



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL  
(OFFICIAL REPORT)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2020*

*Wednesday, 14 October 2020*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.  
Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

*Note: Ministerial and Departmental titles have been updated in the Question text in anticipation of the relevant Government orders to give legal effect to the Taoiseach's announcement in Dáil Éireann on 27 June 2020.*

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### School Staff

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the significant inequalities in pay, conditions and pension and other entitlements facing many school secretaries. [30312/20]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Tá ról ríthábhachtach ag rúnaithe scoile i gcomhthéacs feidhmiú na scoileanna. School secretaries are the backbone of a school. They keep them going, doing a number of jobs. They do not want to be in this situation where they are looking at industrial action, but that is the situation they are in, and one which has dragged on for too long. We heard from the Tánaiste last week, and some school secretaries took some encouragement from that, but we want to hear from the Minister, Deputy Foley, on how she intends to resolve this issue.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley):** Aontaím leis an Teachta. I am keenly aware of the vital contribution by school secretaries to the school life of our communities, and I recognise the very important work they do, and indeed the work of the other support staff, in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, which represents many of the secretaries working in our schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school year, whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff, who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from Covid-19, cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the employee assistance service to all school staff, including secretaries.

On foot of a chairman's note to the Lansdowne Road agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019, and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

The Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and school management bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing, and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The work school secretaries did was crucial in getting schools open, and they are playing an enormous role in keeping schools open. We all know from our school communities about the diverse work they do - for example, they take care of a child who is hurt, they deal with queries from parents, they organise the menu choices of a child for school lunches and so on - but, to be honest, they feel taken for granted. Some of the things mentioned have been necessary in the context of Covid-19, but this is not just a Covid issue. It is a long-standing issue that has been going on for some time. The reason it has progressed to the stage of potential industrial action, which school secretaries are reluctant to undertake, is that it was felt that the Government position was moving backwards. At least, under the previous Government, there was a desire to tackle the issues of pay equality, and not just the narrow issue of a modest increase in pay, to which the Minister referred. We need to deal with pay equality and pension entitlements to ensure the job of a school secretary is a decent job with proper pay equality. It is clear from the Minister's reply that she is not committing to that. Will she deal with all the issues and will they be included in the negotiations?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Deputy Ó Laoghaire should be under no illusion here. I absolutely acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by school secretaries to school communities. I am personally aware of it, having observed it over many years. Without fault, the work of school secretaries is invaluable. I want to reiterate that school secretaries deserve the best pay and conditions possible, given the vital role they play within our schools. However, this can be best achieved by utilising the industrial relations mechanism of the State, and that is why I would welcome all parties returning to the WRC.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The school secretaries have had plenty of acknowledgement. However, it is not acknowledgement that they are looking for - it is pay equality,

decent pay, pension entitlements and improved conditions. They want to return to the WRC, and I believe that they are willing to do so. However, that must be on the basis of addressing the real issues they face. It is not enough to go into the WRC with the Department taking a very closed attitude that it is just going to deal and engage on the basis of the proposed modest pay increase for some that does not achieve pay equality or deal with the pension issues. It was a commitment of Fianna Fáil in opposition, and it was a commitment of the Green Party in its manifesto, to deliver pay equality and pension entitlements. I ask the Minister a simple, direct question. Is it the policy of this Government to deliver pay equality and pension entitlements for school secretaries?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I reiterate that the best possible pay and conditions for school secretaries is a priority, and I am very keen to advance that process. Therefore, I am keen for all parties to resume meaningful discussion in the WRC, with a view to reaching a mutual acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked officials from my Department to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as the very important wider issues referenced by the Deputy in relation to the conditions of work. That is to be done in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. As I outlined, the WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties, in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution. I believe that is possible, with the engagement and commitment of all concerned to become involved in the process, which is a well recognised one, and the traditional process used to advance issues and concerns on all sides.

### **State Examinations**

2. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will constitute an independent inquiry into the 2020 leaving certificate which would examine the circumstances leading to the cancellation of the exam, the design and implementation of the calculated grades system, the ensuing errors and omissions and the knock-on effect on the CAO process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30311/20]

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** The Minister said that while not her fault directly, the 2020 leaving certificate was a difficult process for all involved, not least for the students. Will the Minister facilitate an independent investigation into the entire 2020 leaving certificate, which would examine the circumstances leading to the cancellation of the written exam, the design and implementation of the calculated grades system and the errors and omissions in order that we can learn from this for the leaving certificate class of 2021?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The decision to adopt a model of calculated grades by my Department was a result of Covid-19 and the circumstances that prevailed at the time in question, which prevented the State from running the conventional leaving certificate examinations this year. The system of calculated grades is complex and sophisticated. It had to be developed from scratch, specifically for the leaving certificate and within an extremely tight timeframe, in order for students to get their calculated grade results in time. Results were issued on 7 September 2020, and this ensured that deadlines for the Central Applications Office, CAO, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and other jurisdictions' college entry systems would be met insofar as possible.

