



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**SEANAD ÉIREANN**

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

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## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 28 Feabhra 2019*

*Thursday, 28 February 2019*

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### **Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad**

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I have received notice from Senator Máire Devine that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the establishment of a statutory committee on the future of mental healthcare.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice and Equality to provide an update on Garda resourcing in Drogheda, County Louth.

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

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works and flood relief to outline the number of vacant residential properties that are owned by the OPW and the proposals he has to bring same into use.

I have also received notice from Senator Grace O'Sullivan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to make a statement on the number of tree fellings across the country in the past two weeks.

The matters raised by Senators Devine, Nash and Colm Burke are suitable for discussion and will be taken now. I regret that I had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator O'Sullivan on the ground that the Minister has no official responsibility in the matter.

## Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

### Mental Health Policy

**Senator Máire Devine:** For more than one year, the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care, of which I was a member, carried out a great deal of work investigating the services in place our country, identifying problems and potential solutions and holding the HSE, Department of Health and Government to account. The committee was dissolved in October 2018, following the publication of its final report. In truth, the committee was only at the beginning of its work. I have no doubt that the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, shares my belief that the committee was valuable and shone a light on many important mental health issues that had previously been ignored or covered to an insufficient degree. It is essential that this and other work continues and expands over the coming months and years to facilitate the scrutiny of policy, develop new ideas and encourage debate and accountability.

I ask the Minister of State what is her stance on the re-establishment of the committee. The committee called consistently for a strong and robust implementation plan and its re-establishment would be a useful component of that work. In the context of the continuing crisis in mental health services, the failure to implement A Vision for Change and plans to introduce new legislation to overhaul the Mental Health Act 2001, this committee's role could not be more important. I await the Minister of State's response and hope I will hear positive news.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne):** On behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, I thank Senator Devine for raising this issue. As the Senator is aware, the Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care was established in July 2017 with the aim of achieving cross-party agreement on the implementation of a single long-term vision for mental healthcare and the direction of mental health policy in Ireland. The main aim of the joint committee was to examine the delivery of mental health services with a focus on finding, recruitment challenges and increased access to services. The joint committee produced two interim reports dated December 2017 and April 2018, respectively, and a final report was launched in October 2018.

Under its terms of reference, the joint committee recognised that the Department of Health was simultaneously conducting a review of the national mental health policy, A Vision for Change. The joint committee invited various individuals and professionals with expertise in mental health to attend monthly meetings and provide input from their own perspectives on how best to reduce waiting times, increase capacity and provide additional mental healthcare services nationally. Upon completion of its final report, the work of the Oireachtas committee came to an end. While the committee requested in its final report that it be established on a permanent footing, the terms of reference provided that it would make its final report to both Houses of the Oireachtas by 31 October 2018 and "thereupon stand dissolved". Consequently, there are no plans to establish the committee on a permanent basis.

Among the main objectives of the committee was to assist with the completion of the implementation of A Vision for Change to create a more integrated mental healthcare service of the highest quality. As such, the committee's work was firmly affiliated with the refresh policy of A Vision for Change, which is now nearing completion. From an early stage in the refresh process, there was an emphasis on the importance of consultation. Over 1,000 individuals,

including service users, health professionals and community groups, provided input into that consultation process. A major review was undertaken to include recent policy recommendations contained in interdepartmental reports. As part of the review, all submissions to the joint committee were coded with relevant actions embedded in the refresh process under A Vision for Change. It is anticipated that the final report on the refresh process under A Vision for Change will be completed by end of the first quarter of 2019. The report will be informed by the work of the joint committee and the key concerns presented to the committee by various stakeholders during its consultation process will be taken on board. In line with the recommendations of the committee, the refreshed A Vision for Change will support better access, personalised choice and greater service user involvement, while those charged with its implementation will be fully accountable to the Oireachtas.

**Senator Máire Devine:** That response is very disappointing. There are no plans to establish the committee on a permanent basis. This is contrary to statements made by Ministers while the committee was doing its work. We kept the focus on the 80 or so children who were still admitted to acute mental hospitals and the shambolic finances of the HSE when it came to the provision of mental health services in that it did not know where the money went or how it was spent. This goes against the tide.

In the implementation of A Vision for Change I was trying to work it out. It was launched in 2006 and to be complete in 2016, but that has not happened. Some 75% of it has not been implemented. Suggesting mental health services will be safe and secure by implementing the new improved version of A Vision for Change does not give me any succour or comfort. The Members of this and the other House will have to continue the fight to have the committee re-established because the issue of mental health has never been so important for the country. It is a crying shame to take the focus off it.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I refer back to the opening statement which clearly outlines that the key concerns presented to the committee by various stakeholders during the consultation process will be taken on board. On behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, I thank the members of the Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Services for their work. Many people's voices were heard and what they said will be taken into account in the new revised version of A Vision for Change. I do not have anything to add about the committee being put back in place. The structures were clearly set out at the beginning and it was agreed that the committee would be dissolved in 2018, which is what happened. I am sure the Senator and others will pursue the matter through other avenues in the long term.

## **Garda Deployment**

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan.

**Senator Gerald Nash:** My home town of Drogheda is in a state of fear this week in a way I have never witnessed. On Monday a man was shot in broad daylight as he sat in his car outside a toy store in a retail park in Drogheda and is now fighting for his life. The town of over 40,000 people, the town I am from and love, has been in the grip of a violent criminal feud for a few months. However, it has the level of policing cover one would expect in a provincial backwater, not in a town or city of the scale and significance of Drogheda. We simply do not have enough gardaí on the streets to fulfil normal policing duties, let alone investigate the ongoing violent criminal feud.

There are six or seven gardaí per unit or shift, as opposed to 12 or 14 in other towns and cities of equivalent size. There is a single marked car policing an area with a population of close to 60,000. The armed support unit that was deployed a number of months ago to Drogheda in response to the criminal feud was withdrawn last week. To add insult to injury, in a decision handed down by top brass last week overtime by gardaí based in Drogheda Garda station was banned. One would not need to be a criminal mastermind to figure out that now is the best time to shoot somebody in Drogheda when there is little policing cover, when existing gardaí are under incredible strain, when there are few vehicles to police the area and when the permanent armed support unit has been withdrawn. It is now back on the streets, albeit probably on a temporary basis, to deal with the fall-out of what happened on Monday.

We immediately need more gardaí permanently based in Drogheda. The Minister for Justice and Equality came to the town in December and it is regrettable that he is not present to answer questions from me. He was happy to visit the Garda station in Drogheda to have his picture taken with the local Fine Gael councillors and Deputy and tell gardaí that what Drogheda wanted Drogheda got. On the one hand, he is having his picture taken in Garda stations, while, on the other, he claims he is not responsible for operational policing matters such as the allocation of gardaí to certain stations. That is simply not good enough.

We were allocated eight probationary gardaí straight out of the Garda College in Templemore last December, while 15 have been withdrawn. We have only been left with an additional three. We need more gardaí permanently. I do not want to hear such nonsense as it is not a matter for the Minister for Justice and Equality to allocate gardaí. He needs to take political responsibility. The people of Drogheda need protection. Gardaí in Drogheda also need protection and support which they are not getting. This is a political issue. It is a matter of accountability. I want to hold the Minister and the Commissioner accountable.

Tomorrow the Taoiseach will make a planned visit to Drogheda. I was not aware of this visit; I heard about it through the media, as I heard about the visit of the Minister to Drogheda through the media. There is a long-standing convention and protocol that Oireachtas Members of all parties are notified of the visit of a Minister or the Taoiseach, but I have yet to receive that notification. I suggest to the Taoiseach that he not come to Drogheda if he does not have more resources for An Garda Síochána.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I thank the Senator for raising this important matter for the people of Drogheda and the wider area of counties Louth and Meath. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, who, unfortunately, is unable to be here. I know that the Senator, as well as Deputy O'Dowd, has been monitoring the position closely since the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, last updated the House in November on the steps being taken by An Garda Síochána to neutralise the feud. The Taoiseach will visit Drogheda tomorrow to discuss this and other matters directly with members of An Garda Síochána.

The Senator will be aware that when the Minister visited Drogheda Garda station last December, he was very impressed by the robust response that had been put in place by the Garda authorities in the region. There is a dedicated policing operation, Operation Stratus, specifically targeting the ongoing feud. The operation consists of high visibility patrols and checkpoints, days of action and covert policing initiatives, targeting specific parties to the feud. The operations are supplemented by personnel from the regional armed support unit, the drugs unit and

the divisional roads policing unit and have resulted in the seizure of considerable amounts of cash, firearms and controlled drugs.

The Minister is aware of the recent incidents that have taken place in the Drogheda area and, of course, the shooting that occurred at the M1 Retail Park earlier this week. The incident on Tuesday is even more shocking when we consider that it occurred during the day, with families and children nearby. In that context, the Garda Commissioner has publicly spoken about issues such as protecting the most vulnerable and highlighted that his priority is having a policing model that will provide the best outcomes for communities.

The distribution of Garda resources is constantly monitored. A particular distribution model is used that takes into account all relevant factors, including population, crime trends and overall policing needs at local level. The Minister has been informed that on 31 January, the latest date for which figures are readily available, the strength of the Louth division was 340, with 118 gardaí assigned to the Drogheda Garda district. There are also 22 Garda reserves and 33 civilians attached to the division.

The Minister wants to be very clear that this situation will not be allowed to continue. There has been a sustained and concerted effort on the part of An Garda Síochána to bring those engaged in the feud to justice. I know that the Minister and the Garda Commissioner are dedicated to tackling gang-related violence in Drogheda and ensuring the safety of all citizens in the community and the wider area.

