

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN GASRA OIBRE DE CHATHAOIRLIGH COISTI

WORKING GROUP OF COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Déardaoin, 30 Bealtaine 2019

Thursday, 30 May 2019

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 2.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Mary Butler,	Neale Richmond.
Catherine Connolly,	
Seán Crowe,	
John Curran,	
Pat Deering,	
Alan Farrell,	
Sean Fleming,	
Michael Harty,	
Fergus O'Dowd,	
Fiona O'Loughlin,	
Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin,	
Aengus Ó Snodaigh.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Pat Casey and Maureen O'Sullivan.

Teachta / Deputy Colm Brophy sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Public Policy Matters: Discussion

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): Apologies have been received from Deputies Maria Bailey, Brendan Smith and Michael Healy-Rae. In the usual reminder to members on mobile phones, I ask that members switch them off or set them to aeroplane mode in order to avoid interference.

I welcome the Taoiseach for this second engagement with the Working Group of Committee Chairmen. We are delighted to have him here again. The committees undertake detailed work which does not lend itself to consideration in plenary sessions. The committee Chairs know that while our work is intensive, our collective remit is extensive and our approach enables parliaments to engage with citizens in a more meaningful and direct manner. In 2018, there were 626 committee meetings involving 2,179 witnesses overall. A level of direct engagement with citizens and the nature and depth of our work on policy matters are among several aspects of the committee's work which makes it particularly rewarding and beneficial. I hope that this engagement will again be of mutual benefit to my fellow chairpersons in the context of both policy matters and priorities for Oireachtas committees and the Government.

I propose that we now proceed directly to the substantive part of the meeting. I ask the Taoiseach to make his opening statement.

The Taoiseach: I wish the members a good afternoon and thank the Chairman. Accompanying me is the Secretary General of my Department, Mr. Martin Fraser.

In the programme for Government, we wanted to strengthen accountability through attendance at Oireachtas committees and I welcome this opportunity to hear the committee's issues of concern and discuss the Government's response. For that reason, I will keep my opening statement relatively short.

Since this Government of Fine Gael and Independent Ministers came to office, 113 Acts of the Oireachtas have been passed. Nine of these were originally published as Private Members' Bills. A further 23 Government Bills are before the Dáil and ten are before the Seanad. We hope to have as many of these as possible concluded by the summer recess. All this work benefits from the input of the committees. I recognise the contributions of this committee's members' as Chairs and the contribution of members of their committees in scrutinising relevant legislation, dissecting the work of our agencies and advising on public policy. This is our second meeting in this format and it is an opportunity to reflect on where we are as a country, and how we are doing in the round.

The country is nearing a position of full employment. There are a record 2.3 million people at work and the unemployment rate is at its lowest in 14 years. The economy is doing well and it is being managed well. As a result, incomes and living standards are rising, and poverty and deprivation rates have been falling for four years, including a 30% reduction in child poverty. We have balanced the books and moved into surplus, we are reducing the national debt and we will make our first deposit to the rainy day fund later this year. However, we must not become complacent. The country has been here previously and we are mindful of the risks to our economic welfare, no more so than in the context of the threat posed by Brexit. Regardless

of the form it takes, Brexit will have an adverse impact on Ireland and there will be a need for planning in respect of it on the part of the Government, businesses and citizens, as well as at EU level. Given what is happening in London, the risk of a no-deal Brexit continues to be a significant possibility. That risk is, if anything, increasing as each day passes. We will remain vigilant and continue to work for the best possible outcome while preparing for all possibilities.

A detailed contingency plan published on 19 December, and updated in January, set out the Government's analysis of a no-deal Brexit. The Brexit omnibus Act was signed into law by the President on St. Patrick's Day last. This primary legislation crosses the remit of nine Ministers and comprises 15 Parts to help prepare Ireland for no deal. It focuses on protecting our citizens, helping businesses, and securing jobs and ongoing access to essential services and products. On 8 May, Ireland and the UK signed a memorandum of understanding on the common travel area. This reaffirms our shared commitment to maintaining the common travel area in all circumstances. Irish and British citizens will continue to be able to move freely to live, work, study and access welfare, pensions and public services in each other's country on a reciprocal basis. They will also be able to vote in local and national parliamentary elections in the UK on the same basis as British citizens, while British citizens will be able to do the same in Ireland.

At home, we are investing for the future. With Project Ireland 2040, we are making massive investments in our public infrastructure, such as housing, transport, culture, sport, education and healthcare in all parts of the country. At its core, Project Ireland 2040 is about balanced regional development. We are planning for a country with a population of 6 million by the middle of the century, if not before. We need to develop Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway into cities of real scale, growing twice as fast as the capital. We need to develop other major urban centres, such as Sligo and Athlone, and along the M1 corridor, Dundalk and Drogheda, and Letterkenny-Derry. We are also planning for a rural Ireland which continues to experience population and jobs growth with vibrant towns and villages at its core. We expect the population of rural Ireland to increase by 200,000 by 2040.

The shovels are in the ground and Project Ireland 2040 is being implemented. While, understandably, there has been much focus on one particular hospital, there are three new hospitals under construction, one of which, the national forensic mental health service hospital in Portlaoine, will be completed very soon. Extensions are being built all over the country, including new wings or new ward blocks in Limerick, Waterford and Clonmel, to name but three. The new runway at Dublin Airport is now under construction and the first technological university has been established. There is an ambitious programme of school building projects in every county and major new road projects in the north west and south east, including the N4 to Sligo, and the design contracts for the M20. The M7 upgrade and the Enniscorthy and New Ross bypasses will open later this year, with the Dunkettle and Ballyvourney-Macroom projects moving to construction.

Project Ireland 2040 will enable every part of the country to grow and share in our national prosperity. The first allocations have also been made from the four Project Ireland 2040 funds: 84 projects have been awarded €86 million under the rural regeneration and development fund; 88 projects received approximately €100 million under the urban regeneration and development fund; €75 million was awarded to 27 projects through the disruptive technologies innovation fund; and €77 million was awarded for seven projects in the first phase of the climate action fund.

We are also preparing for the world of the future with Future Jobs Ireland. In the coming decades, artificial intelligence, AI, virtual reality-augmented reality, VR-AR, robotics and

autonomous vehicles will change our world as much as the Internet and mobile phones did in the recent past. We need to be ready to benefit from the new jobs and new wealth that will be created.

If we are to have the kind of economy and society that I believe we all want in 2025 - low-carbon, high-productivity, high-tech, family-friendly, globally-traded and competitive - we need to create the environment where that is possible now. Every generation needs to shake up its enterprise and jobs model - otherwise it stagnates - and we are working to change the way we work. Education is central to that. For 2019, we allocated €10.8 billion to the Department of Education and Skills. This is the highest such allocation in our history. It is a big number but in practical terms it means: 5,000 extra teachers hired in two years; the lowest pupil-teacher ratio ever in primary schools; €1.8 billion to assist children with special educational needs; more special needs assistants, SNAs, than ever before; new subjects such as physical education, PE, and computer science; more students attending higher education from non-traditional backgrounds; and new school buildings, extensions and refurbishments all over the country. By the end of this year, we will have added 40,000 extra or replacement school places, and built 200 modern science laboratories and 48 new or upgraded PE halls, and replaced 600 prefabs.

Construction is now also well under way on new facilities at Grangegorman for Technological University, TU, Dublin. I am very keen to see a new TU created next in the south east, in Munster or both.

Delivery of the national broadband plan represents a significant intervention by Government in promoting rural development. A digital divide exists between urban and rural Ireland and that contributes to an economic and social divide. We can close it now or we never will do so. The plan aims to ensure that every home, school and business has access to high-speed broadband, almost all by means of fibre. Earlier this month, we approved the appointment of a preferred bidder. National Broadband Ireland, the preferred bidder, will supply broadband to the one quarter of Irish people and premises that currently cannot access high-speed broadband. It guarantees a level playing field for 1.1 million people, 500,000 homes, 100,000 businesses and farms and 600 schools, getting the same speeds for approximately the same price.

