to the other 26 remaining EU member states is that we

have formal and informal ties with the UK. It is vitally important that we maintain those ties that have developed and changed in the last 20 years, all the economic and social ties that we have at the moment and the really distinct relationships. We cannot let Brexit jeopardise that. I was part of an Oireachtas delegation to Westminster last Monday organised by my colleague, Senator Feighan, where we met quite a number of the Irish community predominantly in London but uniquely the Irish community within Westminster. A third of the Conservative Party at Westminster, be they Lords or MPs, have an element of Irish heritage and 50% of the Labour Party. I had a great conversation with Conor McGinn MP, born in south Armagh, the son of a Sinn Féin councillor. It does not get much more Irish than that.

When one looks to the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats, my own uncle was a Liberal Democrat councillor for 20 years in Surrey. We need to use those informal political ties to our advantage to make sure that Brexit is not too big a challenge for the new developing Irish-UK relations. I believe that our diaspora should be embraced. In return we must look at new systems to make sure that the British diaspora on this island, the 100,000 British citizens living in the Twenty-six Counties who do not qualify for an Irish passport, can retain and remain in Ireland with their families. Maybe that is part of a wider discussion.

I would like to conclude because I know there are other speakers to come in. I want to underline the importance of this debate in every possible angle and every Department, whether in education or health. I encourage the Government to continue its work. I look forward to the upcoming debates and to the debate over the referendum. I commend all the work that the Government is doing.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call on Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Cuirim céad fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil muid ag plé ceist na saoránach Éireannach thar lear. Is ceist fíor-thábhachtach í. Tá sé thar am go mbeadh muid á plé arís. I would like to take a different tack to my colleague, Senator Daly, whom I often agree with on issues on the diaspora. He spoke about a lack of political engagement with the diaspora. I would not say that about our own party. Sinn Féin has a long and proud history of engaging with our diaspora for scores of years and we will continue to do so. It has been a really important part of the work that we do and I have been the spokesperson for the diaspora for the last number of years. I have engaged, as have others from across the House, and I think it is really important that people from across the Houses do engage on a regular basis with our diaspora wherever they may be.

I might ask about the budgetary issue first. The Minister of State's statement refers to the overall current expenditure budget for programme A, "Our People", increasing by €2.2 million from €69.6 million in 2017 to €71.8 million in 2018. I am raising this because there is a €5.5 million differential between that figure and the figure published by Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe on budget day. I refer to page 191 of the Budget Expenditure Report, which is the report of the Minister's Department, under subhead 1, "To serve our people at home and abroad and promote reconciliation and cooperation". The Vote for 2017 for that was €79.044 million and in 2018 it was €77 million. Now I was not the smartest kid in our school but the difference between €79 million and €77 million in the calculation that I have is €1.7 million less.

Looking at the capital expenditure on page 221, there is an almost €4 million differential from €9,443,000 down to €5,500,000. There is a huge disparity between the figures the Minister of State is putting to the House today and the figures that were put to us on budget day.

Either the budget has decreased or the Minister of State's figures are wrong. Could he clarify the situation? If the Minister of State is saying that figure is correct, there seems to be about a €5.497 million differential between the figures Deputy Donohoe gave us on budget day and the figures the Minister of State is now giving us for expenditure under that Vote. Clarity on that would be welcome.

I also want to commend the presentation we had in the Houses recently from the organisation Votes For Irish Citizens Abroad. It put its position paper to these Houses in a very good presentation and Senator Black hosted that meeting. It was very good. There is huge frustration with the lack of urgency around voting rights for the diaspora. From the conversations I have with them, they feel that in many cases presidential voting rights are a first step in this process but that even at that it may be seven or eight years before they get the chance to vindicate their right to vote. They are frustrated about that.

Our country has such a significant history of emigration yet compare the rights of our diaspora to other countries across the globe who give voting rights to their citizens in national elections. Those concerns are shared by the OECD and the European Commission. The European Commission has expressed concern that Ireland's disenfranchising of its citizens living abroad runs contrary to the principle of freedom of movement within the European Union. On one hand we cannot be arguing for freedom of movement for all of our citizens when we are not allowing our own Irish citizens to enjoy that principle as well when it comes to voting rights.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs has called on the Government to accept the principle that Irish citizens living abroad should have the right to vote in elections. The Constitutional Convention has recommended that right since 2013 but we are still waiting for that to be brought to fruition. I would like to push the boat a little and ask the Minister for his opinion. We have the possibility in the future of Irish citizens voting in a Dáil election. What is the Department's position on that? A strong case can be put forward that that should at some stage in future be put forward. Even closer to home is the issue of referenda. We saw the Home to Vote movement demonstrated a huge level of interest recently in referenda in this country and in emigrants retaining a voice and a vote. We are told there are going to be a number of referenda coming up next year. I am sure many emigrants would like to vote. What is the Government's position on referenda? Is there any cognisance whatsoever that the right in this regard should be vindicated?

Another very interesting point raised by Votes for Irish Citizens Abroad in its presentation was that, until now, Europeans living in the United Kingdom could vote for British MEPs but that, after Brexit, Irish people in the United Kingdom will become unrepresented EU citizens. Other countries will facilitate their emigrants in voting for their MEPs. For example, German citizens living in the United Kingdom will vote for German MEPs after Brexit. What plans has the Irish Government? What discussions are being held at EU level in regard to Brexit to vindicate the rights of Irish citizens living in Britain who would like to vote in EU elections?

I attended the very good seminar in Galway run by the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform. Mr. Ciarán Staunton and Ms Karen McHugh were in attendance, as was the Minister of State. A very interesting A to Z of issues comprised part of the lobby's presentation. Although the Minister of State raised one or two of the issues raised at the seminar, a considerable number have been left unmentioned or are unresolved. The organisation talked about the administrative difficulties and delays across various Departments and official agencies. It talked about issues related to banks and challenges that arise when trying to open a bank account abroad. It

stated that although circumstances are improving, they are still very difficult. Facilities where an existing non-resident account is set up while holidaying in Ireland can make the process of converting to a resident account when one moves much easier. The organisation states that in order to obtain a loan, a recent credit history is required. A US credit history, for example, is not acceptable, however. This is an issue faced by people on a very practical level.

The organisation also raised the issue of uncertainty over access to health care under EU regulations among people based in Britain after Brexit. It talked about access to secondary social protection entitlements, such as household benefits, pension, travel rights, passport controls and border issues. These are also related to Brexit. The Minister of State might address them.

I welcome the fact that the Government is in discussions with the car insurance companies but we really need action from them rather than just discussion. This is because, in many cases, they do not recognise a no claims bonus earned abroad. They really are screwing Irish citizens with absolutely extortionate premiums when they try to come home. Issues arise over child care, as for many Irish citizens living here.

There are issues associated with driving licences. In particular, a driving licence from the United States is not recognised or allowed to be exchanged for an Irish one. Therefore, people must re-sit the test and take the required number of lessons. This was a point of considerable discussion at the seminar we attended. The Minister of State might update us on what is happening in this regard. I am told the expiry of an Irish driving licence after ten years and the fact that one must attend in person to renew one comprise an issue. I appreciate steps are being taken to address this. The Minister of State might elaborate on this.

International fees for children of Irish-born parents, unless they have been in Ireland for over three years, presents a significant difficulty. The universities seem to have been quite inflexible to date on this. What can be done in this regard?

Farming entitlements are not available to returning emigrants under the national reserve. Issues were raised over family and social support systems in that they comprise one of the main reasons people come home. This is important.

The organisation addressed many other issues, as the Minister of State is quite well aware. These include housing, obtaining a mortgage on coming home, nursing care, difficulties registering with a general practitioner, etc. There was a sense at the seminar that there is a considerable number of issues to be addressed. I acknowledge that a group has been tasked with examining this. When does the Minister of State expect the report to be issued? How quickly will it be acted upon? Which Departments have been brought together to address the issues? In fairness, we have been raising these for the past four or five years and we have seen very few of them being addressed. I would welcome a comment on this and another soon after Christmas, if possible.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber and welcome the opportunity to debate Ireland's relationship with the diaspora. The Minister of State said this is definitely something he has been working on and that circumstances have improved. There is no doubt about that. It is great to see a shift in State policy towards greater engagement with our citizens abroad. This effort has been symbolic, as with Mary Robinson's candle in the window of *Áras an Uachtaráin*, in addition to more concrete steps such as the creation of a dedicated Irish abroad unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2004. The staff in the unit and

in the embassies do great work. Through the emigrant support programme, we fund over 200 community organisations in over 20 countries. We should be proud of this, particularly when it comes to vital services for older citizens abroad.

The elephant in the room, however, is the lack of voting rights for Irish citizens abroad. This is going to be the central feature of this debate. As my colleagues said, I arranged a briefing for Deputies and Senators on this topic just last week. Emigrant organisations outline just how important voting rights are to them and emigrants' deep disappointment over being disenfranchised. It has been said time and again by emigrant groups and politicians on every side of this House that we are violating a basic democratic norm in this regard. The reality is that Ireland is totally out of step with the vast majority of democracies worldwide. Over 120, and counting, have put workable systems in place to represent their citizens while abroad. Ireland is one of only three new member states to completely cut off its emigrants politically, and we have been repeatedly criticised by the European Commission for this. As the Commission reminded us in 2013, the right to vote is one of the fundamental political rights of citizenship. It is part of the very fabric of democracy. Depriving citizens abroad of their right to vote risks making them second-class citizens. This EU context is important. Denied the right to vote at home and often unable to vote in their country of residence, Irish emigrants are members of the tiny group of EU citizens who have no vote and no democratic representation anywhere in the world. They are completely denied access to the democratic process. This is unacceptable and we cannot stand over it.