**Senator Gerald Nash:** In the 20 years I have been in public life I have never been more frustrated as I have been this week. With others, I am trying to support the work of An Garda Síochána to protect the people of my home town, about which I care deeply. I have never witnessed such angst and frustration in the area. My phone has been hopping since Monday. I know of people who witnessed the event in a busy shopping area on Monday and they are absolutely traumatised. It is inevitable that retaliatory attacks and reprisals will take place. With the limited resources they have, gardaí in Drogheda have been working extremely hard to keep a lid on this violent feud. It is only a matter of time until an innocent victim is caught up in it and shot and until we have the first fatality of this feud. I have nothing but respect for the Minister of State and the work he does but he is not the Minister for Justice and Equality. That Minister should be here today to answer questions from me on behalf of the people I represent. It is deeply regrettable that he is not here. As I said earlier, I do not want to personalise this. The Minister, Deputy Flanagan, was happy to come to the barracks in Drogheda to speak to members of An Garda Síochána and advise them that resources would be made available. Those resources were only temporarily available; they were pulled. It is only now that the armed support unit is on the streets of Drogheda again. I fear that a lid cannot be kept on this any longer. We need resources in Drogheda now.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** I understand the Senator's frustrations. I am not the Minister for Justice and Equality or a Minister in that Department. Senator Nash was a Minister of State and knows that when Ministers are not available, Ministers of State step in. That is what I have done this morning in relaying the response of the Minister for Justice and Equality. I hear the Senator's concern and I will relay it to the Minister, Deputy Flanagan. I would point out, however, from my own regional experience, that we have had not dissimilar situations in other parts of the country. There have been concerted efforts by members of An Garda Síochána, supported by local authorities, State agencies, the Government and others in other parts of the country where there were particular feuds and difficulties that have been brought under control.

The concerns the Senator has relayed are very serious, particularly in respect of the community he represents.

I will relay to the Minister for Justice and Equality the concerns the Senator has voiced today on behalf of the people of that part of County Louth and the wider east Meath area. I apologise the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, is not available. He had prior commitments and engagements. The Senator knows from his own time as a Minister of State that this often happens. Rather than deferring the issue, the decision was taken to discuss it in the Seanad today, which is important, with me as a Minister of State first relaying the response of the Minister for Justice and Equality, who is taking this issue seriously, and, second, relaying the Senator's concerns back to the Minister.

### **Office of Public Works Properties**

**Senator Colm Burke:** I am raising the issue of vacant property owned by the OPW. This first came to my attention some months ago when I found that in the Blarney area there was a house that had previously been used by the Garda and had been vacant for over 20 years. The house had not been lived or used by anyone over that period. When I did a Land Registry search, I found that the property is in a folio listing 50 different properties, in locations from Castletownbere on one side of the county all the way over to Mitchelstown on the other side. The folio included Garda stations, sites and dwelling houses.

Do we have a full audit of what is in the ownership of the OPW? Do we have a detailed list of what is not being used or is unlikely to be used in the future? It should be possible to communicate with the local authorities. In this case in Blarney, I contacted Cork County Council which unfortunately replied that it had examined the property and deemed that the cost of bringing it into use was too great. It would not get involved with the property, which remains vacant. There are quite a number of vacant properties around the country that could be brought into use for community organisations or residential occupation.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** I am replying on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. The OPW manages more than 2,500 properties on behalf of the State. These include office accommodation, heritage properties, visitor centres, Garda stations, warehouses and others. An Garda Síochána is responsible for assigning residences to gardaí in line with its policing plans. The OPW disposes of Garda stations or Garda residences only when An Garda Síochána confirms that they are surplus to its requirements. At present, 96 buildings are vacant. Over half of them, 51, are Garda stations that were closed under the 2012-2013 policing plans of An Garda Síochána. In an interim report of the Policing Authority, six stations were identified for reopening. These were Ballinspittle, County Cork; Bawnboy, County Cavan; Donard, County Wicklow, Leighlinbridge, County Carlow; Rush, County Dublin; and Stepside, County Dublin. A further review by the Garda Inspectorate was published in December 2018. The OPW will be engaging with An Garda Síochána on the outcome of the review.

Of the remaining 45 properties that are vacant at present, a number are in the process of being transferred to local authorities, being considered or prepared for disposal, under consideration for community use or being retained for alternative State use. In addition to the closed Garda stations, there are sundry dwellings or lodges that are part of national parks and gardens around the country and are managed by the Office of Public Works. In general, these dwellings or lodges are for staff who have to be present day or night, for example, park rangers, deer keep-

ers, security personnel and so on. In other cases, they have been licensed for use as tea rooms, visitor services on heritage sites or for use by the Irish Landmark Trust. At present, a small number of these are vacant because they are in poor condition and not habitable from a health and safety or security viewpoint.

The provision of social, affordable and emergency residential accommodation is a function of the local authorities and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Properties owned or managed by the OPW are primarily commercial offices, Garda stations, warehouses or others that are not suited to residential use. However, the OPW has actively engaged with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in providing information on any non-operational, vacant properties the OPW owns. That Department then assesses those properties in terms of what might be suitable for residential use. The OPW has also engaged with the Land Development Agency on any suitable land in its ownership.

As a matter of course, the OPW provides information on its non-operational properties to the relevant authorities or housing agencies for assessment. In the last two years, this process has identified a number of properties as being feasible for adaption for residential use. These include eight units in Dublin city centre that were transferred to Dublin City Council for use by the Peter McVerry Trust; and a property in Crumlin that is now licensed to Dublin City Council for use as a family hub. A further 15 properties are being considered in terms of their potential for investment and adaptation for social housing. These include seven properties and one site that are under consideration by Cork County Council; five properties that are under consideration by Tipperary County Council; and three properties that are under consideration by Limerick City and County Council. The OPW regularly contacts local authorities and other State bodies before it decides to sell on the open market.

The Senator specifically mentions a property in Blarney. I can confirm that a retired member of An Garda Síochána occupied this property until June 2012. In August 2017, the property was offered to Cork County Council under the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform protocols for the transfer and sharing of State property assets. The OPW was told in September 2017 that the council did not wish to buy the property. The contracts for sale for the property are ready and this property, along with a number of other surplus properties and sites, will be disposed of in 2019.

Historically, in the paper environment, lands held by Ministers, State bodies and local authorities were entered on a single folio per owner per county. In the modern digital environment, it is more practical and efficient to open a single folio for each property or title. This represents the current practice of the Property Registration Authority, PRA. Subject to resources, the PRA has been separating these older folios into single digital folios. I trust that the above satisfies the Senator's query. I will bring any other matter he wishes to raise to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Moran.

**Senator Colm Burke:** On the property in Blarney, I am not clear where the officials got their information. My information is that the property was vacant for over 20 years. Maybe somebody was put down as occupying it but the reality is that it was vacant. The current Garda sergeant in Blarney, with whom I engaged on this matter, was not even aware that such a property existed; indeed, no garda currently serving in Blarney was aware of it because it was so long out of use.

*11 o'clock*

I started dealing with the issue more than 12 months ago and I am concerned that the OPW



does not conduct a regular review of the use of its properties. Clearly, the OPW has identified 45 properties that could be put to better use. We had a downturn in the economy and nothing seems to have been done to deal with the issue between 2011 and 2014 when we needed property to be made available. I welcome the Minister of State's reply because at least the matter is being dealt with now. The OPW should carry out a review of the property it owns at least once every two years to identify whether it is being used efficiently. If it is not being used efficiently, we need a long-term plan and engagement with other State agencies to ensure it can be put into use. We need to put a structure in place to deal with the matter.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** There appears to be a communication issue about some of the information that was provided, as it appears to be semi-contradictory. The best option would be for Senator Colm Burke to meet the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran. I will have my office relay such a request to the Minister of State. I am sure Senator Burke's suggestions will form part of any discussion that would take place.

*Sitting suspended at 11.05 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.*

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Senator Catherine Noone:** The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the Committee on Climate Action, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate, and No. 2, statements on the National Training Fund, to be taken at 12.45 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes.

**Senator Catherine Ardagh:** Today I wish to raise the issue of housing and the most recent homelessness figures for this city. I have raised this topic almost every week since becoming a Member of Seanad Éireann. I am particularly keen to raise the European Commission's report on the assessment of member states' progress on economic and social priorities, which is highly critical of the Irish Government's policy on housing. The Commission's report points out that there has been a 23.4% increase in private rents since 2015, the highest in the EU. It also notes that there are 72,000 people on the social housing waiting list but that there are only planned developments of 10,000 houses in 2019. This report comes from the European Commission and it will be very hard for the Government to refute its findings. The report also notes that 17,000 people are supported by HAP and that this is exacerbating problems in the private rental market. The report emphasises the enormity of the gap between supply and demand and comes in the wake of a report published yesterday which showed that there are currently 9,987 homeless people in this State. The Government's policy has been to blame Fianna Fáil but Fine Gael has been in government since 2011 and has done nothing to resolve this problem. We have seen a very small increase in housing supply but nothing like what is needed to address the issue of homelessness and a lack of housing in this country.

The second issue I wish to raise relates to the roll-out of broadband. In 2012 the Government announced its broadband policy, which formed part of the Fine Gael election manifesto in 2011 and again in 2016. I was flabbergasted yesterday to hear the Taoiseach say that he was surprised that the roll-out of rural broadband was going to cost multiples of the original estimate. We all know that the roll-out of broadband, especially over the last mile, is very costly because it involves, among other things, digging up roads. The Taoiseach and the Department

must have known that this was going to cost an enormous amount of money. Many people voted for Fine Gael because of its commitment to the roll-out of rural broadband in 2011 and in 2016 but they have been let down. Small businesses and families throughout the country have been let down badly. They were promised that broadband would be rolled out nationwide but that has not happened. There is only one firm left in the market for the national broadband contract, a finance firm based in the US. This is not a telecommunications engineering company but a speculative financial firm. It is a disgrace that it has come to this and the Government must admit that it got it wrong and does not know what it is doing. It must put a proper broadband policy in place because it is a disgrace that houses and businesses throughout the country still do not have the broadband service they were promised back in 2011.

The final issue I wish to raise relates to the cost of electricity and gas which is due to increase by 4%. Electric Ireland has said that this is due to increases in wholesale costs. We must consider those who are vulnerable in this State, especially the elderly who have not seen an equivalent increase in their pensions. We must ensure that they are not left behind. We will be out campaigning for the forthcoming local and European elections soon and will meet elderly people who go to bed early in order to save on heating. They are living in a way that others do not live. They are not benefitting from the economic upturn but we must not forget them. Special provision must be made to ensure that those who are most vulnerable are not negatively affected by the recently announced increases in the price of gas and electricity.