Despite some real progress to date, I am fully aware that many problems persist in, for example, the areas of housing and homelessness, healthcare and climate change. Last year, 18,000 new homes were built in Ireland. That is the highest number in a decade. We know from figures released by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in recent days that new home building is up another 25% this year so far. We will certainly see between 22,000 and 25,000 new homes being built in Ireland this year. This does not include student accommodation or vacant homes being brought back into use. The construction industry and the social housing programme are being rebuilt bit by bit. Last year, for example, 8,500 new homes were added to the social housing stock, which is a very significant number. About half of those were built by councils or housing trusts and the other half were acquired from developers, leased or brought back into use having been vacant but we need to go higher than that again. We are aiming for 10,000 this year and 11,000 or 12,000 the year after. This is the largest social housing programme we have had in the State for decades but there are constraints and limitations such as the availability of construction workers and delays in planning, tendering and construction. This, and nothing else, is holding us back from accelerating the social housing programme further. In fact, the housing budget this year is €2.6 billion, the biggest budget for housing ever. It will rise again in 2020.

We are also spending €146 million on homelessness services this year. It is making a difference. Last year, more than 5,000 adults and their dependants exited homelessness. More

people are being lifted out of homelessness than ever before but, unfortunately, we have yet to stem the tide of people becoming homeless for the first time or sometimes a second time.

In order to ensure a long-term supply of affordable rental homes in our cities, a different form of not-for-profit rental is required. That is cost rental. There are currently two cost rental projects being piloted - at Enniskerry Road in south Dublin and Emmet Road in Inchicore. Cumulatively, these two projects will provide 380 cost rental homes. If it works as a model, we can scale up across the State.

In healthcare, this year will see the highest ever level of health funding in the history of the State at approximately €17 billion. We also have a €10 billion capital programme over the next ten years to renew our buildings, our equipment and our ICT. As I mentioned, we have three hospitals under construction. A fourth is on the way, with the national maternity hospital due to go to tender later this year. While there has been an understandable focus on the national children's hospital, it is worth pointing out once again that it will take up less than 20% of the capital budget for health leaving 80% for all other projects across Ireland. For example, 11 new primary care centres will open this year adding to the 125 that are already operational.

In 2014, we reversed the previous Government's policy on reducing hospital bed capacity. While being a slow process, by the end of this year, the number of hospital beds will be back above 11,000 for the first time in ten years and while too high, the trolley count this year is lower than last year. Waiting times for operations and procedures like cataracts, tonsillectomies, hip and knee replacements, angiograms and scopes are down by about half since the middle of 2017.

The Sláintecare implementation team is up and running. As we know, this is a ten-year all-party vision to introduce universal healthcare in Ireland, free or affordable healthcare for all, much speedier access to healthcare and a decisive shift towards prevention, primary care and community care, with much greater local and regional autonomy.

Following an open competition, Paul Reid has taken up his role as director general of the HSE. A new HSE board is being established to strengthen the management, governance and accountability of the HSE.

An agreement has also been reached with the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, on a major package of GP contractual reforms that will benefit patients, make general practice a more attractive career option for doctors and help bring about positive changes at primary care level. It represents a 40% increase in funding for general practice over three to four years. A new contract has also been agreed with staff nurses and midwives. It now needs to be implemented.

As we know, climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today so the Government warmly welcomes the report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action published in March. The committee worked constructively over the past few months to achieve a broad consensus on what needs to be done. The recommendations have informed the Government's climate plan, which is being finalised by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton. It will align with other work we are doing to build a strong economy and a society in which nobody feels left out, one that has the family at its centre, with modern infrastructure in place in a country sure of its place in the world. The plan will set out how we intend to meet our climate targets and a range of actions in energy, agriculture, transport and buildings, as well as in other sectors. While it is not often commented upon, Ireland already performs well in some areas such as recycling, exceeding our EU targets. We are now

up to 30% in the context of renewable power. We can also do well in respect of greenhouse gas emissions.

Under our national development plan, we are investing approximately €21.8 billion over the next ten years, some by way of the Exchequer but mainly through the semi-State organisations, which will bring renewable energy from 30% today to 70% by 2030. There will also be investment in the installation of electric vehicle infrastructure, which will be led by the ESB, building insulation and the electrification of more of our railways. Just this week, Irish Rail began procurement of 600 new electric or hybrid locomotives. There are also more buses. The first low-emission vehicles went into service in Dublin this month. No high-emission buses will be purchased for our cities henceforth.

Regarding justice reform, the third report of the effectiveness and renewal group was published in February. It shows the substantial progress that has been made throughout this transformation. We are also working to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland in five areas: leadership and accountability; people; structures and operations; independent oversight; and partnerships. We will strengthen the human rights compliant culture within the Garda; develop a new digital strategy; review Garda discipline; and continue workforce modernisation and civilianisation. We also want to improve the working conditions of Garda personnel through the deployment of ICT to reduce paperwork and by resolving long-standing issues such as rostering, the uniform and wellness.

This is just a small part of the work Government is doing. We are on track but there is much more to do.

The chairmen of Oireachtas committees perform a significant role in our parliamentary democracy and they have had a very much enhanced role in this Dáil. They help us deal with some of the biggest challenges faced by our country. I look forward to hearing their questions and engaging with them on the priorities of their respective committees.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach. Before we move on to the next part of the meeting, I will do a quick recap on the procedures that have been agreed. We will take questions from chairpersons in groups of three. That will operate under the D'Hondt model whereby they will each have one minute to ask a question and the Taoiseach will have approximately four minutes in which to reply. There will be a second round of one-minute questions to the Taoiseach, with the same reply time afforded to him. A note on the sequence of chairpersons and the questions being asked has been distributed; they should have a copy in front of them. In the event that somebody is not present, I will move up from the names in the group below and, as a result, I might call people earlier than indicated. I call Deputy Fleming, who is in the first group of chairpersons.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Taoiseach for attending. Much of the information he provided relates to issues I want to raise with him. I want to make one or two positive suggestions. The first concerns Project Ireland 2040, in respect of which there is a capital expenditure plan worth €140 billion. The level of the national debt was so severe a few years ago it led to our establishing the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA. The Taoiseach should now set up a national capital project agency - similar to the NTMA - to handle all the big projects and gather all the experts together within one agency. The type of projects involved would be those costing more than €20 million; school building projects can progress at their current level. As the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts, I am saying we have had mistakes with the national children's hospital, we might have mistakes with the broadband issue and

there are more. When running a major capital project it is not right to have every Secretary General be responsible for the capital investment in their own Department, with each of them making their own individual mistakes and no overall learning capacity. I see merit in having one State agency. It would build up tremendous expertise and knowledge about procurement. Above all, it would free the line Departments to do their main work. For example, with the national children's hospital the head of the HSE, the Secretary General of the Department and senior officials are spending much of their time dealing with a construction project when they should be dealing with health issues. Having such an agency would free up their time.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank the Taoiseach for attending the meeting. He correctly mentioned Sláintecare as being a ten-year vision for change and reorienting our health service towards primary care and spending public money for the public good, concentrating on need not the ability to pay. To implement the reform programme, we need transitional funding to be allocated to reforming the health service, in particular in information and communication technology which is essential for underpinning the reform programme, in gathering data and giving real-time information on how we can assess the reform programme as it rolls out. Will transitional funding be made available to Sláintecare in this year's budget? When will multi-annual budgeting be adopted to allow for long-term planning and certainty in the reform programme?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach referred to some of the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, primarily within the policing area. I wish to address some matters under the equality element of our responsibilities. I commend the Department of the Taoiseach on its initiative of engagement with the Oireachtas disability group. I commend in particular the work on the Taoiseach's behalf by Philip O'Callaghan.

I will understand if the Taoiseach is not able to give me the specifics on these matters, but I ask him to note them and if possible to write to me subsequently. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, was ratified in March 2018. The ratification of the optional protocol is essential to the implementation of the hope and promise of the UNCRPD and the prospect of people with disabilities being able to secure access to their rights and needs. When will the optional protocol be ratified?

The Report and Final Stages of the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has not yet been scheduled. When will that be done?

The *in loco parentis* rule needs to be repealed. Parents looking after seriously ill and seriously disabled children need to have that certainty.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): That completes the first group of questions.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their contributions. Deputy Fleming's suggestion is one worth considering. It is something we considered at the time of developing Project Ireland 2040 and decided not to go for it. Australia has such a body, Infrastructure Australia, a government agency tasked with overseeing and driving all its major infrastructure projects. It is an idea that is worth dusting down and looking at again. I would throw in two caveats. The roads programme, the schools programme and the Irish Water programme are all proceeding on time and on budget; so if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Capital projects are being delivered on time and within budget in plenty of areas.