As in the 1980s, this issue came to the fore as emigration peaked during the recession. In the context of considerable cuts to social services and rising unemployment, thousands of people left, including my own two brothers. This was especially true for young people in the years after 2008. Over 250,000 Irish citizens emigrated, and the vast majority were in their 20s. Over this period, we saw a 25% drop in the number of people in their 20s living in Ireland. This is emigration on an industrial scale but it is not a new phenomenon. Emigration has existed as a safety valve for this country in times of crisis. The sad reality, however, is that one cannot count towards the live register if one is in Sydney or London.

Despite years of debate and workable templates that exist all over the world, we have put no system in place to deal properly with migration and citizenship. Many people left on one- or two-year visas but were afforded no say in any votes that took place while away. No concern is shown for plans to return, for family back home and for their clear stake in what happens here. The attitude has been one of "out of sight, out of mind". It is simply not good enough. Nothing made this more clear than that the 2015 vote for marriage equality and the incredible #HomeToVote campaign. Former Taoiseach Deputy Enda Kenny warmly congratulated the thousands of people who had, in his words, "travelled from wherever to wherever", to put a single mark on the paper. Without a postal voting facility and with significant ambiguity as to who could stay on the register, many flew from London, New York, Sydney and further afield at huge expense. They did this just to vote and to stand up for their fellow citizens. If we had proper systems in place, they would not have had to travel. Ultimately, the fact that so many travelled so far is a testament to our citizens' desire to remain connected and their clear stake in the direction of our country. That they had to do so in the first place, however, shows just how outdated our democratic system is.

With several referenda scheduled over the next two years, this will happen again, and we need to be prepared for it. The economic context is also very important when we examine our relationship with the diaspora. It has been made clear in several policy documents that suc-

cessive Governments have sought to harness our citizens abroad to attract jobs and investment and create a better export market. It was a key theme at the first Global Irish Economic Forum in 2009 and it has been repeated at every edition since. There are still IDA posters in Dublin Airport of Saoirse Ronan and other celebrities asking those passing through the departures lounge to play their part and seek to send investment home. If, however, the global profile of Ireland is essential for investment and development, it is underpinned by the links created by those abroad. For too long we have seen this is a one-way street. In 2009, the Government's strategic review of Ireland–US relations stated:

Our single greatest asset in the US is our diaspora.

Irish America has helped Ireland's development and it remains a resource of incomparable benefit. This perfectly captures both the potential and mishandling of our relationship with the diaspora. Irish citizens abroad are a population with rights, not just an economic resource. An outlook that constantly emphasises their economic value but overlooks their citizenship and the rights that come with it does not benefit a modern democratic nation.

We are always keen to harness the diaspora but we are less keen on vindicating their rights as citizens. This has to change.

The referendum in 2019 on a presidential vote is the obvious next step, and that is rightly the focus at the moment. It has been a long time coming, after 78% of the Constitutional Convention voted in favour of the change in 2013. This tallies almost exactly with research from the UCC Emigre project, which showed 79% support from resident citizens. This is not surprising given the number of Irish families affected by emigration and the number of emigrants away on short-term visas and contracts.

Successive Irish Presidents have consistently spoken about being a representative for Irish people all over the world. In this regard I am delighted the Government has committed to a referendum on this issue. However, we must show courage and look to longer-term solutions to this very Irish problem as well. One fitting example is that several Members have been elected by votes from abroad from graduates of the University of Dublin or the National University of Ireland. These graduates can easily register and have their ballot sent abroad. Under the current system, a ridiculous situation has emerged where a person can vote from abroad, but only if she has the right degree. This is something we have discussed as part of the Seanad Bill and we need to fix it. Irish citizens abroad have a right to representation, regardless of their degree.

The key is to look towards the 2019 referendum on a presidential vote. We need to show courage and put a proper overall system in place for the longer term. Historically, we have excluded our citizens abroad due to worries about the size of the overseas vote. This ignores the many models throughout the world that control for this, such as the reserved constituencies used by France and Italy or time limits in Australia and the United Kingdom. The recent options paper from the Department goes into more detail here. I urge the Minister of State to be brave in grasping this nettle and to put such a system in place. We have been debating this democratic deficit for decades. It is time now finally to do something about it.

Senator Frank Feighan: I wish to take the opportunity to commend our Minister of State with responsibility for diaspora matters, Deputy Ciarán Cannon. He is doing great work in this area. It follows from the great work of the former Ministers of State, Jimmy Deenihan and Deputy Joe McHugh. Each had a unique style. Jimmy Deenihan has five All-Ireland medals.

Anywhere he went in the world, it was currency. I wish it was currency I could use but I do not even have a county medal. It is something I could use. The same applies to Deputy Joe McHugh, who is from Donegal. He embraced the Irish language, went around and did a great job. I know from the contacts I hear from in London, Leeds and New York that the Minister of State is bringing his musical style, which is very good. I gather those in Milwaukee were delighted with the presence of the Minister of State and his rendition on stage.

The diaspora are part of us all. I remember I travelled around the world in the early 1980s and I ended up working in Australia. I remember going into a bar full of people who never came home. Only then I realised how fortunate I was in the 1980s to be the first person in my town ever to go to Australia and come back home. I imagine many would have preferred to send me back again, but it shows how things have changed. I was so excited to meet friends of my father in New York and some of those he grew up with in Tubbercurry. I remember reading the *Roscommon Herald* in Australia. It used to come out six weeks later. I recall reading every part of that newspaper six weeks later.

That is what our diaspora have done: they have kept in touch. They probably understand more about politics and life in our country than we do because they never forgot where they came from. They did everything they could in their new lives to remember the island of Ireland.

We talk about diaspora and the Fenian brotherhood. My father worked in London most of his life. I imagine Senator Lawless would agree that in the United States we mobilise well. We certainly did as much as we could for those back home. However, one place where we did not mobilise well was the United Kingdom. Was it lack of confidence? Alcohol certainly was an issue. Maybe we did not embrace it as a political system. What has happened in recent years is incredible. It was a missed opportunity. Perhaps we should have done it 70, 80 or 90 years ago when we had a vast diaspora who were available to us. There were some missed opportunities. This is where we are now and it is wonderful to see the work being done.

There is a match on tonight. The Republic of Ireland will play Hungary.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: We are playing Denmark.

Senator Frank Feighan: Sorry, it is Denmark. I am going to the match, so I hope I am going to the right one.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Yes, I hope Senator Feighan goes to the right one.

Senator Frank Feighan: Everyone is jumping on the bandwagon of football now. I remember in the early 1980s when football was not that important. I remember at one stage in Lansdowne Road there were approximately 15,000 or 17,000 at the match. I had to meet a group from London. This brought home to me that most of the group were second-generation Irish. At least 3,000 came by boat from Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and London. They were the nucleus of the Republic of Ireland supporters' clubs. I remember we were in a pub. I think it was The Shakespeare on Parnell Street. That was the Republic of Ireland supporters' clubs. They never forgot. It was a simple thing. They had the resources to organise as supporters' clubs before Twitter and so on. I believe that is an aspect we need to carry on.

The 50,000 undocumented Irish need to have their status recognised in the United States. Again, there is far more we can do with the diaspora. There is far more we should do. Senator Black is absolutely right about voting rights. Senator Lawless is doing great work with the

diaspora and I wish him every success.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I am speaking as a returned emigrant. This is a subject I am passionate about. I welcome the work the Minister of State is doing but I wish to point out that the work will be judged on the things the Minister of State puts in place. The Minister of State can only get away with talking about the subject for so long. We really need to see things put in place. It is not only me, my colleagues or those who are saying it on a cross-party basis. The OECD and the European Commission have said it too. We are the laughing stock of the world because our emigrants, Irish citizens abroad, do not have voting rights. This cannot continue. The excuse that people hide behind and use is the fear that our diaspora will all rush out and vote for Gerry Adams. People need to get over it and get over themselves. That is what is said. If this is not put in place soon, then that is what people may rightfully think.

The minute I left Ireland I felt as if I was somehow a diluted citizen. That was offensive and it continues to offend me. There are no more excuses. The mechanisms are available. I commend the work of the Votes for Irish Citizens Abroad group. The group made a presentation to us last week. I am familiar with it from London. It has kept at it for years working for people's right to vote. I was delighted to meet the representatives. I am grateful to Senator Frances Black for inviting the group to speak to us.

It can only be talked about for so long. It needs to be done. We cannot hide behind things anymore. We need action for the thousands of people who have left. We should remember that emigration is a reality. It has been a reality in the constituency of the Minister of State and in my constituency of Mayo. However, just because it is a reality does not make it normal, and it is not normal. Then people return. It is a question of the way Irish citizens are treated abroad. They are no longer accepted into the golden circle. God knows there are enough golden circles here. There needs to be an emigrant circle where the rights of emigrants are protected. They are not making them up and a lot of them are very simple.

I welcome the initiatives taken by the Minister of State. It is also welcome that licences can be renewed online for the following year. That must be the case. However, I take issue with the fact that people then have to sit a driving test. Anyone who has driven through spaghetti junction or on the M25 or the M1 will not need a driving licence to drive on the roads here. It is just ludicrous. I passed my driving test in London. If one can meet the challenges posed by London traffic, one can certainly meet the challenges here. That must be taken into account.

The quotes given for motor insurance are generally disgraceful but especially those given to the diaspora. In the main, they are people with vast experience in business and everything else who are coming back here and have a huge amount to contribute to the economy. The Minister for Finance should bring in the insurance companies in the same way as the banks were brought in kicking and screaming after we had debated the issue for months at the finance committee. He should make the insurance companies answerable for why they see fit to have huge hikes in motor insurance premiums. Again, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating in the offers being made and the quotes given.

The banks can and must be held accountable. People are made to jump through hoops to identify who they are. They have a passport and other forms of identification. They do need to be X-rayed or have an MRI to prove they are who they say they are. They also have people to vouch for them.