**Senator Joan Freeman:** I acknowledge the presence in the Public Gallery of a student called Nathan Hilton Regan. He is on work experience and has helped me to complete a survey on gaming among children. This is a follow-on from Senator Craughwell's very lively discussion yesterday evening on gambling. I want the House to realise that gambling starts in childhood and it starts with gaming. We all know about Playstation and Xbox consoles and Nathan carried out a survey among 48 students in the last few days on same. We were both surprised that the students responded so readily. In the survey, 73% agreed that they play inappropriate video games such as Grand Theft Auto or Red Dead Redemption. We all know that inappropriate games can have a very negative impact on children, especially when the games involve aggression and violence and get children's adrenaline pumping. When the game is over, where does that adrenaline and aggression go? Furthermore, 50% of those surveyed agreed that gaming affects their sleep. Some children are gaming first thing in the morning while others are gaming through the night. We can all imagine the impact that has on children's performance at school and on their moods. It was very worrying to find that 79% of the students surveyed agreed that their parents knew of the violent nature of the games they were playing. To be honest, I found that strange. Some 91% of the children surveyed have an Xbox or Playstation but I discovered for the first time that they can access social media through these gaming devices. These innocent-looking boxes are given to children for Christmas by their parents, who think they are being kind and are giving them something that will entertain them. Many do not realise that they are giving them direct access to social media and to all the difficult and evil things involved in that.

Around 25% of the children said that they had spent ten hours gaming in the last seven days, while 19% said that they were not aware of physical needs such as needing food, water or to use the bathroom because they were so consumed by what they were doing. The other worrying fact is that 63% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that their work and grades were suffering due to gaming. When children are exposed to Playstation and Xbox games that are violent, they become addicted. In fact, Nathan discovered that the Rutland Centre acknowledg-

es that a gaming addiction is as serious as problem gambling. According to that centre, a gaming addiction is very similar to a gambling addiction. Indeed, many video games are actually designed to be addictive. These games are targeted at our young people. To be honest, I do not know what we can do with this. Parents obviously need to be informed, as do schools. I thank Nathan for all the help he gave me this week. We are going to add another survey and complete a report, and we can maybe then come up with some ideas on how this problem can be tackled.

**Senator Máire Devine:** I want to reiterate what Senator Freeman has said. They target children of any age from three years and I have seen young children aged three playing Gummy Bears games. There is a sweet, cuddly image but there are also “Buy More” tokens at the end of each game, and it builds up and up. This happens to children from three years of age. When my son was one of those Xbox or Playstation guys, sitting in his bedroom playing it non-stop, he borrowed a game from a friend. When I went to watch it, I found it awful. It was one of those games where people were shooting each other and, in one instance, they pushed a woman over - a caricature, obviously - and started kicking her between the legs. I sat aghast and I immediately stopped it, but I could not get over the fact that had got through censorship and everything else. It was for 16 year olds and he was only 14, so he did not get it at that stage. However, that sort of imagery stayed in my mind.

I want to propose an amendment to the Order of Business that we take an amendment to the Health Act 1970 with regard to involuntary psychiatric patients and the charges paid to the HSE. I have become aware that up to 2,500 patients are admitted involuntarily throughout the country for treatment in approved centres and, following their stay, people are subjected to charges of anything from €80 to €800 per day for a 12-month period. While not all of these charges are collected, it is still not in the Health Act that they would be exempted, although there are exemptions for maternity care to women and where people have medical cards. I would like the House to support this amendment and to go further with regard to the legislation.

**An Cathaoirleach:** On a technical point, the Senator is suggesting we take No. 14 before No. 1.

**Senator Máire Devine:** That is correct.

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** Just this morning the Government launched the new policy on overseas development aid, which is a major policy entitled A Better World. I commend that policy and, in particular, commend the emphasis within it on a number of issues that are of real importance. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, of which I am a member, has been working on these issues and I am very glad to see them highlighted, namely, climate justice, gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment. That is really positive to see. Looking at the language used in the A Better World document, I commend those involved in its drafting because there is a strong emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and some inspiring language. It is particularly notable as, this year, we mark 25 years since the international conference on population and development, the ICPD. I know the Deputy Leader is interested in this issue at international level, as am I, and we will be seeing quite a number of events at UN level to mark that 25th anniversary. It is inspiring to see Ireland taking a leadership role on this in our overseas development aid policy and also good to see us moving so firmly towards our 0.7% commitment on overseas development aid. I commend those involved. I look forward to scrutinising the report further at the foreign affairs committee. I ask that we might have a debate on this in due course in the House, now the document has been published, as I believe it would be worthwhile. Again, it is great to see the policy so strongly

highlighting women's empowerment and gender equality.

On a less positive note, I express my strong concern, which I am sure others will share, on the issues highlighted in respect of Scouting Ireland and the letter Tusla sent to Scouting Ireland. The Minister, Deputy Zappone, raised concerns in the Dáil yesterday. This leaves parents in particular in a very difficult position because, essentially, what the Minister appears to be saying is that parents send children on scouting trips almost at their own risk, which is a very worrying development for parents, all those involved in Scouting Ireland and, indeed, for children. I hope we can have a debate in the House, when things become a little clearer, on child protection and the important issues this raises.

I welcome the decision yesterday in the Supreme Court on the powers of the Committee of Public Accounts. I think many of us had felt concern about some of the lines of questioning adopted by the Committee of Public Accounts in recent years and it is positive to see the Supreme Court has said the Committee of Public Accounts acted significantly outside its remit. There has been an unfortunate tendency towards, and an unfortunate culture had developed of, quite aggressive tactics in questioning witnesses before the Committee of Public Accounts, and it was not as effective as a result in terms of actual fact-finding. The Committee of Public Accounts in the past had a very positive and effective role in investigating and uncovering facts around misuse of public funds. In recent years, in some instances, that role has been overstepped. We await the final judgment in April but I welcome that finding as reported today.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** I rise to highlight the fact today is anti-bullying awareness day, which is a campaign run by the HSE. If people are feeling unsafe in the workplace, in school or in any walk of life, a helpline is available. It is important that people are aware help is out there and somebody is at the other end of the line to help them.

Related to that, it was reported in my local newspaper during the week that a child of three years of age was on the mother's tablet playing a game called Momo Challenge, which is a cyberbullying game. The next thing, a face appeared on the game and asked the child: "Are you on your own? Go and turn on the oven and leave it on, and do not tell anyone." It is frightening when these things are happening. This is the first report of an incident in Ireland. While there has not been any serious incident in regard to this game, it is frightening to think a child of three years of age was told that. The child threw the tablet across to the mother and said there was a scary person on it. There should be some sort of regulation around these games, given what can happen and how people can hack into them.

**Senator Paul Daly:** Based on the release today of the Irish importation figures for grain and maize, I was startled to see that wheat imports in 2018 were up 40% to 428,000 tonnes, maize imports were up 43% to 1.6 million tonnes and barley imports were up 105% to 372,000 tonnes. The Deputy Leader will be aware the Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine last year produced a report on the crisis within the Irish tillage sector. That report was placed before this House but, unfortunately, like many of its predecessors, it has found its way to the infamous shelf somewhere. Based on the figures I have given today, that report needs to be taken down from the shelf and brought back in here, and the Minister needs to come in along with it to address these figures.

As I said, we have a crisis in the tillage sector and farmers are walking away from tillage and grain production, yet we are importing grain in the quantities I have just mentioned. The big debate within all sectors of agriculture at the moment is on climate change. Can we imagine the

carbon footprint of this grain, maize and wheat that is coming from as far away as Russia to our shores? We have the people, the equipment and the land, and we are quite capable of producing it here ourselves. The irony in regard to barley, in particular, is that it is being imported in such vast quantities, it is being brewed and distilled by our native brewers and distillers, then being labelled on bottles as Irish and exported again. We need to re-address the crisis in the tillage sector. We need to take down that report from its infamous shelf and we need to get it and the Minister back in the House to have a serious debate on why we are not producing this grain ourselves, and not making it feasible for Irish farmers to produce the grain and maize we are importing in such large quantities.

**Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh:** I second Senator Devine's amendment. Last week, under the leadership of the Cathaoirleach, I was fortunate to be one of a small number of people, with Senator Mulherin and Deputy Brassil, to attend the United Nations in New York on Thursday and Friday. It was a real eye-opener and a very important event. We met the Irish Permanent Representative to the UN, H.E. Geraldine Byrne Nason. Ireland has been a member of the UN since 1955 and a UN peacekeeping nation since 1958. Senator Craughwell's colleagues in the peacekeeping force have served every day since then. Irish lives have been lost as a result of the peacekeeping efforts. We are particularly proud of the help provided by our peacekeeping forces in other nations. It is one of the badges that makes us unique. We are the greatest contributor in Europe to peacekeeping and that is something of which we are very proud. We are privileged to be involved in it. We are indebted to our women and men who go on peacekeeping missions. I know people whose family members have given their lives to that cause.

I ask that we consider suspending Standing Orders for half a day and invite the ambassador, H.E. Ms Byrne Nason, and the Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, to address the House and inform Members on the current state of the UN, its role and our relationship with and contribution to it.

As Members are aware, Ireland is seeking a seat on the UN Security Council. There is all-party support for that endeavour. I and my two Oireachtas colleagues who were in the UN last week strongly lobbied colleagues from other countries that Ireland should get a seat on the Security Council. This is an opportunity for us, a key democratic House of the Irish Parliament, to say we are supporting our people in the UN and our ambassador. When we visit foreign countries and colleagues in other parliaments, we can tell them we need their support for this. I ask for that to be considered by the Leader and the Cathaoirleach.

**An Cathaoirleach:** On the latter issue, the Senator should consider writing to the Committee on Procedure and Privileges. I rarely comment on trips made by Senators. However, I was very proud that Senators Ó Céidigh and Mulherin and Deputy Brassil spoke very effectively at the United Nations. I was very impressed by their contributions, which had a positive impact on our effort to be elected to the Security Council, among other issues. I am proud of what they achieved in that visit.

**Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh:** Go raibh maith agat.

**Senator Frank Feighan:** My colleague, Senator Marshall, summed it up yesterday when he stated that there are 29 days to Brexit and called for cool heads. I agree with him. These are interesting but difficult times. The acceptance of the amendment tabled by Ms Yvette Cooper, MP, in the House of Commons yesterday will ensure that a no-deal may not happen but there is still a long way to go. The British Labour Party has indicated it will support a second referendum. The German Chancellor, Ms Angela Merkel, commented that if Britain needs more time,

it will be given more time. The coming 29 days will be very serious and interesting and I hope it works out.

Last Thursday, I was invited to the National Museum of Ireland to celebrate St. David's Day. We were very fortunate to have the attendance of Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas, the Welsh Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism, and the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne. What is more significant is that many organisations and institutions are preparing for the situation post Brexit. The event was attended by Mr. David Anderson, the director general of National Museum Wales, and Ms Catherine Heaney, the chair of the board of the National Museum of Ireland. A deal or memorandum of understanding has been reached to increase cultural ties with National Museum Wales. The Welsh are our nearest neighbours. Sometimes, we have overlooked Wales in favour of England or Scotland. I very much welcome that initiative by the National Museum of Ireland and National Museum Wales. It will strengthen the ties between the near neighbours, Ireland and Wales, and should be complimented and acknowledged here in the Seanad.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I second the proposal of my colleague, Senator Devine, to amend the Order of Business.

Not for the first time, I wish to address the issue of the appallingly low rates of pay in the childcare sector. A graduate outcome survey published by the Higher Education Authority last week revealed the extent of low pay in the early years sector. Some 43% of honours degree graduates in the sector earn less than €20,000 per year, well below the living wage of €23,000. The survey also revealed that 35% of honours degree graduates are on precarious contracts. Of course, this has led to a staffing crisis. The staff turnover in childcare is 25%. One must think of the impact that has on children. One in four people are leaving the sector. It happens in every crèche across this country.

Members have been raising this issue for almost three years and certainly since I became a Member of this House. I have consistently been told that the Government is going to address it. However, the fact is that it has not been addressed. Early years educators typically earn little more than €11 per hour. They are voting with their feet and leaving the sector. In many cases, they are leaving the country because they can get better rates of pay that recognise their professional qualifications elsewhere. Indeed, we remain bottom of the league among European countries in terms of investment in early years education. I call for a debate on the issue and that, in particular, the Government begin to heed SIPTU and its Big Start campaign, which aims to organise workers in the sector. However, it has not met with the positive response it deserves from the Government. This is failing the workers and the children and at this stage, with the Government having been in power for almost three years, there is no excuse.

**Senator Aodhán Ó Riordáin:** I wish to raise two issues. I have just come from a demonstration outside Leinster House by parents whose children suffer from spinal muscular atrophy. It does not affect many children but those who it does are severely affected. As the Leader will know, I am raising the issue of Spinraza. There was a devastating announcement this week that the HSE has decided not to proceed with allowing Spinraza to be readily available. One would have to have a heart of stone not to be affected by the stories of the parents who gathered outside this morning. They told of the effects Spinraza can have and the fact that 25 of 28 European Union countries have made Spinraza available for children who require it. Only Ireland, the UK and Estonia have not done so. If children such as Grace O'Malley from Mayo or Sam Bailey from Dublin - I know Sam's family quite well - lived in any country other than Ireland, the UK or Estonia, they might have a better quality of life. I do not believe anybody

in the Government has a heart of stone. I hope the announcement this week is just a blip on the road rather than a full stop. Members across the House have raised the issue of Spinraza in recent months and years. I ask that the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, come to the House to address the availability of this drug. In fairness, I do not think anybody in government wants to see children suffer. I know everybody in politics wants to do their best. However, there was a sense that things were slowly progressing to a point when Spinraza would be made available, but that seems to have come to a shuddering halt. On that basis, I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate with the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, or the Minister of State with responsibility for disability in regard to Spinraza.

I note with alarm the issue of the discharge from the sewage treatment plant in Ringsend last weekend. I note it with alarm because it only came to public awareness as a result of a drone taking a photograph of the leakage. It raises concerns for me regarding the sewage treatment plant which is planned for the Clonshaugh area.

If that is the type of issue that takes place in a sewage treatment plant, what can the residents in Clonshaugh expect if and when this plant is built? It is only a proposal. It has not been finalised. I believe the plan should be scrapped and that the land should be used for housing because it is a greater need. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment should come to the House to explain how this fault happened, the reasons that it was not reported immediately and that it took a number of days for communications from different agencies to take place; to allay the fears of Dubliners about that plant; and to justify why residents in Clonshaugh should feel any less worried about the proposal to build a water treatment plant there, which I believe is the wrong place and should be used for different ends.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Last night, I had the pleasure of attending an event organised by the Irish Cancer Society in Monaghan town. It related to regional awareness of the disease itself but was mainly based around national daffodil day, which is on 22 March. I found it very informative, interesting and, in many ways, harrowing. It was very well attended by many volunteers from counties Monaghan and Cavan. Some of the statistics are quite frightening but it is important that we are aware of them. I learned last night that every three minutes, someone in this country is told that he or she has cancer. This equates to roughly 40,000 people every year. It is maintained that by 2020, one in two people will get a diagnosis of cancer in his or her lifetime. The good news is that 80% of those diagnosed with stage 1 cancer survive. We all aware of the ongoing campaigns regarding education around prevention and how people can do more to prevent getting cancer through diet and exercise. I do not think everyone is aware of the service provided by the Irish Cancer Society. We heard last night from a night nurse who attends people with the disease through an end-of-life programme. It is important that people know that up to ten free night nurse sessions can be provided by the Irish Cancer Society. We also heard a presentation from the volunteer drivers. Apparently, there are many volunteer drivers throughout the country and they deserve great credit for the work they do. They can transport someone diagnosed with cancer to a clinic in any part of the country. It is important that people know that this is also free of charge. The reason I mention this is because March is just around the corner. Again, the Irish Cancer Society will be looking for additional funds to keep this service going. A total of 99% of the funds it raises every year is through voluntary contributions. I acknowledge the generosity of the many Irish people who contribute and encourage more people to do so. From a Government perspective, I would like more energy to be put into information and education for people in order that they can take as many steps as

possible to prevent them getting this disease in the first place. Perhaps the Government could invest more in this area.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I second the proposal by Senator Ó Céidigh so that we would, through the Committee on Procedure and Privileges, organise the event on the UN issue with the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the ambassador at some stage. I appreciate that the Cathaoirleach said that it is a matter for the Committee on Procedure and Privileges but I would like to put on record my support for it.

Last night, the Minister of State with responsibility for defence appeared before the House. He was quite comprehensive in everything he said. However, there is a misunderstanding around the issue of Jadotville, Jadotville medals and military service medals for those who served in the Congo that needs resolving. I fail to understand what it is about this country that we are so goddamn mean in our view and our ability to reward excellence. Senator Ó Céidigh spoke about the Irish record in peacekeeping, which has been happening since 1958. We were told, not by this Government, that there were no recommendations for medals for Jadotville, that is, no recommendations for distinguished service or military medals. We were told this for years but some months ago, the actual evidence was found. There are 155 outstanding medals, some for gallantry and some for distinguished service. I wrote to the Minister of State. This is not necessarily an issue for him. The awarding of medals is a military issue. However, the military tells me that it cannot award the medals because it is out of time. The period for a distinguished service medal is two years while it is three years for a military medal. The idea that the military is out of time is nonsense. I am mindful of Private Quinlan, whose family has written to every Member of this House. That young man was not just nominated for a distinguished service medal. Commandant Pat Quinlan also recommended that Private Quinlan, no relation, be promoted to the rank of corporal and given a distinguished service medal. Sadly, that young man took his own life. The family asks today whether that would have happened had he received the recognition he deserved. I ask the Deputy Leader to ask the Government to instruct the military authorities to revisit the issue of medals. If we were able to write a regulation to bring pilots back into the Air Corps, we can surely rewrite a regulation on the awarding of medals. I am sorry for going on but it is a vitally important issue. I am aware of about 155 outstanding medals.

**Senator Paddy Burke:** I wish to raise the judgment in the case brought by Angela Kerins to see what implications it has for the Houses of the Oireachtas. I hope there will be a meeting of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges about it or that we would have a debate on that issue in this House. While I appreciate that there will be a final judgment in April, the Committee of Public Accounts, which is the committee in question, has no representatives from Seanad Éireann. It is a Dáil committee. This case involves the Dáil Committee on Procedure. The Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges acts with regard to how committees are formed. Regulations are discussed at meetings of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges. While we have a number of joint committees, this House has a committee that invites guests and witnesses. This is a significant judgment for the Houses of the Oireachtas. I hope that if procedures or remedies must be put in place, we would meet as a Committee on Procedure and Privileges because it is a significant judgment. The only saving grace for Members of both Houses is that we have privilege, which is an unbelievable thing for Members of both Houses to have. It is in the Constitution. At times, we do not fully appreciate what privilege means and how it should operate. We will have to have some guidelines about how Chairs of committees will operate, the role of the Chair, the role of advisers to the Chair and the legal advice we get. It



is a significant issue and I hope that at some stage, we would have a debate in this House or else the road to go down would be to have a meeting of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Paddy Burke is probably one of the longer serving Members here. I would say two things. The first is that he is correct in that privilege is a great coat of armour for us all but it should never be abused. I rarely make comments like this. Any committee - the Committee of Public Accounts or otherwise - is weaker in not having Senators on it. It is extraordinary. They represent the Oireachtas which has two legs on the chair, one of which is the Seanad which has been endorsed by the people, while the second is the Dáil. Reflecting forward, it would be a stronger committee if it had on it representatives of this House. That is a personal view which I will not impose on the House.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** This is World Rare Diseases Day. I have spent the morning with the families of people who are suffering from SMA and I am angry beyond words. They have come here to beg for their lives. Earlier we heard from Eimear, a 21 year old who is studying genetics. Like others affected by SMA, she is shutting down and we are allowing it to happen. We are supposed to be living in a Republic in which we cherish all the children of the nation equally, but we are not doing so. In 2019 why are children and young people coming here in wheelchairs to beg for their lives? It is absolutely unacceptable. I urge two Ministers to become involved - the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris. The information we are being given is false. I ask them to stop treating us like idiots as we know that we are not being given all of the facts. We know that we are not being given the correct cost of the drug. They need to instruct the HSE to do its job and negotiate in order that the people mentioned will not need to come here to beg for their lives. Representatives of the HSE need to sit down with representatives of Biogen and work it out. As this is a very time-sensitive subject, it needs to be done without delay. Only 70 people are impacted on. I ask the Deputy Leader to go back and work it out with them. We need to consider the opportunity costs in two ways. The cost of treatment and hospitalisation of the people mentioned is enormous. The other opportunity cost is associated with people like Eimear who are studying genetics and can do wonderful things for the State. We should not lose that opportunity. This matter is both urgent and important. I plead with the Government to do something about it on World Rare Diseases Day.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I echo what Senator Conway-Walsh said.