I was Minister for Health when we agreed to go ahead with the national children's hospital. We decided to set up a dedicated agency and board with expert staff to ensure it was done prop-

erly. I wonder if we had taken the other route and allowed HSE estates to do the job, whether the job would have been done just as well or even better. While the HSE comes in for considerable criticism when it comes to new hospitals, new hospital wings and primary care centres, it does them pretty well. While it is not a bad idea, I am not sure if it is a panacea.

Deputy Harty asked about a transition fund. We would agree that reforming the health service will cost money and that cannot come out of the day-to-day spend because that has to be spent anyway. In the health service we need to invest to spend, or spend to save as some people say. I would argue we have a transition fund already; we just do not tot it all up and call it a transition fund. The €80 million a year that is set aside for investment in ICT is a transition fund. The capital budget, which is now about €700 million a year for new buildings, is also transitional funding, as is the new money for general practice, particularly for the new treatments - the chronic disease funds. To me all those things are transition. We just do not tot them up and call it the Sláintecare transitional fund. We could do that but would that not be just an accounting exercise? Obviously people can also bid for the €20 million fund if they have particular ideas. I would argue that we have it already; we just do not tot it up and account for it that way, but maybe we should.

I will need to come back to Deputy Ó Caoláin with answers to his questions. I thank him for his kind words about Philip O'Callaghan. We want to sign the optional protocol but we are not ready yet. I will come back to the Deputy on the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

I was across the *in loco parentis* rule about six months or a year ago but I am not up-to-date on it now. I heard the comments made by the Jack and Jill Children's Foundation, in particular. I have met constituents who have been affected by this. It may be one of those things done with the best intentions but it has not passed the common sense test. I will make sure we come back to the Deputy on all three of his questions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach. We now come to the follow-up round of questions. Again, members have one minute.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I wish to raise two other points relating to public confidence and accountability in the spending of taxpayers' money. Having been Minister for Health, the Taoiseach will be very familiar with the section 38 and section 39 organisations. They expend about €5 billion of taxpayers' money annually. There is no public accountability because they are not directly accountable to the Oireachtas in any manner. Where such organisations receive the majority of their funding from the taxpayers, there should be some accountability to the Oireachtas. We need to ensure there is accountability.

The same applies to public private partnerships. They talk about commercial sensitivity. Some of these contracts run for 25 or 30 years. It is not possible to wait for 30 years to examine whether a project was good or bad value for money. There needs to be a mechanism for public scrutiny of some of these public private partnerships after a short period. That will happen during the course of Project Ireland 2040. It would create greater public confidence if people could see some transparency.

Deputy Michael Harty: In my first round I asked about multi-annual budgeting allowing the health service to have long-term planning and certainty. Many systems that have engaged in health reform have moved to multi-annual budgets to allow for a longer-term planning process.

I return to the procurement process for large infrastructural projects, which falls within the

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The national children's hospital has been the subject of many meetings of the health committee. The existing procurement process was a two-stage process. It gave weighting to cost at 75% and quality at 25%, which put an emphasis on the cheapest bid rather than an emphasis on quality. What plans does the Government have to review that style of procurement process?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: As Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality and as vice chair of the Oireachtas disability group, I acknowledge that we have a working relationship between the Department of the Taoiseach and the cross-party group, most importantly regarding disability issues, which is unprecedented. The matters I have highlighted are of particular importance and concern to the non-governmental organisation sector. The Taoiseach mentioned being across the *in loco parentis* issue six months ago. Nothing has happened in the period since. I appeal to him to look at that very seriously. It is imperative that we have the matter of the optional protocol ratified and see the passage of the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Bill has completed Committee Stage and awaits Report and Final Stages. This is a critical element in the ultimate delivery of the hope and promise of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I thank the Taoiseach for his correspondence to follow.

The Taoiseach: I will pick up on Deputy Fleming's point. It might be more of a question from me to him. Does the Committee of Public Accounts not have any oversight over the matter?

Deputy Sean Fleming: Once the HSE passes the money on, it is outside our remit. That is the issue.

The Taoiseach: I would have thought section 38 organisations at the least should be included.

Deputy Sean Fleming: So would I.

The Taoiseach: The same should apply maybe for section 39 organisations that have more than 50% funding.

Deputy Sean Fleming: We are agreed on the principle anyway.

The Taoiseach: We are.

I was asked about multi-annual budgeting. I believe that as a principle multi-annual budgeting makes a good deal of sense. It is something I would like to move to across Government and not only for health. Again, a practical difficulty arises. We actually set out the budget for each Department, and not only for next year. We publish a table regularly - we will probably publish it as part of the summer economic statement in a few weeks' time. It sets out how much each Department is getting not only for this year but for the next two or three years. These are called expenditure ceilings. They get adjusted at budget time, generally upwards, but we do set out this information. In health, in particular, extra money is factored in each year for demographic and other pressures. Perhaps this is not done adequately, but it is there.

The difficulty we have with health is the consistent inability to stay within the budget ceilings. We can have any budget we like, whether multi-annual, annual or half-annual, but if we are unable to stick within our budget ceilings then they are not of much value. The temptation in a multi-annual budget system is always to take money for next year. That can potentially

make the problem worse.

We are proposing to change several things when it comes to procurement. One may sound obvious but it is serious. We should not proceed with a project until we know the full cost. That sounds blindingly obvious; of course we should not proceed with a project until we know the full cost, but this can actually give rise to difficulties. For example, I am a big supporter of projects like the M20 to link Cork and Limerick and a big fan of projects like MetroLink for Dublin. However, we never actually know the full cost of anything until we go to market or to tender. That is true whether we are building a small house or a massive project. Enforcing that new policy will be difficult because we may find ourselves at a point where we have spent €30 million or €40 million getting to the point of tender only to find out the real cost. Then, we have to decide that we are not going with it after all and then justify how we have spent €30 million or €40 million on a project that did not proceed. That has happened before. Thornton Hall is one example under a previous Administration. There are other examples but it is not a perfect solution either.

The other thing is to look at the balance between cost and non-cost factors when it comes to how we weight a tender. Part of the advice we have from our legal people and experts in the field is that we are far more likely to face a legal challenge if we do not go for the lowest-cost tender. There have been challenges when we have not given the tender to the lowest bidder. That is a risk and it can delay projects. It is not simply a matter of cost and quality. Submissions have to reach a minimum level of quality standards first and then there are cost and non-cost factors. We run the risk - it is a real risk - that if we do not go for the cheapest tender then we could find ourselves challenged. Maybe it is a risk that we should simply face, but it is a risk and we need to bear it in mind.

There is one thing I am keen to change. I have the Attorney General looking at this for me. I do not accept this cannot be done under European procurement law even though that is what some people say. I believe we should have some weighting around past form. I am not referring to any one company because I do not mean any one company. There are several in several fields that have not done a good job in the past. I do not like to see them getting public contracts again. If a candidate was going for a job in any of our offices, we would look at the references of the candidate. Any normal person going for a job anywhere gives references. The employer rings up the former employer and asks whether the former employer was happy. Is that not an obvious thing that we should have in our public procurement process? We should have some sort of star rating based on the past form and performance of a contractor when it came to other public contracts.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: This is simply a reiteration of the earlier points. Will the Taoiseach confirm his intent to come back to me on the points raised?

The Taoiseach: Absolutely.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): We are now going to proceed to our next group. That group will consist of Deputies Casey, O'Loughlin and Deering. Deputy Casey is first.

Deputy Pat Casey: My question is not a priority for the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government but it is probably a topical question in light of last week's events. At a recent committee meeting we had a detailed discussion on the importance of political research, the reasons behind voting and why people vote a given way. One of the key points was that political scientists had committed funding from 2002 to 2007. The project gave

significant information on why people voted. There were different reasons, including political views, political values and other reasons people chose to vote or not to vote. Since then, the scientists have only received money on an *ad hoc* basis and cannot carry out the same level of detail in research work. The question to us at the time was twofold. The first part related to the establishment of the electoral commission and when that would happen. In the absence of the commission, is there any possibility of securing defined funding on an annual basis to allow them to get ready for elections and to be ready to try to get research information that is vital for the Oireachtas in future?