I come from an agricultural community where the barriers in receiving entitlements and accessing the national reserve must be addressed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. That could be done very simply. Officials within Departments must have an understanding of what it is like to be forced to leave one's country and then to come back again.

Another issue I wish to raise with the Minister of State relates to naturalisation and people who want passports. My brothers and other family members were forced to emigrate to England. Their children consider themselves to be Irish and want to apply for passports, but they are told that they cannot because it will cost €950 to obtain a naturalisation certificate. That is totally wrong and something I ask the Minister of State to address, but there are many more issues and the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We really want to see action on these matters. I hope the next time the Minister of State comes to the House there will be measurements of the actions taken and that they will have a real impact in order that we will welcome back our emigrants and embrace everything they have to return to us.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): I thank each and every Member for his or her impassioned contribution. It is more than apparent that each and every Member has a significant interest in this issue and that he or she shares our common objective to be as supportive as we possibly can be of the diaspora, the global Irish.

I will quickly go through the contributions made in which a couple of recurring themes were apparent. If I refer to only one speaker, it does not mean that I was not listening respectfully to the contributions made by others on the same matter.

I congratulate Senator Mark Daly on being a very vocal advocate for the diaspora for many years. He is correct to point to the ongoing need to support in particular the forgotten and isolated Irish, especially in the United Kingdom. From my experience of working with the Irish abroad unit and allocating the budget within the €12 million emigrant support programme, it is a very significant objective of the officials in the unit and the embassy in London, in particular, to ensure they are not forgotten but very much nurtured and supported. Whenever we support an Irish community organisation, no matter in what city it is located in the United Kingdom, a very significant part of the programme is supporting isolated and, in particular, elderly Irish emigrants who left this country many years ago and made a significant contribution through the moneys they remitted to this country. They must not be forgotten. I assure Senator Mark Daly that it is very much at the heart of the work done by the Department.

To be frank, I do not really care whether the diaspora number 11,000, 15,000 or 50,000, as the numbers do not really matter; what matters is the ongoing engagement through Senator Billy Lawless who has done extraordinary work in that regard. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney; Deputy John Deasy and I use every opportunity to continue to make the case for some solution that will allow the issues to be resolved for the undocumented. They form a small minority within an overall figure of 11 million people across the United States and it is difficult to see how we can extract a solution that will pertain to them alone, but we are doing everything we can. I assure the Senator that that engagement will continue for as long as it takes.

Senator Mark Daly also mentioned Ireland Reaching Out as an initiative we should support. We do support and have supported it for the past six years and will continue to do so. I very much appreciate the work done by its founder, Mr. Mike Feerick, and others on the board.

The model they are adopting is very interesting. One or two speakers referred to the fact that engaging with the diaspora worldwide was about much more than attending St. Patrick's Day parades and giving a congratulatory pat on the back to Irish emigrant organisations. It is also about engaging with the diaspora at an individual level, one by one. That is what the Ireland Reaching Out programme is especially successful at doing.

It is interesting to note that in a recent survey carried out on behalf of the Department and administered through the IrishCentral news site we surveyed about 3,500 members of the diaspora across the United States, of whom a total of 69% said they considered themselves to be Irish but did not engage in any shape or manner with any Irish organisation in their local community, town or city. There are thousands, if not millions, of people, in particular in the United States, who do not feel any real affinity with a local community organisation, yet they feel Irish. We need to find some mechanism to connect with them in a more meaningful manner.

Senator Mark Daly referred to the fact that it had been said that as the crisis was over, we did not need the diaspora any more. That is very much not the case and it has never been the case. Deputy Enda Kenny was the first Taoiseach ever to appoint a Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora in Jimmy Deenihan and it continued under the Minister of State, Deputy Joe McHugh. The new Taoiseach has appointed me to that role. He has repeatedly used the phrase "global Irish nation" and referred to the fact that we need to develop a very strong sense of the community that extends far beyond this island on the edge of Europe.

Senator Billy Lawless mentioned the referendum on a right to vote in presidential elections and how important it was to build a sense of the global Irish community. The referendum will be held in the shortest possible timeframe. It is important to point out that it would be physically impossible to provide for an opportunity to vote in a presidential election any sooner than the election of 2025 because of the intricacies of the mechanics involved. It would be impossible to do so within a shorter timeframe.

Senator Billy Lawless also mentioned that it was important to continue to engage with the diaspora beyond the intergovernmental and corporate engagement we have had in the past and to somehow drill down to engage with each member of the diaspora on an individual basis. I commend the Senator for the very important work he has done. The very fact that he was appointed by the Taoiseach to the role of spokesperson for the diaspora in the national Parliament is indicative of how precious this engagement remains to the Government.

Senator Neale Richmond pointed out that the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, had appointed the first Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora. He also asked for more details of the Back for Business initiative. It is a very exciting one in that it acknowledges that a large majority of the people who are returning to Ireland are doing so on the basis that they have a good business idea which they wish to develop in this country. We are taking 48 returned emigrants or people who will be returning in the coming months and partnering them with very successful entrepreneurs who have founded and developed very successful businesses here, all of whom are involved on a voluntary basis. It is taking the seed of an idea emanating from an entrepreneurial returning emigrant and nurturing and supporting them to develop the idea in an Irish context.

Senator Billy Lawless referred to the challenges posed by Brexit, in particular in respect of the common travel area agreement which was in place long before the European Union ever existed. The retention of the common travel area between the United Kingdom and Ireland is

very much at the heart of our Brexit negotiations and will remain so.

To be frank, as he might understand, when Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh issued his press statement in which he said there had been a reduction in the budget for initiatives for the diaspora, I was somewhat taken aback and concerned. If it was the case that we were setting out to reduce the budget for the emigrant support programme, that discussion would have taken place, but I assure the Senator that it did not.

I will clarify this with my officials tomorrow and send the Senator an email. Those are the figures I have and they indicate a significant increase in the programme aid which covers our emigrant support programme. I do not know how that anomaly has arisen. There is no way a discussion would have taken place to deliberately reduce our emigrant support programme when the needs of our emigrants internationally are increasing all the time and we have the resources to support them in a much more effective way. Again, I will check those figures for the Senator.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: I look forward to that.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: The Senator spoke about our people in the UK who are concerned about their opportunities to continue having a vote in the EU elections following Brexit. I agree with Brian Hayes MEP, who spoke in London recently and outlined his opinion that we need to find a mechanism for Irish citizens resident in the UK to continue to have a say in EU elections and to be able to elect an Irish MEP or MEPs.

On the difficulties around returning emigrants, there is an interdepartmental committee which meets again tomorrow, and Senator Lawless and I will attend that meeting. The committee is seeking to address all of the administrative and bureaucratic issues which the Senator rightly points out have been an issue in the past. One by one, they are being resolved. For example, the issue around driving licences was raised by Senator Conway. We have a licence exchange agreement with the whole of the EU, so if one did one's test in London, that licence can very easily be swapped for an Irish licence. It is for jurisdictions like the US and Australia that this is particularly difficult because there are significant differences, particularly in terms of driving standards across the US, and there are also very convoluted licence exchange agreements within the US states. For example, if one was to make a concession to the state of Illinois tomorrow morning that we would have a formal licence exchange agreement on the basis that its driving standards are as good as ours, we would then have to consider what other states it has an interstate licence agreement exchange with, and whether they share the same standards as this country. It is very complex but we are working to address that as best we can.

The whole issue of international fees for our students is an area about which I am very concerned. So far, no solution is apparent to us, and I will explain why. If we, tomorrow morning, as I think we should, were to extend the right to the child of every Irish citizen across the world to study at third level in Ireland at the same cost as a child based here in Ireland, we would have to extend that same right to the children of every single EU citizen across the world. That is the law as it applies at this point in time. I am meeting with the Department of Education and Skills the day after tomorrow to discuss this further and to see if there is any way within EU law to allow for some sort of support structure to be put in place. It would be exceptionally important to have the children of our citizens abroad coming to Ireland and bringing with them their experience of living in another country and all of the positives associated with that, studying in Ireland and then becoming very powerful and effective ambassadors for us worldwide. The

benefit to Ireland as a whole would be significant if we could find a way to do that.

On the area around the national reserve, it is my understanding that the criteria applying for entry into and support from the national reserve are applied equitably across the whole country, be it to a person resident here or a person coming in from abroad, and there is no significant requirement or burden placed upon returning emigrants. They simply have to comply with the same criteria as would be necessary for somebody resident in Ireland.

Senator Black was right to point out that our Irish Abroad unit has been very effective in supporting our people internationally, particularly in partnership with our embassies. I am seeing repeated evidence of that as I visit our embassies around the world. They are exceptionally competent at building a strong sense of community across the cities and countries in which they are located. Something the Senator may be interested to hear about, because of her exceptional talent and track record in music, is Ireland's Other Voices, Philip King's extraordinary initiative, which is now essentially going on tour, which I am delighted to see. We have had Other Voices Austin, Other Voices Belfast and Other Voices Berlin. The Irish ambassador in Berlin remarked recently that at an Other Voices event in Berlin targeting the Irish community, 300 Irish people turned up who the ambassador simply did not know existed. We need to acknowledge that there is a whole new cohort of our diaspora for whom that cultural engagement is exceptionally important, and it might not be in the traditional areas of cultural engagement that we had in the past. The contemporary, cutting edge music that is supported by Other Voices can call out to, engage with and be the glue that allows us to communicate with a whole other generation of our diaspora abroad.

The Senator spoke eloquently and passionately about the whole issue of voting rights. She is correct that the obvious next step is a referendum on presidential voting rights. Senator Ó Clochartaigh asked me how I feel at a personal level about the subsequent actions. I hope the Irish people who are resident on this island will extend the hand of community and of friendship to our people internationally and allow them that very precious opportunity to elect our first citizen. At a personal level, I think that should be the platform for further extension of voting rights to our people in terms of who represents them in these Houses.