Tá plé ar na stáisiúin raidió neamhspleácha sa Dáil inniu. Tá plé ar a luach don phobal, ar an eolas áitiúil, ar na fadhbanna atá ag cuid den tír, agus ar thábhacht an raidió neamhspleách chun cabhrú leis na limistéir éagsúla sin agus leis na daoine atá iontu agus iad ag iarraidh na seirbhísí atá acu a choimeád agus mar sin de. Bheadh a leithéid de phlé sa Seanad thar a bheith úsáideach agus reachtaíocht scríofa agus réidh ag an Roinn Cumarsáide, Gníomhaithe ar son na hAeráide agus Comhshaoil chun laghdú de 50% ar an tóg a íocann baill den Independent Broadcasters of Ireland chun the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland a choimeád ar an bhfód a chur i bhfeidhm. Mindful of the fact that there will be a debate in the Dáil today on the value of independent broadcasters to the community, we could also do with having a debate on the issue in this House. Local radio stations, in particular, do great work and have a distinctive voice which often reflects local concerns in a way national radio stations do not. At its best, it is a vital conduit. At its worst, of course, there are examples where it can also suffer from the Montrose disease, with affected mid-Atlantic accents, preachy political correctness and so on. The Montrose disease often afflicts people who want to be in Montrose. However, more often than not, we receive a much better service from local radio stations. I would like us to have a

debate on their importance, given that a debate is to take place in the Dáil today.

I echo some of what Senator Bacik said. I have spoken many times about the importance of Ireland reaching its commitment to provide 0.7% of GDP in overseas development aid. I would welcome and strongly urge that we make progress in that regard. Even though the right to life of the unborn has been extinguished from the Constitution and we have changed the law dramatically, it does not mean that we need to become zealous advocates of destructive policies in the context of overseas development aid. Pope Francis has spoken about ideological colonisation whereby western countries link aid with western values in the destruction of human life and make it a condition of receiving aid, which is completely the wrong way to go. Innocent unborn children should never be the victims of western governments' policies. There is a need for better maternal healthcare for mothers in the developing world, not the destructive targeting of unborn children. I hope Irish policy will not swing into a negative zone because of the change in the law. I do not believe it is something most Irish people would support. While I agree with some of what Senator Bacik said, I worry about destructive policies following on from constitutional change. It is not the way to go and most Irish people would not support it.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I wish to comment on the proposal made by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, that people be suspended from the housing list for five years if they refuse two offers of local authority accommodation. It is a complete red herring. What a local authority official might deem to be an appropriate offer might not be deemed to be appropriate when account is taken of transport and family connections, access to school and support networks. It must fit for all the right reasons and the local authorities work really hard to ensure it fits. However, racism is an example of where a unit might not be a perfect fit for a family. From my experience as mayor of and a member of South Dublin County Council, having choice-based letting systems which are operated by 16 local authorities is the way to address the problem highlighted by the Minister. Such systems give people an element of choice and drastically reduce the length of time a property is vacant. People are not continually refusing offers of housing. Like me, the Minister was elected to the local authority in an area with a small stock of social housing, in my case Templeogue and Terenure and in his case Pembroke-Rathmines. He probably did not deal with many housing cases when he was a member of Dublin City Council.

Last month he claimed that the seasonal drop in the level of homelessness was evidence that the housing plan was working. Yesterday's figures show that this is simply not the case and that Rebuilding Ireland is continuing to fail. The Minister called the figures disappointing. That is an insult to families who are homeless. Yesterday's figures are an outrage. The figures have increased by 26% during his time in office, which shows that the plan is not working and that Sinn Féin's motion of no confidence should have been passed.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** Well said.

**Senator Catherine Noone:** I thank the Senators who raised issues on the Order of Business. Senator Ardagh spoke about housing. Obviously, we are facing major challenges in the housing sector, but we are making progress, with 14,500 new homes built in 2017, which represented an increase of 50% on the figure for the previous year. We expect 20,000 new homes to have been built when the 2018 figures are released. Budget 2019 provides for the largest amount of money a Government has ever spent on housing in a single year. The allocation is €2.4 billion, €500 million more than was provided in 2018.

Many of the key indicators indicate that there has been an improvement. I accept that it is frustratingly slow and note Senator Warfield's comments in that regard. Senator Ardagh also raised the issue of the costs of electricity and gas. Vulnerable people need to be protected from price rises, and it is disappointing to hear that Electric Ireland is anticipating a 4% increase for gas and electricity this year.

Senator Freeman raised the issue of gaming. She and others have highlighted some very worrying aspects of gaming for children, and the pervasive nature of social media. It can be very difficult for parents to know what to do. In concluding her remarks the Senator said that it is hard to know what we can do about it. Like many of the Internet-related issues we speak about in this House on a regular basis, this is really a societal issue. It is hard to know what policy makers or legislators can do to improve matters. There is also the issue of the sedentary lifestyle associated with gaming. Parents believe they are doing their child a service by providing him or her with a Nintendo or other console, but it means that the children are sitting down and playing games. Their minds are active and they socialise through those games, but it also creates all sorts of lifestyle problems for the future.

Senator Devine also spoke on gaming, which she has raised regularly in the House. The gummy bears game she mentioned is frightening. It is hard to credit but again, it is hard to know what we can do about it. There are certain things we could ban, but it could be argued that a ban sometimes makes them more attractive. Children are finding ways around these things anyway. Education is key, as is teaching children about how to protect themselves online at primary school level. On the Momo game that Senator Byrne mentioned, I have heard of a case of a teacher telling children in a school not to discuss the issue. That is worse in a way, because-----

**Senator Máire Devine:** It makes it more attractive.

**Senator Catherine Noone:** -----it needs to be discussed and children need to be educated on how to navigate these dangers. It is not my place to pontificate on the issues because I do not have the answers, but I believe education is key. I am happy to accept the proposed amendment to the Order of Business, to take No. 14 before No. 1.

Senator Bacik raised the issue of overseas aid policy and the report, A Better World, as did Senator Mullen. She emphasised the gender equality and climate justice aspects of that report. I have not read the report as yet, but I am encouraged by the comments Senator Bacik made about it. I suggest that we have a debate in this House on the issue. Senator Bacik also raised the issue of Scouting Ireland and the fact that parents are sending children to the scouts at their own risk. I imagine that many people in Scouting Ireland feel very unhappy about media commentary in recent days because, like every other organisation, there are many good people involved. The Government is concerned with safety. The safety of children is an absolute priority, and there is no flexibility on that. Mandatory reporting is the law and parents should be assured that the people involved have had the requisite training. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, is considering any other actions that may be required beyond the Tusla recommendations, but it must be reiterated that child safety is of paramount importance at all times.

Senator Bacik, among others, also mentioned the powers of the Committee on Public Accounts in light of the recent judgment. I agree with many of the comments that were made, in particular those about grandstanding and the aggressive nature of some of the committees. It

appears sometimes that it has become more about grabbing headlines than the work at hand, which is regrettable and does not reflect well on these Houses. As the Cathaoirleach said, it does not reflect well on the Committee of Public Accounts that there are no Senators on it. Many of us have been active members of committees, and it is something of an insult that Senators are not on the Committee of Public Accounts. There is no logical reason for it, and I agree with the Cathaoirleach.

Senator Byrne mentioned the anti-bullying awareness helpline. It is very important to highlight it. People of all ages experience bullying. It is obviously worse when one is a child as it can have a much worse psychological effect when it occurs at a young age. However, it is a very difficult thing to cope with at any age. It is good that the helpline is being highlighted. It should be highlighted more often. I have already referred to the issue of the Momo video game in Limerick, which is very frightening.

Senator Daly mentioned the tillage sector. I am not an expert in that area, but the Senator has raised a very serious issue. He raised a very interesting point about barley and the distance it travels. We should be capable of producing the crop here for people who need it to produce other products. This is very topical, in the context of climate change, and would be a very interesting debate to have with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the near future. The last time I took the Order of Business it was clear that the Minister might be before us to debate with us in the near future.

Senator Ó Céidigh mentioned peacekeeping and his recent visit to New York. The Cathaoirleach has replied on that matter already, which is one for the Committee on Procedure and Privileges. The Tánaiste can come to the House without us having to get the permission of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges, but I am more than happy to support the Senator's request.

Senator Feighan mentioned St. David's Day and increased cultural ties with Wales, which are to be welcomed.

Senator Gavan raised the childcare sector. The issue of how little childcare workers are paid is a huge issue. The last point the Senator made was probably the most interesting and pertinent. The high turnover of childcare staff has a negative impact on children. There has been much positive work done in the area of childcare since the first Minister with responsibility for children was appointed by the previous Government. It is regrettable, however, that the incentives and schemes being put in place are not impacting positively on the sector. We are trying to strike a balance between ensuring parents who need childcare for their children can afford it and ensuring that people working in childcare have a level of income to sustain a lifestyle. It is a difficult issue, and one we should have a debate on in this House. We should not focus solely on those issues, but rather have a wide-ranging debate on the entire issue of childcare. We need to discuss this from the point of view of the care given and also the wages earned by those who work hard and are very qualified for the work in the area.