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: The Taoiseach paints a rosy picture of education but that is not the case really in practice. There are some quick points I intend to address. The first is the notion of the whole school community as well as parity of pay for teachers. It is really important that those making up the heartbeat of the school - the secretaries and caretakers - are treated equally. At the moment we know they are on poor pay and have uncertain short-term contracts. They are not deemed to be public servants. This certainly needs to be looked at as does the question of revised contracts for special needs assistants.

Educational inequality and disadvantage need to be addressed in terms of trying to raise the playing field at an educational level for those who are vulnerable, especially those with special needs. Can the Taoiseach comment on the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. It has been *in situ* for 15 years. When will it be fully implemented? My next question is about the delivering equality of opportunity in schools scheme. While the scheme works for many schools, there are many disadvantaged children in non-DEIS schools. We need to have extra funding for home school liaison resources, school meals, school books and extra programmes.

Deputy Pat Deering: I apologise for being late and arriving when the Taoiseach was in the middle of making his presentation. My question from the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine relates to the future of the agriculture sector. Obviously, the sector will face major challenges in the coming years. Most likely, given the exit of Great Britain from the Union, there will be a deficit in the next Common Agricultural Policy. My question is basically around the CAP. What is being done at present to ensure that our European colleagues, who have been friendly in the past while, are coming on side with regard to extra funding that may be required to meet that deficit? What is the status of negotiations at the moment? What is the status of the rest of the negotiations on where we are going with CAP and the strategy around it? Will the Taoiseach enlighten us on when we may see the draft strategy for Ireland's strategic planning for CAP in the next period?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Casey asked a question about political scientists. I will have to check that out. I will have a chat with the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan, about that. I do not see why we could not have a dedicated fund for that kind of research. One always runs the risk of being accused that one is carrying out the research for the benefit of the Government. I will not go over old ground in that regard. We had commissioned some research and decided not to go ahead with it, but maybe there is a way to do it. Given the very high number of spoiled ballots in elections gone by, a bit of research into that would be beneficial. Also, there could be some research in respect of turnout. A 50% turnout is not bad for local and European elections, but I would be interested to know why 50% did not vote. It would be very useful to have that information. I will speak to the Minister of State about whether that is something we can do. It does not require the establishment of an electoral commission, although that would be the ideal vehicle for it.

Like the Deputy, the research I found most interesting on the day was the exit poll, which turned out to be wrong beyond the margin of error on many counts. For the first day, RTÉ and a lot of the media reported on the exit poll, not the election. I saw Ms Saoirse McHugh, a really impressive young woman from Achill who had been elected by RED C that morning, interviewed on RTÉ all morning. She was not a runner-up. One thing they do in the Netherlands, which might be something for us to consider, is to require media outlets when they report opinion polls not to report the medium, but to report the range. Instead of saying that a party is at 32%, they should have to say that the party is actually at between 29% and 31%. That would be more accurate for a start and would also be beneficial politically. It is something that we need to give some thought to, particularly as there is a margin of error in all these things that causes people, both media and politicians, to jump to conclusions that are not actually based on the science.

Regarding the electoral commission, we need to do it. It is long overdue. It is still a project that is in gestation and, again, is under the remit of the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, in the Customs House. We have this bizarre situation where we are setting up referendum commissions all of the time. Referendums have become a very frequent feature in Ireland and we are forever setting them up, closing them down, finding a judge and finding offices. It is kind of crazy. If we had a permanent electoral commission, so many of these things would be done much better, including the register.

I had a good discussion with Ms Nicola Sturgeon when she was in town in recent days. The Scottish use STV for some of their elections as we do. They do not use electronic voting, but they do use electronic counting. They have machines that one just feeds the ballot papers into. They are glass and one can see what is going on. They are able to count their votes in a matter of hours whereas we could still be counting votes down in Cork City Hall in a few days' time. While I would never go for electronic voting again, maybe we should think about electronic counting. Perhaps we could borrow the machines from Scotland every now and then.

On the question of education, I am not sure if it is a rosy picture but I think it is a good picture. If the Deputy looks at our international statistics, our Irish students perform pretty well in reading, maths and so many different areas. Our teachers and our educators do a fabulous job. On school secretaries and caretakers, that is one of those long-standing issues that I would love to see resolved, but anything we do would have to be prospective. If they were taken on as public sector employees into the future, it would have to be prospective. I do not think we could do anything retrospectively for lots of reasons.

I will have to come back to the Deputy on the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSN, Act. It is approximately 15 years since that legislation was passed and I would imagine large sections of it now are out of date and probably need to be updated in order for the legislation to be implemented.

Deputy Deering asked about the future of agriculture. Crucial to that is the next CAP in the next five-year multi-annual financial framework, MFF. It is something that I keep a close eye on because Ireland is a net contributor to the EU budget but most of what we get back is through CAP. We want that to continue. I am lobbying very hard and building alliances with France, Spain and countries in eastern Europe to try to defend the budget for CAP and ensure that it will be if not more than then ideally the same as it has been in the past. That is going to be a real priority for us as we head into the talks on the MFF, which is Europe's next five-year budget. The best way to achieve that is to make it part of environmental policy, to green the cap and to make it a common agricultural and environmental policy. I am not a farmer, as the

Deputy knows, but I have an interest in farming. I was reading all about the detail of the GLAS scheme the other day. Many people do not know this, but there are 60,000 farmers in Ireland who are beneficiaries of the GLAS scheme. Part of what they do under that is plant trees - oak and ash, native trees. They provide wild bird cover, for example. They are already doing many things that make a lot of sense. Maybe it should be mainstreamed as part of CAP that all farmers, or a greater number of them, should be part of GLAS. If we want to get more money for farmers and for CAP, I think it is in that space that we can get it. The other area is, perhaps, transition. If there are farmers who want to move from some forms of farming to other forms that might be more environmentally sustainable, they would have to be incentivised to do that and it would have to be voluntary. If we are looking to boost the budget so that there is more money for farmers and more money for the rural economy, the best way and the right way to do that, I think, is to make it an environmental policy as well as a food policy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach. Deputy Casey wishes to ask a second question.

Deputy Pat Casey: Yes. I thank the Taoiseach for his answers. We might include something else in the research that relates to the Taoiseach's party in particular. I had to scrutinise a number of ballot papers over the weekend. Deputy Doyle was getting first preferences while Councillors Shay Cullen and Irene Winters were getting second and third preferences. I believe they lost 50 or 60 votes. From the point of view of the Taoiseach's party, perhaps he could look into that.

The Taoiseach: The voters were switching-----

Deputy Pat Casey: They switched from the European to the local ballot papers. There were quite a few spoiled votes because of that.

Housing is a priority for the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government. It is disappointing to see that the homeless figures have increased again. We are three years into this Government's term of office and into a continual rise in homelessness. While there is a Government responsibility, it is a blight on all of us in the Oireachtas that there are more than 10,300 people homeless, nearly 3,800 of whom are children. Will the Taoiseach indicate when he believes that trend will stop in its upward trajectory and start to reverse?

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I agree with the Taoiseach that some of the EPSEN Act is outdated. It is appalling that it has not been implemented within 15 years. Given that we need to re-examine the matter, though, I call on the Taoiseach to make that a priority. Without a shadow of a doubt, there must also be timelier assessments of children who need extra support and early intervention. A range of supports within schools are also required. More intervention is required in respect of the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, which are based in the Department of Health but which have major implications in the context of education.

The Taoiseach mentioned capital spending. Too often, there is a longer delay between announcements and school openings than should be the case. Since I never miss an opportunity to mention specifics, I will refer to the new secondary school in the constituency of Kildare South that was announced last year. Sites are still being considered and there has been no movement on the project. St. Paul's in Monasterevin has been waiting 15 years. It has 207 boys-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I am sorry, Deputy, but we are over time.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: -----sharing two toilet cubicles. There is also the case of Co-

láiste Íosagáin in Portarlinton.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy, but I must be fair. I call Deputy Deering.

Deputy Pat Deering: From an agricultural perspective, one of the good news stories was the announcement approximately two weeks ago of a compensation package from Europe. Will the Taoiseach remind us of when that funding will be matched? There was a commitment of a further €50 million from the State's coffers. What are the potential allocation dates for the money and how will it be allocated? Will it be allocated on a *pro rata* basis in terms of those who have suffered the most in the past year or so or will it be allocated straight across the board?