On 3 October, I announced that 6,100 leaving certificate students would later that day receive details of improved calculated grades following the correction of errors found in the

coding used as part of the calculated grades process. As part of the round 4 offers made by the CAO on 8 October, some 485 of these students received a CAO offer on foot of their improved grades. Each of these students will be able to take up his or her offer in the current academic year. I also announced on 3 October that I had asked for a comprehensive independent review of the design and implementation of the calculated grades process to take place when the process is complete.

I want the independent comprehensive review to consider key aspects of the calculated grades process. This will include the initial decision to adopt the calculated grades model; the question of whether the process met its objectives; the effectiveness of the process; how the process worked in terms of design and implementation; and the effectiveness of the governance and oversight procedures. Importantly, I also want the review to include the lessons that can be learned. The full scope of the review will be set out very clearly in advance.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** That is to be welcomed. We do not need to fall out over words such as “investigation”, “inquiry” and “review” but I would be interested in knowing who the Minister intends to charge with responsibility for overseeing the independent review. I am sure she will agree that if the students of 2021 have to face the same type of system, which we all hope will not happen although we do not know what will happen in the coming months, similar mistakes should not be made. Is the Minister in a position to outline the nature of the process to appoint an independent individual to oversee the review?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. It is my intention that the review will be an independent expert review and that there will be an international element to it given the expertise required in this field. The terms of reference will be set out and made available well in advance. The review will consider whether the calculated grades process met its objectives. It will raise questions as to how effective the process was in its entirety. The scope will be clearly set out and agreed in advance, and it will identify lessons for the future. It will examine how the decision was reached to develop a calculated grades model for leaving certificate 2020 when it became apparent that the traditional leaving certificate examinations were not possible in light of the health and safety advice at the time; the context in which the calculated grades model was developed and the impact on stakeholders; the calculated grades model’s design, development and implementation; and governance and oversight procedures. It will allow for a full opportunity to consider all aspects.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I am happy to welcome that and we are happy to work with the Minister. She inherited this situation. She has had successes. Opening up the schools has been a success. To a large degree, yesterday was a successful day for the Minister.

On the staffing schedule the Minister announced yesterday, involving a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio to 25:1, which is welcome, will the arrangement apply to DEIS primary schools? They have a different staffing schedule. The worry we have is that if the arrangement does not apply, the senior end of a primary DEIS school will have the same staffing schedule as a mainstream school. I acknowledge it is beyond the scope of this question but perhaps the Minister could revert to me on whether the reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio will be passed on to DEIS schools, which have a separate staffing schedule. If not, there will be absolute equalisation between DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools at the senior end. The Minister will agree that this is not something we could support.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As the Deputy is aware, the full staffing schedule has reduced from

26:1 to 25:1. There is unanimous agreement that this is a very positive step forward to the benefit of our schools.

With regard to the DEIS schools, the Deputy is correct that there are different bands. In the junior cycle, there is a ratio of 20:1. It is 24:1 at the higher end, that is, in third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes. Where juniors and seniors are together, it is 22:1. It varies. A substantial DEIS package of €5 million has been made available as part of the budget. Aspects of that will include the school staffing schedule.

### **Special Educational Needs**

**3. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the status of the development of clear guidelines on when and the manner in which children with special educational needs can integrate within mainstream classes during the school day and the way in which that will be managed. [30313/20]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** An issue seems to be arising in schools across the State whereby families are being told either to choose between the unit and the mainstream if their children are in an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit. I understand that this is not required or appropriate. It is happening in the absence of guidance. There is limited guidance provided, amounting to four lines in the roadmap. Will there be further guidance to ensure this is not happening?

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josephinead Madigan):** I thank the Deputy for his question. Children with special needs should receive their education in placements that are appropriate to their needs alongside their peers wherever possible unless such an approach would be inconsistent with the best interests of an individual child or other children in the school. This is provided for in section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004.

On the guidelines the Deputy mentioned, guidance has been sent to schools. A summary of it was published on the website [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) on 11 September. It relates to special education, in particular. Pupils in special classes should continue to interact or integrate with mainstream classes. The guidelines do not prevent this. Schools will continue to do their best in the interest of the students. If the Deputy has concerns about a certain school, he may write to me about it and I can revert to him. To the greatest extent possible, schools should be trying to integrate children with special needs.