Senators Ó Ríordáin and Conway-Walsh raised the issue of Spinraza. They have raised the matter consistently in the House. I have been working on this issue and feel very passionately that people should be provided with that drug. A young child from the area I am from is very negatively effected by this. By my estimation, having followed this issue in an attempt to understand how it all works, it is clear that the system is flawed. Drug companies can manipulate the situation by forcing vulnerable families to come up here and beg for their lives. There are

only 70 people affected by this. It is my understanding that the drug is under review in the UK as well and there may be a commercial aspect to this. That is completely unacceptable and is small comfort to any family with a child who needs the drug. Those people do not want to hear about the financial realities; they just want the drug to be given to their child. I am keeping a very close eye on what is happening in this area but I am comforted by the fact that, in other cases where this flawed system has been used, this has been a regrettable blip on the road to the eventual provision of the drug. I cannot foresee circumstances in which this drug will not be provided eventually. The drug company, as much as the HSE, will have to play ball on this issue. I do not have an answer today, but Senators should know that I am as concerned as they are that the drug is provided to families. The numbers are not large enough to justify not providing it. There is a fine line to be walked. We cannot allow the system to be manipulated so drug companies can maximise their profit to the nth degree. I feel passionately about this and the salient point and the wider issue is that we need to reflect upon how we decide about these drugs. The system is arranged in such a way that trying to find out what is going on is like the last secret of Fatima. Families hear rumours and it is simply not good enough. We need to look at how we handle these drugs for rare diseases, how they are provided to families and the process that people have to go through. It is an insult and something we should look at. I will speak to Senator Ó Ríordáin if I get any news about it. I have been speaking to the Department on a weekly basis about that to try to make it happen.

Senator Gallagher raised the wonderful work done by the Irish Cancer Society. The main point from his contribution is that people need to realise that lifestyle can affect their health. It is something I have consistently worked on in the public health area. Legislation such as the Public Health (Alcohol) Act goes a long way. We need a public health Bill on obesity as well. Such legislation can go a long way in trying to educate the population - and it is hard to use the word "educate" without sounding condescending - as to how best to look after themselves so that they do not require care and do not get cancer. Cancer affects many families and Irish people are generous when it comes to voluntary contributions. It is good to have the opportunity to highlight the Daffodil Day initiative that is so successful every year.

Senator Craughwell raised 155 outstanding medals for members of the Defence Forces. There was a debate on defence last night and the matter could be raised as a Commencement debate. I do not have specific detail on that but I can follow up on it.

Senator Paddy Burke raised the issue relating to the Committee of Public Accounts and I have already made comments on that. Privilege is a privilege and should not be abused and nor should individuals who come into these Houses to help us get to the bottom of issues be put through the grandstanding and aggression I have witnessed in the past.

I have already addressed the issues raised by Senator Conway-Walsh regarding Biogen and Spinraza.

Senator Mullen raised the issue of local radio and we all concur with his view. I would be happy for there to be a debate on independent broadcasters. It is difficult to be an independent broadcaster but they provide an important service to their local communities.

Senator Warfield raised the issue of people refusing offers of local authority housing and the new policy that has been spoken about. There is a fine line when it comes to providing housing. There are probably rare or certain cases when people expect the ideal house to come up for them. I have sympathy for a teacher and a garda who cannot afford to live in Dublin and choose

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to live in Kildare or Wicklow, commute long distances and see little of their family. They have to live a long distance from where they would like to live. We have to provide decent social housing for people but there is a fine line. People who are working hard every day and travelling long distances to be able to live their lives are helping to provide for people who sometimes refuse houses in circumstances where they should not refuse them. That is a very wide debate that we could have.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Surely vacancy is the problem and not-----

**Senator Catherine Noone:** The point is that there is not much vacancy.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** There are 4,000 vacant units in this city between the canals.

**Senator Catherine Noone:** I do not have the figures here today.

**An Cathaoirleach:** The Deputy Leader will come back on that.

**Senator Catherine Noone:** It would be an idea to put that specific point down for a Commencement debate because the Senator could get a full answer from the Minister on that. Housing is an issue we should continually debate in the House. I would welcome an opportunity for Senator Warfield and others to be able to raise issues like that with the Minister.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Devine has moved an amendment to the Order of Business which was seconded by Senators Ó Céidigh and Conway-Walsh: "That No. 14 be taken before No. 1." The Deputy Leader has indicated that she is prepared to accept this amendment. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

### **Health (Exemption of Charges for Involuntary Psychiatric Patients) (Amendment) Bill 2019: First Stage**

**Senator Máire Devine:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health Act 1970 to exclude involuntarily detained psychiatric patients from any in-patient fees.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is there a seconder?

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I second the proposal.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Senator Máire Devine:** Next Tuesday.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 5 March 2019.

## **Special Committee on Climate Action: Motion**

**Senator Catherine Noone:** I move:

That, in relation to the Special Committee on Climate Action —

(a) the Order of 4th July, 2018, appointing the Committee (as amended by Order of the Seanad of 29th January, 2019), is amended by the substitution of ‘14 March 2019’ for ‘28 February 2019’; and

(b) having reported to both Houses of the Oireachtas on or before 14 March, 2019, the Committee shall, not more than two weeks thereafter, report to both Houses recommending revised draft orders of reference for the Committee.”.

Question put and agreed to.

*Sitting suspended at 12.36 p.m. and resumed at 12.45 p.m.*

## **National Training Fund: Statements**

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):**

I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss the National Training Fund. This is an important and worthwhile fund and I will give the House as much information as I can on it.

Funding is allocated by the Minister for Education and Skills with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in accordance with the provisions of the National Training Fund Act 2000.

In more recent years, due to the economic situation, the focus moved from training those in employment to training those seeking to enter the labour market with a view to meeting their diverse needs and ensure that they possess the relevant and enhanced skills required in the labour market, both now and in the future. However, there has been a fundamental shift in the labour market over the past five years with unemployment falling from 16% at one stage to 6% in January 2018. There was a need, therefore, to change or rebalance a suite of programmes to reflect the changing needs of the labour market and skills gaps in the market. Indeed one of the key features of the National Training Fund, NTF, is its flexibility and the way it responds to changing economic and labour market conditions. As the economic climate has improved, expenditure on training for those in employment has increased with a corresponding reduction in expenditure on training for those seeking employment, which makes sense. This trend is evident from 2014 to 2018 and, based on economic forecasts, will continue in 2019.

The Government announced increases to the NTF levy by 0.1% in 2018 to 0.8% and by a further 0.1% in both 2019 and 2020 to fund investment in education and training relevant to the skills needs of the economy. The Government is committed to reform of the fund to ensure that it continues to be responsive to the world of work. These increases in the NTF levy were accompanied by a package of reforms to the fund. The reforms were or are being introduced following a consultation process with the employers with the aim of making the fund more responsive to employer needs and to give employers a greater say in informing priorities for

the fund. An independent review of the National Training Fund was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the package of reforms. This independent review, which was undertaken by Indecon, was published by the Minister for Education and Skills on 17 August 2018. The report made 14 specific recommendations across four key areas which are about reforming the future direction of the NTF, utilising the NTF to support investment in higher education, enhancing enterprise engagement and input to NTF priorities and introducing improvements in the monitoring and evaluation of the NTF.

As part of budget 2019, a number of steps have already been taken to align with the recommendations set out in the report. There has been additional support for close-to-labour-market skills requirements. Additional funding has been provided to continue the expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships, increase the number of places on Springboard, support Skillnet Ireland to meet the skills gaps in the economy, and there are such gaps, and to invest in a new education and training board, ETB, employee development programme. Part of the NTF surplus is being prioritised to support additional higher education-further education and training, HE-FET, expenditures and the development of labour market skills. The Government has decided to ring-fence €300 million of the existing surplus over 2020 to 2024, which is €60 million per annum, to provide targeted funding to meet the skills needs of the economy and to respond to Brexit and other challenges facing the economy. The Department of Education and Skills will work closely with the new oversight arrangement to progress this issue and will launch a competitive call in the second quarter of 2019 for new courses that are aligned with the key objectives of the investment. I will return to this point shortly.

There is increased focus on supporting in-company training. The NTF is delivering €6.3 million in extra funding to Skillnet Ireland in 2019 and supplying a new funding line of €11 million for the implementation of the new SOLAS-ETB framework to upskill lower-skilled workers and to support small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs. There already has been a re-allocation of NTF funding of FET for employment programmes below the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, level 5 to the Exchequer and this process, begun in budget 2018, has been accelerated in budget 2019. Some €57 million in investment in programmes with significant activity below level 5 on the NFQ, previously resourced from the NTF, will now be funded from the Exchequer. The NTF will be deployed to support close-to-labour-market skills programmes in areas of identified skills needs with support for enterprise-focused higher education programmes. That has increased from €37 million in 2018 to €120 million in 2019. This investment will be made in areas with identified skills needs as outlined in the national skills bulletin and in line with the priorities established by the National Skills Council. As was the case in budget 2018, the NTF will fund all of some programmes as part of this investment.

An implementation plan to deliver the recommendations contained in the independent review was published as part of budget 2019, along with details of a new advisory group to the National Skills Council in order to strengthen governance and oversight and to secure employer input into the strategic direction of the fund. This advisory group will be chaired by a member of the National Skills Council and will include representatives from the enterprise sector. The actions set out in this plan set out a clear path for transforming the National Training Fund into a strategic, enterprise-focused response to meeting the skills needs of the economy. The implementation plan has been designed with the intention that the majority of the recommendations stemming from the Indecon report have been implemented in 2018 or will be in 2019, so that the 2020 expenditure decisions will be made in a fully reformed NTF.

Regarding oversight, the implementation of the plan will be monitored by an interdepart-



mental group comprising the Departments of Education and Skills, Public Expenditure and Reform, Finance and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Progress in implementing key recommendations will be reported in the quarterly Action Plan for Education progress reports.