The Taoiseach: Just on the homeless numbers, which are the number of people in emergency accommodation, they are up again. I agree with Deputy Casey that they are disappointing. I am also loath to use that word because it is much more than "disappointing". It is devastating that they continue to rise. The number of families and children has gone down slightly and the number of singles has gone up, but overall it is an increase. If I had been asked this time last year, I would have hoped that, by this time this year, we would see the number start to fall. It has levelled off at around 10,000 per year but should be falling by now and falling much faster. It is not. A major part of the approach is providing more social housing, which we are doing as quickly as we can. We will do more this year and next.

The other issue is that of tenants' rights. With the co-operation of the Opposition parties, we enhanced tenants' rights in the past couple of weeks. This means that if somebody is given notice to quit by his or her landlord, he or she has much more time to find alternative accommodation. Both of those steps are going to make a difference in terms of exits from homelessness and preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place. I would be more than disappointed and more than devastated if, by this time next year, the numbers did not fall substantially.

There are factors under our control, such as the provision of social housing and enhancing tenants' rights, and there are factors that are not under our control. Nearly half of the cases of homelessness are caused by family breakdown. It is impossible to predict how many families will break down in the next year. Roughly 20% of people who are homeless are not from the EEA and are not entitled to housing. They might not even be entitled to live here at all. Again, it is impossible to predict those numbers for the year ahead. What we can predict is the number of additional homes we will add to the social housing stock. That will be at least 10,000 this year, which represents quite a major increase over the figure of a few years ago.

On the compensation package, we actually do not have the terms and conditions yet from the Commission. I have not seen them. Perhaps the Minister, Deputy Creed, has seen them. I cannot answer the question just yet. We will need to find Exchequer money to match the funding. That is the way it works. I do not know where it is going to come from yet but we will find it. It will provide some income support for farmers. We will try to ensure they are able to apply for those payments and get them as soon as possible. I saw the figures from Teagasc today on how farm incomes fell substantially last year, because of the bad weather and other factors. The farmers need the funding. We are going to try to get it to them as quickly as possible.

I am conscious of the possibility that Mercosur may be back on the agenda. Members will be aware that also. I do not have an update on that yet but it is very much part of our watching brief.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): We are going to move to our next group, which comprises Deputies Butler, O'Dowd and Curran. We will start with Deputy Butler.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Taoiseach for the engagement. Meeting our skills needs is vital to Ireland's future. As we approach full employment, it is important to ensure that we have systems in place. Today the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation launched a report on the role of apprenticeships and work permits. Could I flag two issues, on which the Taoiseach might comment? Last year, there were just under 15,000 apprenticeships in Ireland. This figure is very welcome as during the recession, the number of apprenticeships fell by 80%. Of the 14,953 apprentices, however, only 2% are female, amounting to 332. This is an issue we certainly have to examine. We learned that, prior to 2016, the State paid the apprentice during the off-the-job training periods. However, for apprenticeships after 2016, the employer continues to pay the apprentice when on off-the-job training. Therefore, block release, which is 15 weeks in length, can cost the employer €7,500. If somebody is on release for one day per week, however, it is much easier for the employer to absorb the cost. Could this be considered?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The biggest issue facing our chairmanships collectively today is the Kerins judgment and its impact both on us as officeholders and on the Oireachtas. It is a matter for all of us to deal with individually but, nevertheless, it is important to get a perspective from the Taoiseach's Department on it. The credibility of the Oireachtas is threatened by the finding that we acted unlawfully, or that a committee did. Therefore, it is important for us to reform ourselves. I would appreciate the Taoiseach's comments on that. The most important hearings at my committee this year were those on the FAI. Over 100,000 people watched the proceedings online, yet members had no capacity to ask particular questions and follow through on decisions that were made. Therefore, there is a considerable gap we have to address. I would really appreciate the Taoiseach's comments on that.

Deputy John Curran: I welcome the Taoiseach. In the Taoiseach's opening comments, he made reference to the fact that we are nearing full employment and that rates of poverty and deprivation are falling. That is true but the statistics belie the fact that a significant number of people still are living in very difficult and challenging conditions. There are families who have not worked in generations so there is intergenerational unemployment. There are communities that are still very disadvantaged and deprived. There is a range of programmes across Departments to assist them. We used to have the RAPID programme. Unfortunately, it has now become the community enhancement scheme and its remit is much broader than that of targeting disadvantaged areas. As for the social inclusion programme, the level of funding is static and is projected to be static for the coming years.. Funding for drugs task forces has not increased. The point I am trying to make is that the targeted interventions required by the communities need to be assessed across Departments. I am not saying for one moment that every subhead has to be increased but I ask the Taoiseach to consider a Cabinet sub-committee to examine the area of disadvantage. Three, four or five Departments must be involved if it is to be addressed significantly. We have in the past been in circumstances in which the country was doing well but we left people behind us. I would not like to see this happening now. We can do better than we are doing. We should do better but a Cabinet sub-committee is probably needed to work in a cohesive and joined-up way.

The Taoiseach: Let me pick up on Deputy Butler's point on the number of female apprentices. I was not aware that the number was so low but I was aware that it was low. The Deputy is correct that we need to make a serious effort to interest more girls and women in taking up

apprenticeships. We are facing major skills shortages in construction and so many other areas. We definitely need more women to consider taking up careers in the sector. The jobs are generally very well paid once one gets through the apprenticeship. The Deputy's point is very well made in that regard.

On employers having to pay when the apprentice is on block leave, I will check the position. There are always two arguments on this. Some ask whether the employer should not make a contribution since the State is paying for the training for the employees. If the State were not providing the training, it would have to be paid for oneself, as the guilds used to do. On the other hand, employers would no doubt point out to me immediately that they pay both the national training levy and employer's PRSI and are therefore paying for the apprenticeships. I will check the position again. We are increasing the national training levy every year by 0.1%, which brings in an extra €50 million for higher education and training.

I have not yet read the Kerins judgment so I am loath to comment on it. The Government could certainly provide advice on it. Now that there is the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisers-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Committee on Procedure has established a working group on this. It will be responding to that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It is important that we all have an input into that as chairmen. My point is that we must be seen to engage in reform ourselves.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): Absolutely. A briefing will be prepared for just after the break. It will be available to the Chairmen in regard to the ruling. The working group has been established to allow for input on it.

The Taoiseach: What is definitely required, however, is some sort of clear guidance for committees on what can and cannot happen. I am aware that Deputy O'Dowd very ably chaired the hearings on the FAI. There was considerable public interest in that. The hearings made change happen. It shows the power of Oireachtas committees, that people can actually be held to account and that change can be made to happen. At the same time, I confess that I believe the previous Committee of Public Accounts did treat some witnesses very badly a few years ago. Notwithstanding all the issues around Ms Kerins' salary, I believe she was badly treated by the previous Committee of Public Accounts. There was one referendum I voted for that I am glad got defeated, that is, the one that would have given Parliament the power to carry out Oireachtas inquiries and make findings of fact against individuals. I voted for that and I was a member of the Government which proposed it. I am glad the people, in their wisdom, rejected it. Ultimately, we are politicians, we need votes to stay in our jobs and we are driven by news cycles. If one is going to act in a judicial way and make judgments on individuals, one must do it in a fair way. One must listen to all the evidence, not comment until one has heard all the evidence and then come to conclusions in a judicious way that should not in any way affect how the public sees one.

This was one of those occasions when the people were right. We should maintain that separation between the Judiciary, which can make findings of fact and findings against individuals, and politicians, who probably should not go into that space. That is not to say we cannot have robust committees that hold organisations to account and shine light into dark places. They have done that very well in recent times.

Deputy Curran made some very valid points on the issue of poverty, which is real in Ireland where there are very disadvantaged communities. He was an effective Minister of State in that area and I remember him working in that role. Long-term unemployment is down to 1.9%. It is probably as low as it has ever been. However, that masks a different reality, which is what we call jobless households where nobody in the house is in paid employment. I will not use the word “works” because often people work in their homes as carers. We have an action plan to deal with that and it is being driven by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty. It can make a big difference if, through a combination of incentives and disincentives, we can encourage those households, or at least one person in those households, to join the workforce.