Senator Feighan again referred to the issue of using our particular talents to engage with the diaspora as best we can. I congratulate him on the wonderful work he does in building strong interparliamentary links between Ireland and the UK. These links are serving to protect the very precious and hard won peace that we now have. It also allows for the Irish in the UK to feel very much part of a sense of a greater Irish community.

Senator Conway is right that it is about results and I am a person who has always been driven by achieving results. I do not see the point in producing reports without action. We have asked Indecon to undertake an in-depth and forensic analysis of why these returning emigrant issues are arising. Once I have that report, which I hope to have in late December or early January, I will begin to act on every recommendation contained within it. Some of them will apply within the structures of the State, which I hope can be easily resolved. Others apply to organs outside the State like the insurance companies and the banking federation. I met today Insurance Ireland, which is the umbrella group representing Irish companies here. Change is happening and, thankfully, it told us it has discussed this issue with eight major insurers who supply most of the market here in Ireland. If persons returning now can provide evidence of having had a no-claims bonus or a claims-free and safe driving record abroad, that will be taken into consideration in terms of an insurance quote here. We will be producing some documenta-

tion on that in the coming weeks to explain to people how they go about doing it.

I would engage a lot with some of the people who run an excellent Facebook page, Irish Expats Returning to Ireland, which has about 15,000 people. The key issue is to prepare. If one simply turns up on the shores of Ireland having been in Australia for five years and expects all of these issues to somehow disappear, they will not. The key issue is to prepare, prepare, prepare. Insurance Ireland and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are going to produce a document that outlines to people exactly what they need to do in terms of preparing for getting insurance quotes in particular, so they have all the documentation and necessary records in place to ensure they get the most competitive quotation.

I have already addressed the issue of the national reserve and farming. On naturalisation, any barrier that is in place needs to be addressed, and €900 is a significant barrier to most families. I hope this issue is addressed within the Indecon report and a solution is suggested, which I hope we can pursue in order to resolve that issue.

Senator Mark Daly: What of the Irish parliamentary forum?

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: I understand the Irish parliamentary forum was a body convened by the first Minister of State for the diaspora, Mr. Deenihan, and it has not sat since. I would like to talk further with the Senator about that. I will be frank. Whether or not we should be spending additional resources on facilitating interparliamentary engagement with the Irish parliamentary diaspora worldwide, and while it may have merit, I think the resources we need to expend now and in the immediate future are on engaging with our diaspora at a much more granular level, getting down into communities, particularly in the UK, Australia, Canada and the US, and finding out, for example, why 70% of Irish-Americans do not engage with any Irish community organisation and why they do not feel that sense of a community and of a greater thing outside of themselves. That is where we need to focus our attention, although I would like to talk to Senator Daly about that and see if there is any mechanism we can put in place to ensure those meetings continue.

I thank all Senators for their excellent contributions. This is an area I am very much focused on and very passionate about. All Senators should feel free to contact me if they have any issues or suggestions to make on how we can provide even better or more meaningful engagement to our diaspora. My door is always open.

Sitting suspended at 6.10 p.m. and resumed at 6.16 p.m.

Housing and Rental Market: Statements

Acting Chairman (Senator Keith Swanick): The House will now have statements on the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government entitled, The Impact of Short-term lettings on Ireland's Housing and Rental Market. I call the Minister.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I want to thank Members of the Seanad for providing the opportunity this evening to discuss the report of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on the impact of short-term lettings on Ireland's housing and rental market and our plans in Government to address this. I want to thank the committee for its work in preparing the report on the sector.

I am pleased that, broadly speaking, the recommendations of the report mirror the anticipated approach I hope to propose.

The strategy for the rental sector, published nearly a year ago, recognised the potential issue of significant numbers of properties being withdrawn from the long-term rental market for use as short-term tourism-related lettings. It recognised the negative impact this would have for the supply and availability of residential rental accommodation. As the committee's report states, it is difficult to accurately measure the extent of the different forms of short-term letting and to estimate the impacts on the rental market and the availability of housing, but we are aware there is real potential for a more substantial impact in the future.

Accordingly, I established a working group made up of representatives from my Department, from the Department of Finance, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, An Bord Pleanála, Fáilte Ireland, the Residential Tenancies Board and Dublin City Council to develop proposals for the appropriate regulation for management of short-term tourism-related lettings, taking into account the Government's overall housing and rental policy objectives. I have asked this group to report to me before the end of the year.

There are three broad categories this may affect, namely, homeshares, occasional short-term letting of apartments and full-time short-term letting of apartments. I support the practice of homesharing, that is, people providing overnight and short-term accommodation in their own homes. It is a good thing. It can be an important source of income, helping homesharers to meet the costs of mortgages, rents or other household expenses and hence support tenure security. It also supports tourism and associated economic activity and even social and cultural exchange. Homesharing does not reduce the number of residential units available in the economy.

In contrast, the reason that we have to carefully monitor and in some cases restrict short-term lettings is that they may divert landlords, who normally provide residential rental accommodation, to short-term letting to tourist and business traveller customers. Similarly, people may purchase or rent properties specifically for short-term letting as an investment option, taking them out of residential market. Short-term letting under either of these scenarios would involve a direct loss of units in the rental sector or the broader housing system. This would mean less long-term and secure accommodation available to the growing numbers of families and people who need it in high-demand areas, and this cannot be allowed to continue.

I recognise the potential positive impacts of short-term letting through platforms like Airbnb, such as increased economic activity and tourism revenue. However, in a context where the housing system is under severe pressure, the positive impacts may be outweighed by the negative ones. Nor do we want to deny people the opportunity that short-term letting, in traditional bed and breakfast accommodation or via online platforms, gives them to let out rooms in their homes as a means of earning some extra income.

Recognising this essential duality in short-term letting - the difference between the home-sharing host and the commercial operation where properties are used primarily or entirely for short-term letting - is key to both our understanding of the sector and the policy and regulatory response. This is strongly reflected in the committee's report and recommendations and strongly influences my own thinking as we move to developing long-term proposals to manage this issue. Fortunately, we have not been affected by this problem to the same degree as other cities, and thankfully we can learn from approaches already taken elsewhere.

We have to develop a nuanced policy response to this issue, one that provides clarity to property owners and enables individuals to rent their apartments in a way that protects their neighbours and is consistent with the existing planning of their dwelling. The policy response must distinguish between the occasional letter and the structured full-time short-term lets of some landlords, which remove those properties from the local rental market. It should also recognise that in many parts of the country, there is less pressure on the rental sector than, for example, in the centre of Dublin, and so a nuanced, balanced approach is needed to help everyone get the best out of their local situation. In some places, short-term letting will pose a risk to the rental stock, while in others it could provide an important opportunity for landlords to make profitable use of properties they have difficulty letting. We should not forget the positive impact that increased occupancy can have on local services and businesses in places where occupancy might traditionally be low. As such, the primary goals of the regulatory proposals are to reduce the market impacts of short-term rentals on the long-term residential rental market; facilitate the use by resident householders of unused capacity in their homes for short-term letting and the associated economic benefits for them and the local economy; ensure the quality of accommodation services provided, consumer protection and safety; and limit and mitigate the costs associated with high volumes of short-term lettings borne by residential communities.

What is currently envisaged is a licensing system for intermediaries, such as websites and management companies, and persons renting out single rooms and entire properties as short-term lets. The precise details regarding inspection, monitoring, enforcement limit setting and fees, as well as the consideration of local factors, are still being finalised by the working group. As a first task, the working group was asked to develop guidance for local authorities when considering planning applications for short-term letting. This work has been completed and a circular was issued by my Department last month. I would like to take the opportunity to clarify some points that have been raised in regard to the circular.

The purpose of the circular is to address issues where an application is made for permission under the Planning and Development Act 2000 for a material change of use for short-term letting purposes. Let me be very clear. The circular has not made any change to the planning and regulatory framework in regard to short-term letting. It simply provides transitional guidance to local authorities until a more developed regulatory structure can be finalised.

The circular applies to apartments only, not houses, because of the different rules already in place about a material change of use. Importantly, planning regulations have traditionally recognised that home sharing and overnight guest accommodation is permissible in certain circumstances in houses, but not apartments, without a need to obtain planning permission. I wish to explain and clarify that point. The owners of homes are in full control of the area surrounding their homes, whereas apartment owners share facilities such as doors and corridors surrounding their homes. Therefore, we have to treat houses and apartments a little differently, not because of the impact on the owner of the property but because of the impact on the other owners in a shared facility setting such as an apartment block. Under the Planning Act, all development, including a material change of use, requires planning permission unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated regulations. Short-term letting in apartments, therefore, may constitute a material change of use and, if it does, requires planning permission. It is up to the owner of a property to seek guidance from his or her local authority as to whether a change of use permission may be required. This is the current position and has not been altered by the recent guidance.

The Department is open to assisting web-based platforms, such as Airbnb and others, to

provide the necessary information on their platforms, where they do not yet do so, to ensure that property owners using their services are fully aware of the applicable planning requirements and on how to meet them. The guidance provides that when considering an application for planning permission for a material change of use in an apartment in order to allow short-term letting, consideration should be given as to whether the short-term letting will be for more than 60 nights, will cater for more than four guests and involve more than two rooms, and whether more than 20% of the apartments on any floor of the building are being used for the activity. This refers to applications for apartments only and does not relate to houses.