My Department supports a continuum of learning through a range of dedicated supports in line with the needs of the child. These include the provision of teachers, special needs assistants and psychological support from the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS. In addition, there are specialist supports provided by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, which has published guidelines on setting up and organising special classes for primary and post-primary schools. The teachers should be aware of those. The guidelines advise that students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes, to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities.

The overall aim of the continuum is to ensure that every child is supported in the journey towards realising their potential through education in an inclusive and caring school environment.

Pupils in special classes should continue to interact with or integrate with mainstream classes. However, the number of mainstream classes with which each special class pupil integrates should be minimised in order to maintain pod grouping to the greatest extent and to assist with contact and tracing mechanisms, should this become necessary.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am glad to hear it is the Minister of State's firm belief that children with special educational needs should not be denied the opportunity to be part of the mainstream class and to have the associated interaction. My concern is not that it is the Department's intention that it should be otherwise; it is that what I describe is happening. Not every parent is necessarily willing to bring it to the attention of the school they are dealing with that they are unhappy with the way things are being handled. I have come across parents who are worried and special education teachers who are concerned about parents who are effectively being told to choose between ASD units and mainstream education and about the use of the excuse of Covid. I accept that Covid undoubtedly makes matters more complicated but the objective still needs to involve children benefiting from the unit and also being part of the mainstream inasmuch as that is possible.

The guidance does not prevent what I describe but there is not enough detail on how the circumstances are to be managed. The NCSE needs to take a more assertive approach in ensuring that existing guidance, in addition to more substantial guidance, is applied.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** If parents have concerns about particular schools, they should contact the NCSE. If schools have difficulties, they can contact the NCSE or the Department. As I said, the guidance is very detailed and clear. I have said clearly today that pupils in special classes should continue to interact or integrate with mainstream classes. Obviously that number will have to be minimised. What is being said is that at primary school level, for example, this may mean each special class pupil integrates with one mainstream class only, and at post-primary school level it may mean special class pupils attending only those mainstream classes necessary for their subject participation. There are a number of guidelines. There is the continuum of support guidelines for teachers laid out by NEPS. There is also the inclusive education framework, which is published on the NCSE's website. There are also the traditional guidelines, a specific part of which is on moving between mainstream and special settings. There are a number of guidelines and I ask the schools to ensure that they try to abide by them.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** It is welcome there is a very clear message but it is certainly my experience that special education teachers in particular feel the guidelines are not adequately clear and that the NCSE needs to be more assertive.

Yesterday's budget included provision for 1,000 special needs assistants, which I welcome, and it follows similar measures in the previous years. However, the manner of the allocation of these special needs assistants will be crucial. It will involve the roll-out of the new allocation model. There are concerns about this, especially schools whose profile changes significantly from year to year as do their needs. The review kicks in too late for them to benefit within the school year. I am not expecting the Minister to get into the granular detail of it right now but if this model is to be rolled out, will there be significant consultation with stakeholders, including parents, special education teachers, schools and school patrons, in advance? Many people have legitimate concerns about the manner of allocation of special needs assistants and special education teachers.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I assure the Deputy I am acutely aware of the sensitivities about

special education. This is why when we are in a position to front-load the new special needs assistants model in September 2021 - we could not do it this year because of Covid - we will, in tandem, be rolling out the school inclusion model. As the Deputy knows, through investment in the budget, I am in a position to recruit extra therapists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. We are extending this to two other community health organisation areas apart from the pilot project we did. The pilot project covers approximately 150 schools and this will cover 200 schools. We intend to roll this out over the next two to three years. It should provide some reassurance to parents. The one thing we do not want is to make any transition without bringing everybody along with us. It will be a wrap-around service in the schools and will include special needs assistants. Overall, it is fair and much more equitable way to deal with the issue.