I want to have a rethink about the community enhancement scheme and the RAPID programme. I started to think about this matter the other day. We all know what is being done in the north-east inner city and how it has been successful so far. People would like to have that model replicated in their areas but that is not possible. One could not find the resources to do it in all areas. I thought that perhaps we should designate ten or 20 areas of profound deprivation around the State and do something similar, but then it occurred to me that we had done that previously and called it RAPID. I had in mind places in Deputy O’Dowd’s constituency, Corduff in my constituency and Ronanstown in Deputy Curran’s constituency. We can all think of such places. We would very quickly end up reinventing RAPID. I am giving some thought to that and I am going to talk to Mr. Fraser - he knows a great deal about the NEC as well - in order to see if we can relaunch something that would be targeted at a small number of disadvantaged areas based on objective criteria. Everyone will want his or her parish included but that will not work. I am giving the matter some thought.

Deputy Mary Butler: Our committee has had many engagements on Ireland joining the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, CERN. The vast majority of EU countries are members of this scientific organisation. There is an economic dividend in being a member of CERN, but membership, at €1 million for associate membership and €10 million and more for full membership, is expensive. Has the Taoiseach given any consideration to this matter? The general consensus appears to be that if Ireland is serious about being part of the international science community, it ought to be part of CERN. What are the Taoiseach’s thoughts on that?

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: I welcome the Taoiseach’s comments and I support him in what he said. One of the issues that arises in investigation bodies that are accountable to us is that they only get a proportion, perhaps a minority, of their funding from the taxpayer, such as, for example, through Sport Ireland. While due diligence is carried out in respect of that amount of money, it does not necessarily mean that there are no other issues arising. We have to consider new legislation, if necessary, so that if Sport Ireland or similar bodies form an opinion that there may be other issues arising as a result of facts that are brought to their attention, they would have the capacity and legal authority to act given the strict and appropriate guidelines in that respect.

Deputy John Curran: I thank the Taoiseach for his comments on RAPID and disadvantaged areas. I recognise that everybody will want a programme in his or her area but analysis and figures are available to show the areas of greatest deprivation. It is not necessarily about new programmes and schemes but probably about more targeted resources for our most disadvantaged areas. It is not just RAPID funding but funding going through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for breakfast clubs and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It requires that joined-up approach. As is being done in the north-east inner

city, there is greater scope to tackle some of our most disadvantaged areas. I do not like naming them because I do not want a stigma attached, but the evidence is available to support the areas that would benefit from it most. If we cannot do it when the economy is growing, I doubt that we will ever do it properly. We should take this opportunity and I am glad the Taoiseach is prepared to consider reintroducing a RAPID-style approach - call it what one wishes - that would target resources at our most disadvantaged areas.

The Taoiseach: I will have to check the position regarding CERN. I am aware that the question has come up and I have often seen online campaigns encouraging us to join CERN. A guy who was in my class in primary school works for CERN, although I have not seen him for a long time. I encounter his mother regularly at election time but I have not seen him. I will have to check the position. I have a feeling that we decided to join, perhaps taking an associate membership.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes, the Government decided to join in 2016 at a cost of €1 million but the decision was withdrawn.

The Taoiseach: Okay, we never did it. I will have to check with the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan. I have a recollection that we did decide to join, but I do not know why we did not do it.

I agree with Deputy Curran that it is as much about joining up what we are doing already as it is about resources. In the new contract with GPs we have set aside a €2 million fund, and it is only to get started, dedicated to primary care in areas of high disadvantage. That is a start and we can scale it up. There is a thing in healthcare known as the inverse care law - Deputy Harty will be familiar with it - whereby those people who need healthcare the most are the least likely to get it. Wealthy people can afford healthcare and often have many unnecessary investigations and even unnecessary operations, whereas those who often need them the most get them the least. The answer to it in education is DEIS and we all know how that works, but there is nothing like that in healthcare. Primary care in areas of great disadvantage where people are more likely to die young, smoke, get cancer and be sick gets the very same funding from the State as anywhere else. That is wrong. If we doing a second RAPID or something similar, part of it must be healthcare and a significant increase in healthcare investment in those designated areas focusing on things that make the most difference such as public health, encouraging people to turn up for screening, cessation of smoking and the many things that blight people's health.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): The next group of speakers comprises Deputies Crowe, Maureen O'Sullivan and Farrell.

Deputy Seán Crowe: My theme relates to one area and I have two questions. The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has been up and running for the past 20 years. Some of the most difficult meetings we have had were with families of victims of the legacy killings and so forth who have appeared before the committee. The concerns those people have relate to delays in inquests, some of up to 40 years, information withheld and inquiries agreed to but never set up. The difficulty we are facing now is the statement from the British Secretary of State for Defence regarding the introduction of a statute of limitations in respect of British soldiers. The Taoiseach has said he opposes this but has he told the Secretary of State for Defence that an amnesty for British soldiers is unacceptable? Can he also provide an update on legislation the Government is to introduce regarding the Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms? There is agreement in the Stormont House Agreement to move forward in respect of the legacy, but now we have a situation where the Secretary of State for Defence is undermining

that process.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Deputy Brendan Smith sends his apologies for not being here. The first issue which arises is that our committee had a number of meetings recently to discuss defence and the Defence Forces. It replicates issues raised with the Taoiseach during Leaders’ Questions recently. He knows the issues in question, namely, pay, retention and the lack of morale. He has acknowledged them and mentioned that certain things are happening. It is urgent that they be addressed, judging from what was said at the meeting this morning.

The committee also welcomed the report on the national plan for business and human rights 2017 to 2020 which emerged after some time. A chairperson was also appointed to the business and human rights implementation group. When will we see some of its work? I ask because it took a long time to put the policy together and have a chairperson appointed. It is taking more time to hear about anything further that is happening.

Another matter that I want to address concerns Ireland’s new international development policy, A Better World, which was launched by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, in February. We need to know how it will be monitored. Is there a mechanism for it?

That brings us to consideration of policy coherence, something we are not very good at.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I welcome the Taoiseach. Childcare is the overarching issue that always comes up at the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. The launch of the national childcare scheme will happen shortly. It is a major development. However, we can never do enough in this sphere because we are so far behind where we should be as a state. While an unprecedented budget has been provided for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, one of the meaningful steps we must take is dealing with rates. This point has been raised repeatedly at the committee and in the Dáil. Waivers of rates apply in some instances but not in others. It depends on whether provision is entirely dependent on the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme or some private work is also undertaken.

The other issue for consideration is adopting a uniform approach to the after school set-up. I refer, in particular, to using the State’s assets, namely, schools throughout the country, to provide after school care. Some meaningful step is needed in that area.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I will start with Deputy Crowe’s question about implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The Government’s position on the issue is crystal clear. There cannot be a statute of limitations and an amnesty when it comes to crimes that might have been committed by British soldiers in Northern Ireland or any other combatant involved in the conflict. The Government of the United Kingdom may intend to apply such measures in Great Britain, but we will vehemently oppose any attempt to extend their application to Northern Ireland. We have stated our position, of which the British Government is aware, and will continue to make our stance known. In fairness, I think the British Government has heard us. As I understand it, the proposal in question would apply to Great Britain, not Northern Ireland.

Turning to the legacy arrangements agreed to at Stormont House, there has been no progress on the issue which has become tied to efforts to re-establish the Executive. Talks are under way

involving all of the parties. The Tánaiste is in Belfast today. The British Prime Minister is very keen to see the institutions back up and running before she leaves office. I would like that to happen too and the two Governments are going to work very closely together on the matter. I hope all of the parties at the talks will be able to make whatever compromises are necessary to get the institutions back up and running. It has to happen in a sustainable way in order that they will not collapse again in a few months. That is essential, not just because of the sad killing of Ms Lyra McKee but also because Brexit may see us enter into a dangerous period ahead. I am, therefore, committed to getting the institutions in Northern Ireland going again. We should, however, welcome the British Government's releasing of additional money for the inquests. We sought it for a long time and it has now been done. Some of the inquests are under way. I refer, in particular, to inquests into events at Ballymurphy.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan asked about pay in the Defence Forces. As I stated in the Dáil yesterday, pay in the Defence Forces is linked with pay in the public service. Members of the Defence Forces are not unionised and not part of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, but they do benefit from any national pay agreement made. That means that by October 2020 pay for the vast majority of public servants, including soldiers, sailors and Air Corps personnel, will be fully restored. It is being done in steps and the process is under way. Separate from that process, the Public Service Pay Commission has also produced a report. I have it now. It covers issues specific to the military. It makes recommendations which will be put before the Cabinet in about two or three weeks' time at the latest. There is, however, more to this matter than pay. There are other issues related to morale and retention. We need to look at it in the round and are determined to do so.