This guidance is a first step. The broader licensing and regulatory approach on which the working group is developing proposals will provide the nuanced and comprehensive framework I believe we need to meet our varying goals within the sector. I will revert to both Houses with any proposed amendments to the planning code which may be required on foot of the working group's report. One thing I would particularly point out to Senators is that throughout the committee's examination of short-term letting and its impacts, all stakeholders agreed there is a lack of quality data in order to inform an evidence-based approach to the problem. Most stakeholders consider that short-term lettings are having an adverse impact on the residential rental market, in particular in Dublin, but much of the evidence presented is anecdotal or based solely on opinion. To try to remedy this, Dublin City Council, in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland, is commissioning a study to assess the impact of short-term letting on Dublin's residential housing market. In addition, any proposed licensing regime will need to generate quality data so that policy makers in the future will be better informed.

Before concluding, I would like to refer to today's reports from the ESRI on house prices and from *www.daft.ie* on rents. Both reports point to a strong demand for housing, bolstered by economic recovery and falling unemployment which, coupled with a tight supply of housing, is exerting a strong upward pressure on house prices and rents. A continued and sustainable supply of new homes across all tenures is the solution. The Rebuilding Ireland target is to increase the annual supply of new homes to 25,000 by 2020.

Regarding the ESRI special article on house prices, the report published today seeks to determine whether house price growth is divorced from key economic fundamentals, that is, employment levels, population growth and disposable income. The ESRI paper was produced under a joint research programme, operated by the ESRI with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The conclusion is that prices appear to be at or close to the levels expected, based on our economic recovery, and there is no evidence that other factors, such as a credit bubble, are responsible for price inflation.

While the results of the paper underscore the challenges we face in the housing area, it is important that research such as this is conducted to inform our understanding and to provide a sound empirical basis for policy responses. The clear message from the paper is that the ongoing recovery in the economy will continue to exert upward pressure on house prices. In view of the strong growth envisaged, the ESRI notes that Government policy needs to focus clearly on housing supply, and that is the focus of the Government's Rebuilding Ireland - Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness.

Regarding the *www.daft.ie* report on rents, we are well aware that there are acute pressures in the rental market driven by rising demand, the economic recovery, a lack of supply -- which we are discussing today - and the high costs which highly indebted landlords face in servicing their mortgage loans. These pressures are borne out by the trend highlighted in the data, which

is upwards, but I would dispute the reported rate of increase. It is important to note that the *www.daft.ie* data measures rent asking prices, which tend to be higher than the rents actually being paid. The low number of properties being advertised on *www.daft.ie* means that the figures are based on a relatively small sample and may not be entirely representative.

The rent index report issued by the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, is based on actual rents in registered tenancies. Its figures are based on excess of 20,000 registrations each quarter. The RTB data are used by the Government to monitor rent prices. The RTB's rent index report for quarter 3 of 2017 is expected next month and will provide information on actual rents agreed for tenancies established in quarter 3 2017. However, if we look back to quarters 1 and 2 we find the average rent increase over those two quarters was less than 4%.

There is no doubt that rent increases continue to place significant pressures on tenants, particularly those who are seeking new accommodation. The data in the report further underline the need for and the relevance of the Government's rent predictability measures. The Department carried out a review of the rent predictability measure over the summer, based on the RTB data for the first two quarters of 2017, which involved public consultation and input from local authorities. The review found that the rent measures and the rent pressure zones, RPZs, are not fully achieving their desired effect, due to non-compliance by some landlords with the RPZ requirements, such as, for example, using the refurbishment exemption to charge higher rents, and some tenants being willing to pay over the legal rent increases permitted. On foot of this review, I announced a number of changes that will be made to strengthen the impact and effectiveness of the RPZs. These will clarify and tighten up the rules for exemptions and make it an offence to charge rents above those permitted by the legislation. The RTB will be given the powers to investigate and prosecute landlords who implement such increases. Government policy is clearly focused on increasing housing supply and particularly the supply of homes at more affordable price points. The ESRI analysis underscores the need to boost supply across all tenures, that is, private, rented and social housing, to meet current and pent-up demand and mitigate any further increases as the economy recovers.

I would like to thank the committee for its thoughtful and substantive report on the impact of short-term letting and for the recommendations which it contains. They are and will continue to be extremely helpful as we move forward with the design and establishment of an appropriate regulatory framework to protect our housing and rental supply and also take advantage of the benefits that this new and growing shared economy provides.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister for coming before the House and sharing his report. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government. Clearly, this is a very complex issue. The Minister is correct in stating that there is a lack of data sets and hard facts on this issue. I presume the committee's recommendations are available online. We made 13 recommendations following a lot of discussion and engagement. We heard from Airbnb and other platforms. We tend to focus on Airbnb, but there are other ways to source short-term letting. One issue is the resourcing of local authorities in terms of carrying out inspections. Any regulations, controls or legislation we may introduce will not work unless enforcement powers and resources are provided to local authorities.

I wish to acknowledge the work of the committee Chair, Deputy Maria Bailey, and thank the committee members, who put a lot of time and work into the recommendations. I also wish to thank the committee secretariat which serviced the committee well.

I wish to raise a few points with the Minister. I take it that he has taken all of the recommendations on board. I refer to the second recommendation, namely that a licensing system be introduced for short-term lettings. That is important. The third recommendation was that casual short-term lettings of up to 90 days in a given year should perhaps be examined, which is related to planning issues. The eighth recommendation was that a review of current planning and development laws and regulations should be carried out to establish whether they are robust enough to prevent abuses of the system. That is important.

The eleventh recommendation was profound, in a way, and strong. It was that the current memorandum of understanding between the Department and Airbnb cease as the committee did not believe it was sufficient or appropriate. Finally, the 13th recommendation is “that adequate resources be provided to local authorities in order for them to undertake a systematic inspection and enforcement regime”. That is really important. I am glad the Minister has taken the report on board, or at least that his working group will look at all these issues. Will the Minister share with us when he intends for the working group to complete its work?

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The end of the year.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister. I am not just saying this because I am on the committee, but the report was very extensive. There was huge public engagement and consultation. After a lot of close scrutiny it was decided that we should be very focused on the key issues. That is why we made 13 recommendations.

Senator Keith Swanick: The growth of short-term lettings such as Airbnb across the globe has presented a set of serious challenges for regulators who are catching up. The State has an important role to play in ensuring proper planning is fully adhered to and the housing market protected. Fianna Fáil is in favour of the 90-night limit put forward by the report. This will not discourage homesharing but will prevent the loss of homes from long-term renting into professional short-term letting. Preliminary research conducted by Dublin City Council in March 2017 on the extent of Airbnb activity in Dublin suggests that a total of 6,729 listings existed on Airbnb for all of Dublin, with 5,377 listings located within the Dublin City Council area at that time. Of these, 50% were listings for entire houses or apartments only. The committee also heard evidence that there are currently more short-term rental properties available in the Dublin 1 area than there are traditional rental units, and that at least 30 former rented units have been lost in the past 18 months as a result of changing use for the purposes of short-term lets.

Just this morning I checked Airbnb for availability tomorrow night. I did not pick tonight as I am sure there will be an extra burden on all hotels and rentals as a result of the Ireland-Denmark game. For tomorrow, there were 306 entire apartments or homes available to choose from in the Dublin city centre area. That was only 10% of the entire listing. Based on that, over 2,000 have been booked already for tomorrow night. Some 243 hosts had more than one property and these 243 hosts accounted for 913 properties between them. This highlights how 15% of hosts possessed 39% of entire home listings on the Airbnb platform on that given date. There were 1,103 entire homes booked for more than 80 nights in all Dublin during 2016. In Dublin, a typical host on Airbnb earned €5,000 and hosted for 51 nights in 2016.

Outside Dublin, there were 960 Airbnb hosts in Cork in one year. In the period from September 2015 to August 2016, earnings for a typical host in the south-west region, taking in Cork and Kerry, were €3,900. On October 23 the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government issued a circular stating that planning permissions for short-term lets should be

refused if there was a short-term let of over 60 days. The guidance was unclear over who had to apply for permission and on what grounds it would be granted or refused. It also outlines a refusal of permission for stays of more than five nights or for more than four people, which would rule out families and week long holidays. This was met with bewilderment and confusion by stakeholders. Why has 60 nights been selected? What is the basis for just four people? The guidance is contradictory and confusing and risks damaging the sector without actually properly regulating it.

The Department convened a short-term letting task force which is due to issue recommendations by the end of 2017. In response to Dáil questions last month the Minister, Deputy Murphy, stated the planning circular gives guidance on current planning laws but the task force recommendations will set out the basis for a new regulatory framework. I cannot understand how we can make it so difficult. There are plenty of international examples out there. In San Francisco, hosts have to register with the authorities and if Airbnb advertises an unregistered property, it can be fined \$1,000 a day for each listing. In Berlin, people who let more than 50% of their apartment on a short-term basis without a permit risk a fine of €100,000 and London has imposed a 90 night limit per year on short-term lets.

This Government loves a good task force, review, report, or expert group. It loves kicking issues down the road so as not to deal with them, but this is not complex. Despite the Taoiseach's statement at the weekend, we are all in agreement that we have a homelessness crisis and that any measures to address it should be taken. There can be no doubt that the lack of long-term rentals is directly feeding into the homelessness emergency. The Government's confused circular from last month needs to be replaced with clear regulation around the 90 night limit.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Minister and thank him for the debate we are having. I commend the committee of which Senator Boyhan is a member for the work that it has done. As a former Chair of a committee, I think the debates we are having here, and which should also be held in the other House, are of extreme importance given the matters on which joint committees work. The previous Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Barrett, made a proposal to have debates in the Houses on reports produced by the committees. The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Business Committee should expedite that proposal because it is important to have debates on the work of committees.