## **Special Educational Needs**

**4. Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she will take to cater for the increasing numbers of special needs pupils at primary level; if she has assessed the impact of the curtailment of supports for such children as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29741/20]

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Over the past three weeks, I have brought to the attention of the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health, the chief executive of the HSE and the Minister for Defence the scandal whereby existing front-line therapy staff, including occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech therapists, whose intervention can make a real difference to children's progression in our education system, are sitting in back offices making phone calls as contact tracers asking people whether they have been to the pub. I want these staff returned immediately to the vital role they play in supporting children.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** We understand the HSE's position, particularly with Covid and the accelerating pandemic, that it had no option at the time. I am not defending it but I understand why it had to take therapists and use them to tackle Covid through contact tracing. What we did is ask the NCSE to recruit therapists directly. This is what we will do. Recruitment is now under way. It will be very necessary for the school inclusion model I mentioned earlier. We have already had an interim evaluation and I will get the final evaluation at the end of the year. It has been a great success for the children. I am glad the Deputy has asked about it because it will be a revolutionary part of looking after children with special needs. We have shown it has increased their listening skills and confidence. I really think the Irish model will be the envy of many in the world when we get to roll it out, and I am determined to do this over the coming years. I reassure the Deputy that all therapists are now being recruited directly through the NCSE, so we will not be in a position where we have to rely on the HSE.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I welcome this and it is a very positive development to be commended. However, for James who started school in September 2018 and who was referred by the early intervention team to the Galway and Roscommon autism spectrum disorder service in Athenry and placed on a four-year waiting list for occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, the announcement will not have an impact. His access to these vital supports is now being delayed for a further 12 months because therapists are doing contact tracing. As a result, James will be in third class before he accesses these supports, which will help him to participate fully in school. This is having a devastating impact on James and on 1,048 other

children on this waiting list in these two counties alone. It also impacts on the education of up to 136,000 pupils throughout County Roscommon and County Galway who are sitting in classes with these children. This does not lead to effective integration. It is welcome but we need to address the HSE problem also.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I hope I adequately answered the question with regard to the HSE issue. The Minister of State with responsibility for disability will deal with access to services in the HSE. My particular remit is with regard to the school environment and making sure we have adequate therapists recruited for the school inclusion model. It is a complementary service to the HSE. It is not in lieu of it or does not substitute for it. The substantive question was about special places or special classes. The NCSE forecasting is very important. It plans the establishment of special classes and special school places on an ongoing basis at local and national level. It has developed closer links with the Department regarding longer term forecasting and is developing a five-year plan that incorporates population demographics information from the Department to the planning section. These forecasts are shared with the planning and building unit to include planning for special class accommodation in all major projects. The planning and building unit recently confirmed, at my instigation, that accommodation for special classes will be introduced and included in all new school builds. It is very important that people are aware of this.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I welcome the reply from the Minister of State. The difficulty is that she is correct, as her remit is about the education system and the Minister of State with responsibility for disability is in charge of another aspect of it. What is happening is this issue is being passed from Billy to Jack. We took Defence Forces personnel away from contact tracing and we left speech and language therapists doing contact tracing over the past seven months. Take Liam for example. He turned five last month and had his first block of speech therapy sanctioned in March. He did not have any session before he started school in September. As Liam was not sanctioned a special needs assistant in a school, his older sister must translate for him. These issues have come across because speech therapists are doing contact tracing and no one has replaced them over the past seven months.

Will the Minister of State intervene and ensure the front-line therapists who could help Liam are doing the job they are trained for? Will the Minister of State ensure his older sister, Eva, can be a normal child in first class and not a special needs assistant for her brother?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Clearly, many of the issues Deputy Naughten is raising are under the remit of the Minister for Health and probably the Minister of State with responsibility for disability as well. I accept what Deputy Naughten is saying. We cannot have delays that are in any way going to adversely affect a child obtaining speech and language services. That is a separate matter to the school setting, as I have said. I do not believe it is a case of being passed from Billy to Jack. These are separate environments and places. The therapy in the school setting is not in lieu of any services that should be provided to a child by the HSE.

A significant investment was made in the budget yesterday with €4 billion going into health. That amount is unprecedented and should help alleviate some of those issues. The special education budget alone has seen a 50% increase since 2011 and the allocation has gone from €1.2 billion to €2 billion. Deputy Naughten mentioned SNAs. There has been a 60% increase since 2011 and we now have 18,000 SNAs. We have made significant progress but obviously there is a great deal more that we need to do.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** That is much different.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

**5. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education for details of the guidance for those at high risk; if schoolchildren who have medically vulnerable parents will be facilitated with remote learning; and if she will revise the Medmark process for high-risk school staff. [30314/20]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I read last week's guidance on remote learning. There were some issues with it, including the heavy reliance on special educational teachers. I was especially disappointed that the document continued to ignore any facilitation for children and staff who have high-risk parents at home and cannot attend school as a result. These parents have been asking for guidance for months. Some schools have acted of their own volition to put in place remote learning for these children but the Department continues to refrain from acting or giving guidance in writing. It is causing great anxiety.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The Department has published guidelines to support schools in making adapted education provision for those children who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to Covid-19. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance on the return to school of at-risk groups. The advice confirms that the vast majority of children can return to school and it is important for the overall health and well-being of children to attend school. This guidance provides that children with immediate family members, including parents, in the high-risk and very high-risk categories can return to school and that this is important for the child's overall well-being. This is consistent with public health advice internationally on at-risk family members.