I must admit that I am not familiar with the business and human rights working group. I will have to check it out and respond to the Deputy.

On A Better World, it really is an exciting policy. It seeks to expand what we do in international development throughout the world. The increase in budget is €100 million this year and, all things going to plan, there will be a further increase next year. I am not sure how it is monitored. I imagine the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence has some role to play in that regard. I am, however, open to suggestions. It is turning into a very big budget; it now amounts to some €800 million overall and needs to be monitored properly.

Deputy Farrell mentioned childcare. I know that it is an enormous issue for citizens, particularly for those with young families. It is a major issue in my constituency which has a very young profile, as it is in the Deputy's. The Government has two objectives. We aim to reduce the cost of childcare for parents, while increasing quality. The topic concerns not only childcare but also early education. I think we are doing it. Deputy Farrell mentioned the national childcare scheme which will kick off in November. It will mean an increase in subsidies for those already in receipt of them. It will also mean that about 10,000 middle-income families who currently qualify for nothing will qualify for subsidies for the first time. That is not supposed to be the end of the process. Once the scheme comes in, it can be expanded and developed, subject to the availability of finance. One of the demographic advantages we have is that the birth rate has been falling for some years. That creates opportunities to do more with resources in areas such as childcare, maternity services and primary education. I am agnostic on the issue of rate exemptions. As the Deputy is aware, the problem with rate exemptions is that any time a business is exempted from paying rates, including non-businesses such as public buildings, etc., others will inevitably have to pay more. We have to bear this in mind. We can exempt many good things, but then, all of a sudden, the tailor, the butcher and all of the other people on Main

Street end up paying much higher rates. That creates a problem in itself. My general view on taxation is that it should be broad-based, rather than hitting some people with very high taxes.

On after school care, it is something I would love to see being developed more. It seems to be a lost opportunity. We have school buildings all over the country. Why is it not the norm to have study hall periods and after school activities? I do not know why they have not been developed. I am interested in hearing the thoughts of the Deputy because it seems to be a lost opportunity to have schools shut down at 3.30 p.m. or 4 p.m. There is much potential to provide after school activities. I am not just referring to study hall activities but also to sports and many other similar endeavours. I do not know why we do not do more of them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I call Deputy Crowe to ask his second question.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I return to what was agreed to in the past. The St. Andrews Agreement is one of the issues to be explored in future talks. The agreement promised that “the Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect ... the Irish language”. What is the Government doing to secure an Irish language Act, as agreed to in the agreement? We are back again to the situation where people have made compromises and agreed to things, but there is no follow-up and no implementation. What is the Government doing in that regard?

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: There is a need for a defined and definite framework for the monitoring of the implementation of A Better World. It would be interesting to obtain information on that issue from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and see what role is envisaged for the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence. Policy coherence has to be central to it. We have played a major role in sustainable development goals but unless our climate and tax policies are also coherent with our official development assistance, ODA, policy, it is giving with one hand and taking with the other.

On the other issue that comes to the committee quite a lot, we meet quite a number of human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, farmers or whoever. Some NGOs have very good connections, and they can make a call that can practically save a person’s life. We have had examples recently in Guatemala and Honduras. The issue of having that access to somebody who can make the call to the relevant person when somebody’s life is being threatened has been brought to us.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Farrell for his second question.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Taoiseach for his comments. I understand that it is a complex issue on the rates side, and is based on several generalities but based on the number of childcare providers across the State, the best guess is that it is a very small sum of money. While I appreciate the Taoiseach’s comments, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs could look at it, although it would have to do so through the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the local authorities. It is not something the Department can achieve on its own.

I acknowledge the Taoiseach’s remark on the Government’s twin-track approach to improving childcare service providers while trying to assist families. On that subject of higher standards, the elephant in the room is the rates of pay for those individuals with higher qualifi-

cations, who are still being paid very low wages. That is something we have to look at in terms of what the international market is doing, particularly in the Nordic countries.

The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, had a pilot scheme in his constituency that ran for a number of years. I have two after-school, school-building-use pilot schemes on the run and there are also several commercial operators in that sphere. Some sort of formal Government or Department-led approach should be looked at. As to the question the Taoiseach asked himself about why it is not being done, it appears it has been rolling for many years but has not actually been grasped.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: If my recollection is correct in relation to the St. Andrews Agreement, part of the difficulty on the commitment on the Irish language Act was that it was not in the St. Andrews Agreement. It was in a sort of side agreement between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister at the time. That is one of the reasons it has not been implemented. It is a shame that it has been caught up in the current dispute about getting institutions back up and running and it is a shame that people see the Irish language as some sort of threat in any way. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act in Scotland does not make Scotland any less British and the Welsh Language Act in Wales does not make Wales any less British, and it is a shame that it has got caught up in that whole constitutional question that always divides people in Northern Ireland. As somebody who loves the language, I would like to see some sort of progress, such as official recognition for the language, a language commissioner, and so on. Once that is there, it can be built on. I am a great believer in the power of incrementalism, and we need an incremental approach to this so as to reassure people with a British unionist, loyalist or Protestant identity that this is not something to be afraid of or something that is being pushed on them. The Deputy will have heard some of the wild stories that have been floating around about people being forced to learn Irish or having quotas for people in the Civil Service, but none of those things was ever really proposed. It is a shame that that has become part of the narrative north of the Border.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan raised the issue of contradictory policies, and I hear her on that. When it comes to tax, we have made some really big changes in the past couple of years, such as getting rid of stateless corporations and the double Irish. I am not sure whether that is fully appreciated by some of our critics. We are now one of the few countries that fully shares its revenue information with other countries. The only way one can know if a company is not paying tax anywhere is if every revenue authority shares that information, and we are one of the ones doing that. We are now deeply engaged with the OECD on what we are going to do to make sure that big digital companies pay their fair share of tax. Big profitable companies should pay their fair share of tax, although they do not always do so. We also need to make sure that whatever reforms we sign up to do not hollow out our own tax base. There was a view in the past that Ireland was under-taxing corporations but if that was true in the past, it is certainly not true now. The warnings we get from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and others indicate the opposite, which is that we are over-reliant on the massive amounts of money we are now taking in from those corporations, and we need to bear that in mind too.

There can be apparent contradictions in other areas, such as the fact that we promote breast-feeding through our health and well-being programmes, and then promote baby milk through our other agencies. Those contradictions are not lost on me but they might take a bit of time to unwind.

On childcare, Deputy Farrell mentioned the issues around rates of pay and how they are

linked to quality, and he is correct in that regard. At the same time, we also need to bear in mind how higher rates of pay will impact on costs for parents. It is likely that some form of sectoral employment order for the sector will happen in the medium term. It is not heavily unionised at present but if it were to become more unionised, there would be a case for a sectoral employment order to set minimum pay standards across the sector.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach. We are now going to have our final grouping, which is Deputy Connolly and Deputy Ó Snodaigh.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh míle maith agat a Chathaoirligh agus cuirim fáilte roimh an Taoiseach. Is iontach an rud é go bhfuilimid ag teacht le chéile sa seomra seo, áit a dhéanann Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na nOileán a chuid oibre. Sa comhthéacs sin, tá gá práinneach le Bille teanga oifigiúil a fhoilsiú. An bhfuil dáta againn dó sin? Cén uair a fhoilseofar é? Is faoin coiste stiúrtha a bhí le bunú don plean gníomhaíochta chun monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar an straitéis 20 bliain atá mo dara cheist. Cá bhfuil an coiste stiúrtha sin? Tá an tríú cheist faoi pholasaí do na hoileáin. Tá easpa polasaí do na hoileáin ann.

I want to raise three things with the Taoiseach. The first is about where the official languages Bill is-----

The Taoiseach: Thuig mé.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá sé sin iontach. Comhghairdeas leis an Taoiseach as ucht an éacht atá déanta aige ó thaobh na Gaeilge de.

The Taoiseach: Tá brón orm go bhfuil an freagra as Béarla.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá sé sin ceart go leor.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I call Deputy Ó Snodaigh.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá trí cheist agam, agus tá ceann amháin acu curtha cheana féin. The other two relate to a major international programme, Gaillimh 2020. Cad iad na céimeanna atá á tógáil? What steps are being taken? Is there an intention to increase the funding for it and will the Taoiseach meet the directors of Galway 2020 to help them gain the publicity they need to attract sponsors and to have as big a range of activities as possible?