I will outline some of the key actions outlined in the implementation plan. The NTF investment will be focused on close-to-labour-market skills areas, informed by skills and labour market data and employer input. Indeed, in 2019 the NTF will provide support for: 7,386 new apprenticeship registrations, 1,200 above the 2018 target; 5,000 trainee enrolments, 1,100 above the 2018 target; 62,000 training opportunities through Skillnet Ireland, an increase of 7,000; 9,000 Springboard places, an increase of 1,000 places; 17,000 higher education places in key skills areas and training for 5,000 lower-skilled workers through the new State-supported employee development programme. All of this is good news, way above the targets. We will issue a call for a new pilot targeting first time upskilling SMEs with a view to implementation in 2020. Greater investment from the NTF will be made in higher education programmes with an enterprise focus, and SME upskilling will be included in the performance and innovation fund.

The NTF advisory group that I mentioned earlier will advise on a new method of engaging with enterprise bodies to ensure there is a focused and structured input prior to expenditure decisions. That is good. An NTF evaluation report will be published annually by the Department of Education and Skills. All programmes will be evaluated for their efficiency and effectiveness. To do this in a consistent manner, a series of key metrics will be devised.

From January 2020, a new ring-fenced funding line, the human capital initiative, will be established within the National Training Fund to invest €60 million per annum from the accumulated surplus over a five-year period. The ring-fenced allocation, totalling €300 million over the period from 2020 to 2024, will form a key part of the Government's strategic response to Brexit and other challenges the economy might face. It will meet the future skills needs of the economy and provide additional investment at levels 6 to 8 in higher education, address skills needs at a regional level via the regional skills fora, give employers a greater role in determining the strategic direction of the fund and allow the education sector to take a more medium-term approach to budgeting through an agreed multi-annual allocation.

Strict criteria in the oversight and use of the fund will ensure the funding is consistent with overall fiscal policy and guarantee that an adequate surplus is maintained in the fund at all times, which is of paramount importance for the future development of the economy. This is particularly important in the context of Brexit and the possibility that unemployment may increase again. Prior to 2012, income from the NTF levy had fallen from a high of €413 million in 2008 to €299 million. However, since 2012, receipts from the NTF levy have increased annually owing to improved employment levels. The surplus at the end of 2018 was estimated at €460 million. The accumulated surplus in the fund has been critical in maintaining expenditure levels, particularly in the provision of training for the unemployed in a period when receipts were falling. I must emphasise that while the surplus is rising, it is prudent to continue to maintain an adequate surplus in the fund to meet demand in future years. I have referred to the fact that while unemployment levels have dropped, we continue to take in as much as we can to the NTF to provide for future security. While the surplus represents a very significant sum, it would cover less than 12 months of NTF expenditure at current levels. The greater employer contribution to the NTF is enabling substantial additional investment in further education and training and higher education. Employers and learners will see real value from this investment such as through the continued implementation of the Government's action plan to expand apprenticeships and traineeships, targeted support for close-to-labour-market

*1 o'clock*

skills needs and significant investment in enterprise focused higher education.

I hope I have made a satisfactory presentation on the NTF to the Seanad.

**Senator Aidan Davitt:** I welcome the Minister of State who is one of the most active Ministers of State in government. He is hard working and always willing to listen to those who make logical arguments. I welcome the good news he has brought to the House. However, as an employer, I find it hard to understand why some employers are being treated as fish and others as meat. In the context of the apprenticeship programme, for example, there is a significant financial incentive for employers in certain trades to take on apprentices. That is true of apprentice electricians, plumbers and those involved in the wet trades. However, under the new apprenticeship schemes that have been rolled out recently in auctioneering, the insurance sector and so on, there are no financial incentives for employers to take on apprentices. I have two apprentices working with me. They travel to Dublin one day a week. We are paying their wages and for their training. It is great to have them skilled up and put them on the path to employment. However, as their employer, there is nothing in it for me. I am not being treated fairly in comparison to an electrician or a plumber, for example. I urge the Minister of State to consider making a small payment for the days on which the apprentice or trainee is off site and engaged in a formal education course. Employers should receive some grant in that regard. It would encourage more of them to take on apprentices or trainees. We are talking about meaningful jobs at the end of the process and there is no better way to learn a trade than in the workplace.

I again welcome the Minister of State and appreciate all of the work he is doing in the Department. However, I urge him to strongly consider introducing a small grant for employers. It is hard enough to be without workers for a day but having to pay them while they are off site is quite a challenge for small employers. I ask him to raise the issue with the committee to which he referred.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I thank the Minister of State for his presentation, to which I listened in my office. I assure him that I am not running here to say something without having heard what he had to say. I thank him for coming into the House and wish to point out that it was me who requested his attendance to discuss the national training fund, NTF, in the wake of the publication by the Government of the expenditure report for 2018 which sets out some exciting, challenging and aspirational ideas. Many of the ideas contained therein make perfect sense. This morning I printed a copy of the wonderful press release from the Government, dated 17 May 2018, which referred to a review, which is important, and the need for ongoing training. I do not doubt for one moment the Minister of State's commitment. I know that he is a very keen advocate of apprenticeships, traineeships, internships and gaining work experience more generally. We all learn in different ways and not everyone is academic. Some are skilled with their head, while others are skilled with their hands. The profession of baker is as noble as that of a stock broker, if not more so.

We must consider the shortage of certain skill sets. We know that there are major issues in agriculture and farming. There are lots of people who are trying to get into the dairy sector, but there is a shortage of skilled personnel. People can be trained and acquire the necessary skills through apprenticeships. It is all about matching people's skills, capacities and abilities. Everyone wants to have a job to bring home a crust. That is normal and the Government is committed to supporting them in that endeavour.

We face a significant challenge in the form of the housing crisis. Everyone understands and

recognises the importance of Rebuilding Ireland in that context. If the targets set in it are to be reached, we will have to start training and upskilling people in the construction sector as there is a need for more qualified electricians, plumbers and others with construction related skills. Representatives of the Construction Industry Federation, CIF, have appeared on numerous occasions before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, of which I am a member. The federation has expressed serious concerns about the shortage of skilled workers. It has also pointed to the need to upskill many involved in the sector. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was in the House yesterday to discuss forestry, a sector in which there are shortages of certain skilled workers too. We must find ways to make progress in these areas.

In the aforementioned press release the Government sets itself major targets. I am not going to start to throw lots of figures at the Minister of State, but I draw attention to the reference to the allocation of €182 million for ETB programmes, €122 million for apprenticeships and €37 million in additional funding for labour market focused courses at higher level. The Minister of State also referred to an additional allocation of €30 million for Springboard courses and €21 million for Skillnet Ireland. I am not interested in analysing the figures now because we are all singing from the same hymn sheet and all agree that there is a need to upskill workers and match their capacity to areas in the economy in which there are skill shortages.

I thank the Minister of State for his time. I urge him not to lose sight of the fact that everyone is entitled to have a job and should have equal access to employment opportunities. If that requires the provision of additional training and supports, the Government must not be found wanting. We must remember the people on the margins, particularly those in receipt of social welfare payments. Many of them could be meaningfully employed on a part-time basis and contribute to society through community employment initiatives run by local authorities, for example. We must determine if their skills can be matched, where practical and possible, to meaningful opportunities and whether they can be provided with additional resources and specialised, supportive training to enable them to get on. Everyone has to play his or her part. I thank the Minister of State for it. We should have an annual review of how this programme is going, but the Minister of State has done well.

**Senator Maria Byrne:** The Minister of State is very welcome. I know of his passion for apprenticeships and training. It is very evident in the work he does. It is something the Government wants to ensure is working right. I have a few questions about one or two of the things the Minister of State referenced in his speech. He talked about quarterly reviews. If something is found to not be working, will he be willing to look at alternatives, suggestions or input from employers?

Senator Boyhan referred to house building and how the lack of apprenticeships and skills in that area is a problem for Rebuilding Ireland. I attended a meeting with the Minister of State and some hairdressers from Limerick and Dublin prior to Christmas. There is a shortage of people who are skilled in that area but there are also a number of issues facing the employers. We raised them with the Minister of State on the day. One such issue is that when employers take on an apprentice it is for a three-year apprenticeship. As Senator Davitt mentioned, the apprentices go to college one day a week. The employers receive no incentive in that regard. They have to cover the full cost of their employees going to college. The employers are being left with the costs of everything. While they are training the apprentices and giving them very good apprenticeships, the employers are now beginning to feel that everything is being landed on them.

A new wage agreement is coming in on 4 March. It is not very clear whether apprentices are covered by that minimum wage legislation. It was signed into law before Christmas but only brought to the attention of some employers who take on apprentices this week. It is not clear from the document whether they are now to pay the full minimum wage or whether there is still an apprenticeship wage. That is another question I have for the Minister of State. These are things that affect the employers who give the apprentices these very necessary skills.

I am a big fan of apprenticeships because I do not believe that third level college is for everybody. If people are good with their hands, there are skills out there for them to learn. Apprenticeships have helped in taking many people out of unemployment. Lifelong learning is something about which we have always heard. We learn as we go along. No matter what age one is, whether young or not so long, it is never too late to learn. Academia may not be for some people and apprenticeships deserve full support. As Senator Davitt said, we cannot allow employers to be responsible for everything. It is an area which I would like to see the Minister of State looking at.

A number of people are being trained. Some people are operating out of mobile units or out of their own front rooms. That leads to the black market, which is in competition with people who pay their rates and who are on the high street. These people are taking in apprentices while the people on the other side are not being regulated. There are a number of issues. Those issues affect all skill sets. It is an area at which the Minister of State might be able to take a look. I welcome the increased funding and the emphasis on this area.