I commend the Minister for this work and his proactivity. Undoubtedly the report which we are debating tonight and the issue of the housing sector are matters in which we are very much immersed, because we all live in communities in which we recognise the importance of social housing, private housing, rentals and short-term letting. We all desire the delivery of more affordable housing and we are working towards it. That is what Rebuilding Ireland is about. Contrary to what Senator Swanick said, the Taoiseach is very much aware of, and is very committed to, the issue of housing and has prioritised it in his tenure as leader of the Government. I ask the Senator to read Rebuilding Ireland and to look at Building a Republic of Opportunity and the Taoiseach's speech last Friday night in order to see his commitment to the issue.

We can have ideological differences about the procurement and provision of housing. I agree with the Minister on homesharing. I welcome his nuanced approach to the issue and what he said, which Senator Boyhan pointed out, about having an evidence-based approach. It is what we need and the committee's report has said as much. If those of us who are old enough to have been students in the 1970s and 1980s cast our minds back, many families in Bishopstown, where I live, had students in their houses. This was called "digs". They paid to have a

room, meals were provided and the family had the positive experience of having a student in the house. As the Minister said in his speech, it also allowed the family to raise extra money. We need to further explore the Minister's points in respect of his primary goals in the areas of the market, the facilitation of householders who are renting, and the quality of accommodation, along with mitigating costs.

If I might digress for a minute I will return to the Minister's final point in his speech, about the ESRI and *daft.ie* reports. I commend the Government and Cork City Council. Some €155 million will be expended by Cork City Council, with the Government, on the provision of 634 units, which underlies the importance of housing for this Government and for the Fine Gael Party. That money is for the construction of social housing in Cork city. It belittles the usual mantra which we will hear from some in this Chamber regarding Fine Gael and its social housing policy. Senator Ó Clochartaigh may well look at me with amusement. We will be delivering €155 million over a list of projects across northside-----

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: How many houses will be there to live in by the end of next year?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I said 634 units.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: At the end of next year?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Yes. This €155 million demonstrates the commitment of this Minister to the delivery of social housing. Senator Ó Clochartaigh can speak to the people in Sheridan Court, the people who are waiting for Dean Rock estate or the people looking for housing in Skehard Road. They know that this Government will deliver. We do not just talk or put up placards, we put foundations and bricks and mortar in place and we deliver houses. That is the Fine Gael Party's record in Government. I would be happy to have that debate with the Senator on any platform.

The number of social units being constructed in Cork is actually greater than the number being built by the private sector. That is a source of worry and I hope we can see it addressed. The other issue of concern to me is that last July, in a series of extraordinary meetings, Cork City Council passed eight Part 8 development applications. They are with the Department and are at varying stages of finalisation. I hope that as a consequence of this debate and the good work of people such as Valerie O'Sullivan and Brian Geaney on Cork City Council that the budgetary approval which has been given can be expedited. These eight Part 8 developments will create more social housing units and will enable people to come off the lists for Cork City Council. It is important these projects are expedited because people are waiting for these houses.

The Minister referred to affordable housing. We all want to see that addressed in the short term because we all know of people who do not qualify for social housing who cannot afford to buy and are paying exorbitant rents. We must urgently examine the area of affordable housing schemes. I know the Minister has plans for this. These are the people who fall between the cracks, and this problem must be addressed. I recognise that Rebuilding Ireland provides a roadmap, and the Government has increased the available funds to €6 billion. If one were to compare that with the budget in the North passed in the House of Commons, what does it provide for housing? That is a question that should be answered.

Rebuilding Ireland is a whole-of-Government approach to housing and ensures that the Government gives significant support. That commitment was demonstrated by the Minister,

Deputy Eoghan Murphy, in Cork recently, opening a wonderful scheme for young people in Bishopstown in recent weeks. These people were not at home or in college but are now in college and are able to reach their full potential. These are young men and women who want to make a contribution, the Government recognised there was a need and came in through Cork Foyer to do that.

As part of the ongoing debate, we should look at the capacity of the construction sector regarding labour skills and financing. We can discuss banks and pillar banks and housing agencies. I hope the Minister will return to the House so that we may have a wider debate on future policy in housing and do so in a philosophical manner. Approved housing bodies may be the favoured vehicle in some quarters, but I believe local authorities are best as they can deliver in a more timely manner.

I commend the Minister on his approach since taking office. Despite criticism, he has got to grips with the situation and has displayed an understanding of the issue. He meets people and discusses issues, rather than asserting that his way is the only way. I have seen his ability to engage and discuss at first hand. I commend him and thank the committee for the report.

An Cathaoirleach: Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Ó Clochartaigh. Tá ocht nóiméad aige. Tá seans aige anois.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Tá, ach níl mé chun mo chuid ama a chur amú ar an Seanadóir Buttimer agus a chuid seafóide.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Tá cruinniú agam agus caithfidh mé imeacht. Gabh mo leithscéal

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Beidh sé ar an taifead. Ná bíodh inní ar an Seanadóir.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: Spare us the Punch and Judy show.

An Cathaoirleach: Ar aighaidh leat, ná bac leis.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Sinn Féin commends the work of the committee and calls on the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to act on the recommendations and bring forward the necessary legislation needed to enact them. Rental figures released today by *daft.ie* show that rental pressure zones are not working, since they have not even managed to keep rents stable. These pressure zones were meant to be the Government's great plan to at least cool the rental market before the bigger issues of supply and freeing up units could be addressed. Without being glib, the sticking plaster solution has not worked.

Several points jump out from the *daft.ie* report. Rents have now risen for 21 consecutive quarters and show no sign of stopping. The quarterly increase in rents between June and September was 3.4%, the fourth largest recorded. Four of the five largest recorded quarterly increases in rents have happened since the start of 2016. From the data in this report, it is clear that landlords are breaching the 4% cap set by the current legislation on a wholesale basis. Unfortunately, as with most issues within the private rented sector, the tenant is responsible for ensuring that landlords comply with the new legislation.

The figures for Galway are disgraceful. Rents in County Galway have risen 14.5% in the last year. A search for three bed properties available in Galway city today on *daft.ie* shows landlords are seeking up to €2,200 a month for a very ordinary three bedroom house, with seven beds in the three rooms. Recent comments by the Taoiseach on the ability of people on the

average wage to buy what he called an affordable house of €315,000 show how out of touch he and Government are from the reality of the national housing crisis. I note that Fianna Fáil has commented this morning on these figures calling them “scandalous”, yet at the same time it has opposed every effort by Sinn Féin to address the underlying issues of soaring rents and family evictions. Sinn Féin has introduced numerous Bills and proposals in these Houses on rent control and rent certainty, homelessness, protecting mortgage holders and so on, but the real scandal is that Fianna Fáil has supported Fine Gael to defeat these measures every time. Our proposals would have saved young families thousands of euro, allowing them to save for deposits and give them some hope that they may at some stage escape the clutches of greedy landlords. Fianna Fáil is as much to blame for this appalling situation as Fine Gael.

The report we are discussing from the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government came about due to a chronic shortage of properties in the private rental sector. Landlords renting properties on short-term lease platforms have seen their profits increase greatly while the available rental stock for ordinary citizens and families has dramatically decreased. The impact of short-term lettings on the rental market is not only seen in Dublin, it is a nationwide phenomenon. The submission of the Simon Communities to the joint committee states: “The complete lack of affordable housing across the Irish housing system is at the core of the housing and homelessness crisis.” It notes that:

Ireland’s private rented sector is not working for private renters or recipients of State housing payments. As rents spiral upwards and supply falls, rent supplement and HAP payments are becoming increasingly ineffectual leaving recipients locked out of a crowded and increasingly competitive market, increasing their risk of entering or re-entering homelessness.

The approximate scale of short term rentals in Ireland can be estimated by conducting an Airbnb letting availability search in key locations nationwide, as the Simon Communities did for the week of 19 - 23 June. Looking at Galway for that week, for instance, there were 185 “entire place”, or full house, rentals available, representing only 27% of total listings, which suggests there were 685 such properties in Galway alone.

Senator Colm Burke: That shows the strength of tourism.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: When one compares Airbnb figures in Galway with those for longer term lets on *daft.ie*, on 1 May 2017, there were 13.5% more properties to let on a short-term basis on Airbnb than the total number of properties for the combined provinces of Connacht and Ulster on *daft.ie*. That is why we must examine the report’s recommendations very seriously and why the Government needs to implement some of them.

The committee made the following recommendations: that a two-level regulatory regime be introduced via primary legislation in relation to short-term lettings with a strict regime of regulations targeted at entire properties, short-term commercial lettings at one level, and a less stringent second level focused at those who rent out their primary residence for a period of 90 days or less per year; that a licensing system be introduced for short-term lettings and short-term letting platforms and that such a system should require platforms to register all hosts with the relevant local authority and to share information on letting type, availability and use with the local authority, and the revenue generated by the host with the Office of the Revenue Com-

missioners; that casual short-term lettings of up to 90 days in a given year should be exempt from planning permission. Any short-term letting in excess of 90 days should require change-of-use planning permission; that a study of the impact of short-term lettings on Ireland's housing and rental market be commissioned, focusing particularly on Dublin 1 and Dublin 7 and the ripple effect which may have been experienced in the surrounding localities; that in order to track properties shifting from long-term letting to short-term letting that landlords be required to provide a reason for a tenancy ending to the Residential Tenancies Board and the local authority; that each local authority is adequately resourced and each establish a role with specific responsibility for short-term lettings; and that the working group establishes the data required in order to continuously monitor the impact of short-term lettings. It states that, on foot of this, a system should be put in place for short-term letting providers to be required to provide the Department with these data. It also states that a review of current planning and development laws and regulations should be carried out to establish whether they are robust enough to prevent abuse of the system.