Two items of legislation that have been promised in the area that comes under my committee and that I was asked to raise are the heritage Bill and the national monuments Bill. When is it expected that we will receive them in committees? It is a big job of work.

Finally, the committee, and it is probably the same with other committees, is struggling in terms of membership and turnout. Some of that is due to positions not being filled by the Government parties or Government members not turning up. It can be quite insulting for people who travel to attend our committee when there are one or two members in attendance. We are all very busy so I am not laying the blame on any one person but it is a difficulty that we have to address as a Parliament and at the very least, all the positions should be filled.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): Since this is the last grouping, I will take this opportunity to put a couple of questions to the Taoiseach. Deputy Naughton mentioned to me that the all-Government plan on climate action is going before Cabinet. When is it likely to be published? Her absence today is due to her attendance at an Internet regulatory conference. When will the legislation regarding an online safety commissioner proceed?

The Taoiseach: To address Deputy Connolly's questions, arís tá brón orm go bhfreagróidh mé as Béarla. The Deputy will get a much more coherent answer from me in English. I will have to check publication dates for the official languages (amendment) Bill and the implementation action plan. They have both been pending for quite a while and I know the Deputy raises them very regularly, so she is probably wondering why I am not giving her a date once again, but I will pursue them with the Minister. One of the things I hope to do in the next two months is to have a Cabinet meeting in a Gaeltacht area. We have had a number around the country in different provinces but have not yet had one in a Gaeltacht area, so perhaps that would be the opportune moment for us to have that work done. I will not promise that the meeting will be go h-iomlán trí Ghaeilge but we will have it in a Gaeltacht area. That might be a good deadline to focus the mind on these two projects.

We should have an islands policy. We have scraps of one around the place. As Minister for Health, I did a bit of work on the health of those on islands, while there are special provisions in education of which the Deputy will be aware, but it is not all pulled together. That is a very good suggestion that I will take on as Head of Government who is able to pull together different Departments in that regard.

Galway 2020 is not led by central government, as the Deputy is aware. I have met them but there has been a change in personnel since the last time I had a formal meeting in their offices and met them informally on Shop Street while I was canvassing with the new MEP, Maria Walsh, a couple of weeks ago. I committed to meeting them again and I will do so. It is a significant opportunity for the city. One thing that strikes me about Galway, which I did not realise until quite recently, is that even though it is a great city from a cultural point of view, there are not many spaces where events can be held. One of the reasons the Connacht Rugby project is so exciting is the fact that it is not just about a rugby stadium. It will contain facilities for other events as well. This is a very exciting project and I hope the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport will be in a position to provide some funding for it later in the year.

I will have to come back to the Deputy about the heritage Bill. Regarding attendance by committee members, I know it is difficult. There are a lot of committees and we are all very stretched, particularly those on three committees. We then give out to them for not being present for votes and being in the Chamber as well. The solution is probably more parties or a wider range of Deputies in Government. We will muddle on for now.

The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment will bring the climate policy to us in the middle of June, so it is almost done. It is shaping up very well. I know that for some people, it will be too little too late, but what we are trying to do as a Government is get it right when it comes to climate policy and have a climate policy that is serious but sensible. It will be serious in the sense that it gets our greenhouse gas emissions down, which is the whole point of it, but sensible in that it does not do it in such a way that makes us poorer, costs us jobs or makes us less secure. That is the overriding philosophy around it. That will arrive in the middle of June. More importantly, we then need to implement it.

The legislation regarding an online safety commissioner is being prepared. I do not yet know the date but I would expect the heads this year.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach for the engaged-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am behind-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): Sorry, I am ahead of myself.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Cuirim fáilte roimh freagraí an Thaoisigh maidir le pholasaí do na h-oileáin. Cé gur rud dearfach é sin, níl sé sásúil, beag nó mór, agus ní féidir glacadh leis, an fhreagra nach bhfuil dáta fós don Bhille. Bhí an Coimisinéir Teanga ós ár gcomhair sa seomra seo coicís ó shin agus chur sé in iúl cé chomh deacair is atá sé dóibh a gcuid oibre a dhéanamh. An Coimisinéir Teanga told us how difficult it was to do his work without an official languages Act. We have one that is not fit for purpose. It has been there since 2003. We have been promised it repeatedly - before the summer, after the summer, before Christmas. An t-aon bhotún a rinne mé, the only mistake I made was forgetting to ask which year. We were told it would be this year, then we were told Brexit, and now we are here. The commissioner cannot do his work. We are talking about the most basic rights - just bunceartanna, so it is iontach go bhfuil sé ar intinn ag an Taoiseach cuairt a thabhairt ar an nGaeltacht. I have been to all of the Gaeltachtaí with the committee and I can tell the Taoiseach this is the common theme. Please publish the Bill so that we can have an Act and have basic rights.

Regarding the coiste, we have had a strategy for 20 years, which is very good, and we have a plan gníomhaíochta, which is also very good but we must implement it. The implementation is dependent on a monitoring body, but it has not even been set up. Sin mo dhóthain. Go raibh míle maith ag an Taoiseach.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): Does Deputy Ó Snodaigh have any further questions?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: No.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I will change it slightly because Senator Richmond has joined. I know he made an extra effort to reach us. We were about to conclude. If the Senator has a couple of questions for the Taoiseach, we will let the Taoiseach come back in.

Senator Neale Richmond: I have two questions. I have just come from a flight from London so the Taoiseach can guess how topical they will be. We are about to reopen our public hearings based on the report we published in June 2017. My first question relates to the Brexit preparedness that has been undertaken, not necessarily from the legislative side of things, because the Brexit omnibus Bill has gone through the Houses and is very detailed, and not necessarily relating to a no-deal scenario, but in terms of working with the various sectors such as the business and agricultural community, Irish citizens in the North, etc. Has the Taoiseach's Department set down any matrix regarding what the level of engagement should be, how the various sectors have prepared, and whether they have put their plans together? Where does the Taoiseach think we are at at this stage?

My second question relates to the Taoiseach's meeting this morning with the leader of the opposition in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn. I noticed in some media outlets that he said that if he was to become Prime Minister, much like many of those seeking to become Prime Minister across the water, he would somehow renegotiate the deal. Will the Taoiseach confirm whether he reassured him that the withdrawal agreement has been negotiated and closed and that it is the only way to have a managed Brexit that leads us into the future negotiations?

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Connolly, tá náire orm. I know that almost every week she stands up in the Dáil and asks when this legislation will be published. Each time she does, I get a little bit more embarrassed that we have not yet published it and that we keep

telling her it is imminent when it does not arrive. I do not know if it is achievable or not but I will set that Cabinet meeting as the target date for doing it because we should do something Gaeltacht related there as well. Let me act on that.

In response to Senator Richmond's questions about Brexit preparedness, we have statistics about how prepared businesses are and so on. We have a red, amber and green matrix regarding what is done, what is not done and what is in planning. We are in pretty good shape in terms of being prepared for no deal, but that is not in any way to diminish the seriousness of it and the impact it will have. Our preparedness is good. I had a very good meeting with Mr. Corbyn and his team today. I met one to one and we then met as a group and spoke about a lot of issues, including Northern Ireland and Brexit. I emphasised to him that while any change to the political declaration is possible, the withdrawal agreement is closed and the only way this could ever change would be if there was a fundamental change in red lines from the next UK Prime Minister or the next UK Government, for example, a decision to stay in the customs union or the Single Market. I think that was well understood by Mr. Corbyn.

We also talked about how hard it would be to secure a further extension beyond 31 October. There is a hardening view across the EU that we cannot continue to have rolling extensions. While there could be a further extension if there is an election, to allow that election to happen, or a second referendum, it is not viable to believe there would be unanimous support in the European Council, as that is what is required, for a further extension while the United Kingdom continues to figure it out or for another set of indicative votes. I imparted the message, as politely as I could, that the chances of a further extension are quite slim and the withdrawal agreement, including the Irish protocol and the backstop, is closed from our point of view.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Taoiseach and all the committee chairmen for the engagement today. It covered a great deal of ground and was comprehensive. It is welcome that this is now part of our parliamentary calendar, as it is an excellent opportunity to allow for such engagement. We look forward to the next engagement between the Taoiseach and the working group.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.20 p.m. *sine die*.