The education and training boards, ETBs, are definitely the way to go. The fact that the ETBs are responsible for different areas of apprenticeships is very important. Instead of all ETBs trying to be very good at teaching everything, it would be good if there was one leader in each area. The same rules should apply across all ETBs and the same guidelines should be set down in respect of all the different skill sets. That is very important to prevent people trying to put their own interpretations on things. Overall, it is very positive but there are a few issues which need to be looked at. I look forward to hearing from the Minister of State.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I acknowledge the comments of Senators Davitt and Byrne with regard to his commitment to his role. I have a couple of short points to make. The important point to begin with is that Sinn Féin supports the National Training Fund policy. We think it is a progressive policy which puts us much more in line with best practice in Europe. We welcome the fact that it is financed through a levy on employers. We think that is the only practical way to go about this business. We believe that the funds for this policy should be prioritised towards apprenticeship programmes. Our current apprenticeship structure still leaves a lot to be desired. In 2017 just 391 people took part in the Government's newly established programme and only nine of the promised 15 programmes were introduced. Our party's own policy proposals, with which I ask the Minister of State and his Department to engage, set out a five-year plan to increase the number of apprentices to 60,000 and to develop 63 further programmes. We believe we urgently need to prioritise this sector. If one looks at countries like Germany, one sees that there is a much wider range of apprenticeships available. These are hugely beneficial not only to the people involved, but to the economy overall. It is what good long-term economic planning should be about.

With regard to recent national training fund developments, I am worried about the decision to give greater power and say to big business in terms of how the fund is spent. This may be an ideological difference between ourselves on the left and our colleagues in the Chamber. The

money is to be spent in a way which keeps the public interest central yet we are allowing private enterprise to dictate to the State how this money should be spent. I know the Minister of State takes good cognisance of the trade union movement and I am glad to say that the ICTU and a host of academics have come out quite strongly against this idea. For instance, Professor Kathleen Lynch of UCD has criticised the move as allowing commercial interests to influence State education. The general secretary of ICTU, Patricia King, was also unequivocal in her stance against this development. She stated:

Education policy and decision-making must continue to be autonomous and unconstrained of employers. This move not only erodes academic freedom; such a policy approach is out of step with the times...

She further stated, “The Fund’s priority cannot be confined to initiatives directly relevant to the needs of employers.” I ask the Minister of State and the Department to take cognisance of those words because - let us be clear - the trade union movement has, or at least should have, a massive role to play in respect of the apprenticeships schemes. I ask the Minister of State to recognise that this move is problematic. The education sector and the private for-profit sector do not share the same objectives or interests. To conflate the motives of these two groups is to be naive and is potentially very dangerous.

**Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy John Halligan):** I thank the Senators for their very valuable contributions. I know that all of them have an interest in apprenticeships and in developing apprenticeships and skills. We should look at where our economy is today and then look back ten or 12 years. As I have always said, during the recession the area of apprenticeships practically collapsed. This happened for a number of reasons, including high levels of unemployment. Before the recession, many basic apprenticeships collapsed. I do not like to use the word “basic”, but I refer to apprenticeships that are essential to the progression of our economy in the building industry such as carpentry, plastering, and bricklaying apprenticeships. These collapsed because builders trying to get work done as quickly as possible did not really have time to take on apprentices. I have no hesitation in saying that as they may have felt it was what had to be done. We took in many people from abroad, with which I have no problem, so the number of apprenticeships dropped. It was, therefore, an enormous task for me, when I was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for apprenticeships, to make sure that we again developed the basic apprenticeships, but also that we enhanced apprenticeships. I believe we have done that. I will not call the full range of apprenticeships out but there are 41, including for advanced quantity surveyors, horticulture, hairdressing, healthcare assistants, HGV drivers, equipment engineering, sports management, supply chain associates, science, aircraft assistants, pipe-fitting, hospitality, engineering, accounting and so on. The 41 apprenticeships include 17 new apprenticeships this year. I think we have done exceptionally well.

Senator Davitt spoke about employers. I have a lot of sympathy for employers. I understand that there is a complexity and it is important for us to be able to get the message to employers that, when they take on apprentices, they further develop their own company. When talking to employers, especially in the high IT sector, we have found that they are more than happy to take apprenticeships. We are short on high skills which is a debate we should have at some stage. Employers are happy to take apprentices on and train them at that high end of the employment bracket.

Senator Davitt is correct to a degree. I have been to a few countries around the world which have a different funding scheme for apprenticeships where the Government will co-fund, to a large degree, the apprentice working with the company. One also finds that it is not unusual for employers to go into third level or leaving certificate institutions to find out the skill factors of the students there, if they are good at science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and to take them straight away and co-fund them. It can work either way. I will look at that. Assessing the effect it has is part of the remit that I have set out for myself. The Senator is correct that it can sometimes be very difficult for small employers to do the same financing as big employers. We will look at that.

**Senator Aidan Davitt:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy John Halligan:** Senator Boyhan said exactly the same thing and I will do that. I know the Senator is a great supporter of the education and training boards, ETBs, and they do valuable work for us. Our association with employers is very important in this regard. I asked about the whole fund a number of years ago so that when I faced questions like this, we would have had an independent review carried out. I do not think we could go too far wrong with having independent reviews of all the funds that we spend in the Department. We had a concise, independent review by Indecon. The Department and I decided that we would follow through on almost all of Indecon's recommendations. We will work through that over the next couple of months.

Senator Gavan spoke about the impact of businesses and whether they have too much of a say. I looked into that. It is important for businesses to come to us to tell us where there is a shortfall in skills, whether in engineering, hospitality or pharmaceuticals. They are the experts. We continually engage with businesses through our nine skills fora. They regularly meet with businesses, whether pharmaceutical, agricultural or whatever else, on behalf of our Department and then come back to us to say that we are short on skills for a business sector. In my engagement with employers throughout the country, I have not found them taking advantage of apprenticeships or skills. They work within the sector.

A number of Senators asked if we should find some way to help to finance apprenticeships and skills through the employer. I think that is a valuable suggestion, to see if a fund could be set apart to help once we make sure that apprentices and employees are treated well and paid the required wage, whether the apprenticeship wage or the cost of living at the time. I am unsure whether the apprenticeship levy stays under the new public service pay agreement or if there is an increase in it but I will find out. I agree with Senator Gavan in that sense, that we have to make sure all employees are treated respectfully and paid what they are entitled to. Up to now, we have not had any indication from the independent report that there are apprentices who are not being treated well.

A question was asked as to whether we have apprenticeships in agriculture, which is very important. We have applied horticulture, which is maybe not agriculture, farm management, farm technician and agricultural mechanics apprenticeships. We are doing very well for the first time in the last number of years. I do not think there is an area of business for which we do not have an apprenticeship. The question was asked as to whether we can be as good as Germany. We are dealing with 4.6 million people and a very buoyant economy which came from a recession. We do not have the same big car manufacturing firms or engineering companies that Germany and such would have, where there are an awful lot of apprenticeships. We cannot match that percentage because we do not have those big companies. All the top pharmaceu-

tical companies in the world are here in Ireland and a different level of skills is required for pharmaceutical companies. Up to seven or eight years ago, pharmaceutical companies which were upskilling their workforce or doing research would have gone back to base if they were from Israel, America or France. They do not do that now. They engage with our universities, institutes of technology and with this Department through the skills fora that I mentioned, to look for our apprentices and skilled workers.

A shortage of skills was mentioned. There is absolutely a shortage. I have been to all the top companies, including one that wins huge contracts from the European Space Agency. Most of its top workers are from outside Ireland because it cannot get the skilled workers here. It advertises for them here. We need to talk about that. I firmly believe that if we are not innovative in our economy and do not invest in innovation and in the high skills factor, we will suffer. There is no question about the advancement of technology across all sectors, including agriscience, pharmaceuticals and so on, in which we are doing well, being number one in the world in agriscience. The point remains that if we do not upskill in all these areas, we will suffer since we are not meeting the educational requirements of our workforce so that they have abilities to use when employed by companies, including top pharmaceutical companies. There is a lot to be done.

I think straight and say it as it is. The National Training Fund has been fantastic. It has done exceptionally well. The small contribution that the employer makes, the 0.1%, is significant in a sense and it is balanced. We meet employers all the time who say they are happy and get good apprentices. There is a question of whether we pay apprentices enough. I worry that with a buoyant economy, which is doing exceptionally well, people may not want to go into apprenticeships. They can get a ready-made job in a factory that pays well or a ready-made job elsewhere. We have to consider the possibility of upping the apprenticeship payment. We may have to do that over the next few years if we see numbers dropping. Right now the numbers are increasing and we are ahead in some apprenticeships, as I said earlier. That could, however, be an issue down the line for apprenticeships. Would we have to entice more people into apprenticeships? A sure way to entice people into employment is if it is good employment with a reasonable rate of pay. We will have to look at that issue in the coming years.

Reference was made to whether we check with employers. There is a review every quarter from my Department. I am part of that review. When it is carried out, I look at every part of the review to make sure there is accountability across all the sectors I deal with around apprenticeship skills and so on. On all the money being taken from the National Training Fund, there is no doubt that there is accountability with regard to every cent of it. We make sure of that.

Some have questioned why we have the surplus. I explained why we need the surplus. It is due to the fact we could be headed into uncharted waters with Brexit. The sum of €430 million may sound like a big surplus but it is not. In the greater scheme of things, that surplus would be eaten up in normal economic output in one year. The money needs to be held and we have ring-fenced €300 million. I will outline the reason. In my opening remarks, I said the NTF had to be transferred, to a degree, because unemployment had dropped so the fund was not being used. However, we are unsure of what will happen with Brexit and if unemployment figures will rise again so rather than having to go back to the employers, for the first number of years we have a surplus we could use to deal with that. While some people may not agree with it, I agree with the surplus and if I had my way it would be increased until we are out of this uncertainty with regard to the economic position we may be placed in due to Brexit.

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I hope I have answered the Senators' questions. Over the coming months, my plan is to get representatives from all the Departments to meet my Department to talk about skills and apprenticeships. Many of the proposals and suggestions made by the Senators should be brought to that meeting. They would be best brought by the Senators rather than second-hand by me. Over the coming months, I plan to have that meeting. I will certainly write to the Senators on the apprenticeships payments.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paul Daly):** I thank the Minister of State.

When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Maria Byrne:** Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.35 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 5 March 2019.