The report recommends that local authorities begin strict enforcement of Article 10(4) and that they should ensure that apartments being used for short-term lettings have the necessary planning permission. In recommendation 10, it suggests that the working group engage with stakeholders from other jurisdictions to establish the regulations or amendments they introduced to curb the impact of short-term lettings. It also recommends that the memorandum of understanding between the Department and Airbnb be ceased as the committee does not believe the memorandum of understanding is sufficient or appropriate. It states that educational material to help inform short-term letting hosts of their legal rights and responsibilities should be posted on the website of the Residential Tenancies Board and that adequate resources should be provided to local authorities in order for them to put in place a systematic inspection and enforcement regime of short-term lettings and to publish periodically the results of these inspections.

We ask that all these recommendations are taken on board and that the Department would indicate to us a timeframe as to when it intends to implement those recommendations. We commend the work of the committee. However, I note that Senator Buttimer made a number of comments about housing being built in certain areas.

An Cathaoirleach: Tá an t-am istigh anois.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: We are often accused of fairytale economics but Senator Buttimer is suffering from fairytale construction syndrome. The people who are thronging daily to our offices looking for somewhere to live do not see enough evidence of those houses being built. We need to see action in this area as well as the others I have outlined.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the Minister for his time today. I also thank the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government for conducting work in this relatively new and rapidly developing area of the housing crisis. It struck me as I was reading this report, which is timely and welcome, that a sort of reversal of roles has taken place as the issue has developed. On the one hand, we have Irish citizens who are becoming homeless due to our broader housing crisis being housed in hotels by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government while tourists who used to stay in those hotels are now staying in the spare rooms, apartments and houses which our homeless population should be living in as their homes. This problem affects every part of the housing chain. As more medium and long-term rental opportunities are sucked into the market for short-term lets for tourists, we become, at the top, less attractive in terms of foreign direct investment and relocation opportunities as a result of Brexit. In the

middle, families, younger professionals and students are suffering a worse quality of life due to the greater demand and consequent higher prices for private rental accommodation. At its absolute worst, the issue is causing people to be homeless as low-income families and individuals are simply not as profitable for landlords as short-term rental opportunities.

A couple of specific issues in the report are particularly glaring and need to be addressed immediately. The first is the absence of data. We are fumbling around in the dark without impartial State statistics. That an Oireachtas committee examining a crisis in our housing market has to rely on tripartite data from Airbnb, a secondary website that has data related to Airbnb and Dublin City Council, where none of the figures seem to correlate with each other, is not an acceptable standard on which to formulate housing policy. Airbnb, as an actor in the market, could have an alternative motive and we cannot rely on it to formulate policy given it could be at fault or in need of regulation itself. The main opposition view in this report is presented by the Irish Property Owners Association, which claims that these short-term lets are not affecting the rental market. We should not have to rely on a group with a potential vested interest in the current arrangement, given the perceived flexibility it gives property owners, especially when it denies this is a real problem while at the same time admitting that the problem is following the same trends as in London, where the problem is now prevalent. As a result, it seems clear that the Department needs to impose registration and licensing requirements on landlords immediately and start collecting comprehensive and regularly updated data, in line with recommendations 2 and 7 of the report. We need data to be independent of market actors and the Department can fill this role easily.

In terms of the issue of regulation, one line from this report really stuck out to me which was that “[t]he private rental market remains the main access route for people leaving homelessness”. I suppose that the statement is true but that the private rental market is framed as the number one pathway out of homelessness took my breath away for a second. As the report illustrates, there is a lack of strong and stringent State regulation of the private rental sector at the moment and it is therefore concerning to me that this is how we allow our homeless population to re-enter the housing market. I do not accept that the private rental market should be the primary route out of homelessness. I worked in the homelessness sector for a long time and saw people move out of homelessness into rental accommodation and end up back in a cycle of homelessness.

The rental market is not secure or predictable enough to be moving vulnerable people from hostels and hotels straight into it. If the sector is going to remain the main pathway for at least the immediate future, the Minister needs to act immediately to strengthen regulation in this area. However, I recognise the progress that has been made on this broader issue to date, particularly the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act passed in the Oireachtas last Christmas. The committee recommendations in this area are strong and I urge the Minister to take them on as Government policy. Recommendations 1, 2, 5 and 6 are particularly constructive. However, in terms of the two-tier regulatory structure, I am strongly of the view that we should at least consider, as an emergency measure, completely banning short-term rentals of entire homes which are not primary residences to bring those properties back into the housing supply immediately. Perhaps this would be a radical move but it was done in Berlin last year in response to a housing shortage and it would be a strong and proactive response to the issues raised in this report.

In terms of responding through legislation to the issues raised in the report, a number of practical steps jump out from reading it. First, the exemption from planning permission for

overnight guest accommodation in Article 10(4) of the 2001 regulations needs to be amended and updated. From my reading of it, the exemption appears to stem from a different era and was most likely drafted with family-owned bed and breakfast accommodation in mind. It needs to be changed to reflect how rapidly this market has expanded. Second, the report clearly outlines that there is a lack of clarity and definitions in the housing regulations. We need State definitions, whether in primary legislation or regulations. These would include what constitutes a primary residence, the difference between homesharing and short-term rental activity and the definition of a short-term let.

I welcome the committee's opposition to the memorandum of understanding with Airbnb and agree that it is inappropriate. We would have better clarity on the market if better data were collected but, considering there are other actors in this market too, the memorandum will not comprehensively address the issues raised. We need to augment the obligations on Airbnb to supply the Department and the Oireachtas with up-to-date and accurate information on the use of its platform. The data supplied to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government were incomplete and we should be taking a proactive role in ensuring Airbnb's responsibility to declare usage is stricter. I also welcome the references to liability in these lets. This is an issue of great concern and the possibility for termination of tenancy, if a landlord finds out, would force more people back into the market and even homelessness. I hope the Minister is considering this issue and draft legislation along these lines. I would welcome a chance to contribute to the process when it comes to the Oireachtas. An update in this respect would be appreciated.

Senator Colm Burke: I welcome the Minister to the House. I agree with Senator Ruane in much of what she has said. Some of the provisions in the planning legislation and, in particular, the exemption about which she spoke were designed for a different era. We now need to bring in amending legislation to deal with this. Senator Swanick referred to 15% of the number of hosts possessing 39% of the entire home listings. This is now big business for some people. The owner of a guest house who has an income of more than €37,000 a year must collect VAT. Given that 15% of the number of hosts own 39% of the entire home listings, what is the VAT position of these people? I am not going after those who have one house and want to get an extra bit of income by providing this service.

I am not talking about them but about the people who have turned it into a major business. It is an area to be examined.

Senator Lynn Ruane touched on the next matter, the breach of covenants in leases. I am talking about management agreements in apartment blocks. I am not clear on whether there is compliance with management agreements or covenants in leases or deeds conveying these properties if there are lettings such as this. The position can easily be adjusted in apartment blocks if there is not sufficient wording in documents to prevent something like this from happening. This is where a building is provided for residential use only.

Another matter about which I am concerned is insurance. Is there adequate insurance provision? I have gone through the report, but I have not seen any real reference to the insurance element. For example, if there is an incident - we hope there never will be - will insurance cover be provided if property is damaged or parties are injured? In a recent "RTÉ Investigates" report we saw huge numbers of people occupying properties. If there was to be a major incident in any of these properties, the insurers would argue there had been a breach of regulations or compliance with the conditions of the insurance agreement and they might not pay out. This is

something the Department must examine and on which it should engage with insurance companies. It should seek clarification on it.

Senator Lynn Ruane has said she is not satisfied that this is the full detail of the number of properties involved and that there are 5,377 listings for Airbnb. What information do we have that all of the 5,377 listings have notified their insurance companies in that respect? This is very important and we must deal with the matter.

There is also the matter of fire safety. I know that the “RTÉ Investigates” report had a different angle on lettings, but is there adequate provision in all of these premises for fire safety? The television programme also referenced the lack of staff in local authorities to carry out inspections. The Department must take up this issue with each local authority to ensure there is an adequate number of inspections, no matter what the area. We did this in the restaurant and food outlet sector, in which there is strict regulation of inspections, but we do not seem to have the same process in place for the letting of properties. It is important that we change that and have an adequate number of staff in every local authority to carry out inspections in order that the regulations can be complied with in full. We can all speak all day about new regulations, but if we do not have adequate supervision, the system of regulation will be absolutely useless. It is important that that issue be dealt with also.

I thank the Minister for dealing with this issue. I also thank the committee for its extensive work and bringing forward its proposals.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I, too, thank the committee for the work it has done. This is a very important matter which many Members have raised several times. That is why I was so anxious for it to be debated, as many people had put much hard work into it. I want to get away from the use of Airbnb because we are talking about short-term lettings. If anybody were to google it, he or she would very quickly find approximately 15 companies in Dublin operating in the short-term letting market, including Booking.com, Dublin Short Lets, Dublin City Apartments, Dublin at Home, Dial-a-Short-Let, Housetrip.com, thekeycollection.ie, Homestay, etc. The previous Senator used the 5,377 listings figure, but the number is far greater than that for Airbnb.

When I walked out my front hall door this morning, there were six people standing on the street, waiting for their keys to get into various houses. The six houses would normally have been for working people in the long-term letting market, but they have now been moved to Airbnb. I am sure that when I return home this evening, there will be somebody pulling a suitcase up the road and using his or her phone to find a certain street with the Airbnb rental property. I am not referring to people letting a room but the whole house. I am talking about two up and two down traditional working class housing in Dublin 2 or Dublin 4. This morning I was in Portobello speaking to people about ensuring they were on the register in time for the referendum to repeal the eighth amendment of the Constitution. I followed a car around the area and when the boot was opened, out came the towels and shampoo; the person was servicing a small terraced house as an Airbnb let. When I asked the driver what he was doing, he told me that it was his full-time job. He travels around the city centre turning over houses previously in the long-term letting market. A local woman pointed out that what would have traditionally been civil servant accommodation - a house with six apartments - was now an Airbnb rental property with a constant turnover. Why would one not do this when one sees the figures? On the south side of the city one could make up to €160,000 per year on a two-bedroom Airbnb rental property with a 75% occupancy rate. One could make up to €150,000 on the north side. I will not

reference the north-south divide, but these units are lost to families.

Senator Lynn Ruane mentioned the idea of tourists in homes and families in hotel rooms. That is common in the city. We have received report after report and do not need an in-depth investigation. There are multiple signs across all sites. At Spencer Dock a three-bedroom unit will make €94,900 per year with Airbnb. It would have been built for a family or working people within the city. That is for what planning permission was granted. We cannot keep turning a blind eye to this. Another example is an affordable city flat in Dublin 4, with a rental figure of €1,050. Total rent every year is €54,000. The list could go on and I found those after only a couple of minutes on the Internet.

There are indications that several private companies are advertising for Airbnb rental properties that they will fully maintain. They will change the bedclothes and shampoo in properties across the city centre. A gentleman who lives on the north docks spoke to me this morning. He had bought an apartment which he wanted to make his family home. There are 640 apartments in the development. Last summer he took time out to investigate how many of them were in the short-term letting market full time. There were 300. We have a problem and must take our heads out of the sand to deal with it.

People ring me constantly to tell me their communities have been hollowed out, with homes beside them now being party homes. Last week a young woman in the city centre rang me to tell me that she would have to put her apartment up for let as the two two-bedroom apartments above her were constantly being let. Last bank holiday weekend she had to call the management company which contacted the landlord who then called An Garda Síochána. This was after several incidents. The landlord said he had no idea what was happening; he just let the property on Airbnb. I accept there are 16 other platforms.

Nearly 50 people in the two apartments above her had been partying for the weekend. She needed to work to pay her mortgage. How can she do that with a party of 50 people making noise over a bank holiday weekend? In fairness to the gardaí, they wanted to do something but needed the public order unit to deal with the issue because there were too many people for a single garda to manage. The landlord walked away and said he could not manage the situation.

I am hearing such complaints on an almost daily basis from Stoneybatter to Ringsend and Pearse Street to Phibsborough. Communities are being hollowed out by short-term letting. Families bought homes only to find that their streets are being turned into hotels. Those who bought apartments see hotel-style trolleys in corridors, and sheets, towels and shampoos being changed as would happen in a hotel. People who have to go to work every day to pay their mortgages have invested their lives in these homes.

This does not include those across the city who are homeless and could rent homes, and workers who want to rent apartments but are competing with rents of €160,000 per year for a two-bedroom apartment. How can they compete with that? That is not covered by our planning specifications.

The Minister said we may be able to do something about apartments, but we have no mechanisms for houses. I have seen good, solid inner city communities turned into holiday lands. That is not what they are meant for. They could house families.

We all want a quick fix for the housing crisis. If there was action on this issue we could provide 2,500 units for the long-term letting market. I have met landlords who told me they

have four or five houses in Stoneybatter and that is their business. I have been asked how I dare to interfere with their rights. I explained that they are family homes and that the area is zoned as a residential area for families rather than holiday lets. They told me they let the houses on a long-term basis, but can make 100% more in short-term letting.

We cannot wait for more reports. I have raised this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy English, the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, and the Minister, Deputy Murphy. When the Minister, Deputy Murphy, was in the House on 28 September he talked to me about a licensing procedure. I read his contribution to the debate. He said:

A licensing system is probably the best way to go. There is a group working on this. It will be led by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

That Department has skin in the game on this issue. It is interested in tourism numbers and bringing more tourists into the city, and fair dues to it. I am interested in families getting into homes and solid working class communities across the city which have been hollowed out. To allow the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to lead on a licensing issue such as this is unacceptable.

I have a Bill on the Order Paper for the regulation and registration of short-term lettings. I am quite happy to withdraw it and offer it as a Government Bill. Let us move forward. I have heard about studies from the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister, Deputy Murphy, yet every day families are competing against short-term lets.

I have spoken to auctioneers across the city who have told me people are looking for two-up, two-down houses for short-term lets. Such houses are where working people traditionally lived, but they are now been turned into holiday lets. I am angry. This is a new model of housing in the city. We turned a blind eye to it over the past two years.

It is insulting to talk about a memorandum of understanding with Airbnb when it has not stuck to one memorandum of understanding across the Continent. Each city had to introduce legislation and regulation, and we will be no different. The sooner we do so the better. If we are really serious about this housing crisis, we can turf tourists back to hotels and put families back into homes. It is up to the Minister to do something about it.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I thank Senators who made contributions. I am deputising for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. I will try to address some of the specific issues which were raised. I have made a list of the questions I cannot answer directly and I will try to get responses to them.

As I am sure we can all agree, home sharing fulfils an important and valuable contribution in terms of tourism in our economy, as well as providing a valuable source of income for homeowners. Home sharing where the dwelling involved is the permanent or long-term residence of a person or family does not reduce the number of residential units available in the economy. The Government wants to enable responsible home sharing in ways that do not affect the availability of long-term residential rental properties.

As the Minister, Deputy Murphy, stated earlier, the aim is to facilitate the short-term letting of accommodation within permanent residences while protecting the existing stock of residential property in areas of high demand, safeguarding neighbourhood amenity and consumer pro-

tection and generating revenue to address negative externalities of short-term letting, to which Senator Humphreys referred.

The short-term lettings market caters to a distinct market which otherwise would not be served. Short-term lettings typically cater for people who fall outside of normal hotel customers, including those looking for a more local experience and, in some cases, those with lower incomes. It is important that such visitors to Ireland are catered for and not be denied this experience due to an overly restrictive regulatory regime.

Any proposed licensing regime must have cognisance of the relevant local effects short-term letting can have on a community. Naturally, where a rent pressure zone is in place, it may be desirable to try to curtail the number of entire properties availing of the short-term letting market. Conversely, in areas where there are vacant properties and low demand for rental accommodation, there is potential for a licensing regime to encourage short-term letting, thus incentivising tourism activity and providing a source of income for vacant property owners.

We have planning laws and will make sure they are enforced properly. As a first step, the working group has developed guidance for local authorities in regard to the appropriate approach for planning decisions related to short-term lettings and a circular in this regard was issued to all local authorities last month. The working group is now working on proposals for an appropriate comprehensive regulatory approach for short-term tourist related lettings and the identification of any necessary amendments to legislation required to give effect to such regulation. The guidance circular is not expected, or intended, to resolve all the issues related to short-term letting. The broader licensing and regulatory approach on which the working group is developing proposals will provide the comprehensive framework to do this.

I note the recommendations in the report proposing a review of the current planning regulations and, in particular, the proposal to introduce specific exemptions from the need to obtain planning permission in cases where short-term lettings do not exceed a certain day limit in a year. Planning control and regulation is one important element of the broader issues being considered by the Department's working group. The group will report before year end on the appropriate regulatory approach for short-term lettings and any necessary amendments to existing legislation, including planning legislation, which may be required. The working group's report will also be informed by the useful and timely joint committee report and its recommendations which we are discussing. It is important to note that the planning Act provides that exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of specific forms of development may be provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development. This is a key test for any proposed planning exemption. In addition, as required under the planning Act, any proposed amendments to the existing exempted development regulations require approval from both Houses of the Oireachtas before new regulations can be signed into law and brought into effect. Therefore, we will revert to both Houses with any proposed amendments to the planning code and, specifically, the exempted development provisions that may be required on foot of the working group's report.

Under the planning Act, all development, including a material change of use, unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated regulations, requires planning permission. Any development that is carried out without planning permission or that does not comply with the terms of a planning permission is unauthorised development and may be subject to enforcement action by a planning authority. Responsibility for enforcement action in regard to any breach of the planning code is a matter for individual planning authorities and extensive enforcement

provisions are provided for in Part 8 of the Act. However, the Department issues periodic reminders and guidance to planning authorities on planning enforcement generally. In May 2013, a ministerial policy directive was issued to all planning authorities, reminding them of their statutory obligations under Part 8 of the Act relating to enforcement. The directive required that planning authorities ensure that sufficient and appropriate human resources are made available for enforcement purposes. It also required planning authorities to undertake appropriate monitoring of planning enforcement and directed them to prioritise large-scale unauthorised development and enforcement cases.

On planning enforcement related to the issue at hand, the Department has issued two departmental circulars to planning authorities, in December 2016 and October 2017, which, among other things, advise them to take a proactive approach to enforcement, particularly to ensure that short-term letting activity is in compliance with the existing planning code. In addition, the Department will be requesting planning authorities to provide information on their enforcement activity in this particular area and on a periodic basis going forward.

Any proposed regulation or licensing regime must be easy to use. The average home owner providing a short-term letting facility will not be doing so on a large scale. They simply wish to earn some extra money to help with the mortgage or some other expense or perhaps to have their property occupied while they are away themselves. This needs to be encouraged, not impeded. The application process needs to be straightforward, with the administrative burden on both the homesharer and the State kept to the minimum necessary to ensure compliance and the protection and safety of consumers.

The point Senator Humphreys makes is a valid one. I know parts of Dublin city that have changed in recent years and there are districts of the city with quite a number of short-term lets. I accept the Senator and others have said we have had too many reports. This report is due before the end of the year. To ensure we introduce regulations that do not have other knock-on effects, I believe we can wait the three or four weeks until that report is finished.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I offer the Minister of State my Bill. The easiest way to do it is for the platform to keep the register, not the individual.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I will look at the Bill. I again thank the Senators who have contributed to the debate thus far.

Acting Chairman (Senator Diarmuid Wilson): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Colm Burke: At 10.30 a.m. tomorrow.

Acting Chairman (Senator Diarmuid Wilson): Is that agreed? Agreed.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.25 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 15 November 2017.