The best way to protect against Covid-19 is for households to continue to follow all current public health advice on how to minimise the risk of infection. This includes regular hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing. It should be noted that the public health evidence regarding the initial return to school is positive and highlights that schools are relatively low-risk environments for Covid-19. This is confirmed on a regular basis.

My Department has in place an enhanced occupational health service, OHS. The current OHS provider is Medmark Occupational Healthcare Limited. Medmark has a process in place for school staff with health concerns about the risk to them of serious illness from contracting Covid-19 through workplace attendance. The risk categorisation is comprehensive and follows the same process that is being applied across other sectors.

To date, more than 1,700 teachers, SNAs and school staff have been assessed by Medmark under this scheme. A person who is not satisfied with the outcome of this process may apply to have the case reviewed by a further panel of medical experts. The Department has developed and prepared a comprehensive response to support the well-being of school communities. NEPS is working with schools to support them to meet the needs of their pupils, especially pupils who are anxious at this time.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** When I raised this with the Minister previously many of these parents were anxious. Part of the difficulty here relates to how broad the high-risk category is. The very high-risk category is extreme and specific and obviously there are particular

provisions for that category, but the high-risk category seems to take in everything from mild asthma to leukaemia. Many parents are highly vulnerable and their children are seriously concerned about them. The situation is even more grave now than it was at the time I first raised it with the Minister. Many families do not feel comfortable and do not believe they have adequate guidance. They do not feel heard.

Some of the issues relate to the evaluation of high risk. The Minister made reference to the guidance. Again, the guidance deals with children who are at high risk but there is nothing for those who have parents or close relatives with whom they are living who are at high risk.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I absolutely appreciate that this is an anxious time for everyone across all sectors of society. We must acknowledge as well that everything that can be done is being done, especially within our school environment. All the measures that need to be put in place within our schools have been put in place. The resources that were necessary have been put in place.

It is a tribute to the manner in which those aspects are being implemented by school communities throughout the country that we can say schools are safe places. This has been confirmed nationally and internationally.

I appreciate the categorisation of at risk and very high risk. That categorisation is implemented by Medmark. Medmark is following the same strategy or categorisation that has been implemented throughout the public service. We are no different within the school environment. It is best practice to follow what is being followed by others on the front line, including our nurses and doctors.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** That brings me on to the latter part of my question relating to Medmark. There is increasing anxiety among school staff. I have raised with the Minister previously the fact that I believe there is a need for greater leadership and communication on the situation in schools. Schools may be relatively low-risk environments and children may be less likely to transmit the infection, but they are not without risk. School staff have significant concerns, especially those school staff who are at high risk.

The Minister mentioned Medmark and said that 1,200 or 1,300 school staff have undergone this process. One key issue raised by the representatives of school staff is the review process. Dr. Ronan Glynn said before the Covid-19 committee that there has to be an individual approach. A uniform approach will not work. Everyone's public health considerations are different. In how many cases has the initial decision by Medmark been overturned by the review panel? I told the Minister's office that I would raise this issue. Of the 1,200 cases referred to, how many went for review and how many took a contrary view after that review by the panel?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Deputy Ó Laoghaire is correct. It is only right and proper that there would be an opportunity for a review of any decision. That mechanism is in place. It is an independent review by medical experts. Individuals who wish to have their case reviewed have the opportunity for that and to provide, if they wish, updated or new medical evidence that may be assessed.

In the first instance, some 1,785 people applied to be considered within the process. A total of 913 were categorised as very high risk, 802 were classified as high risk and 70 were categorised as normal risk. A total of 327 applied for a review of the classification. Of that 327, some 16% were placed into different categories.

Again, the process that is being employed here is being employed across the public sector. We are no different within the education field. The classification has been applied to those who are on the front line, including nurses and doctors, etc.

## **Other Questions**

### **State Examinations**

**6. Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education to outline the steps she will take to ensure that there is a leaving certificate examination in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29740/20]

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Leaving certificate 2020 was a difficult time for every student. Standardisation caused major concern. Some 6,000 students had their results upgraded. Almost one in 20 students have now applied to sit the examination in November. The students of the leaving certificate class of 2021 are now afraid that they will be messed around. Will there be a leaving certificate examination next June?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As Minister for Education and Skills, I am committed to ensuring the State examinations of 2021 operate as normally as possible, subject to the prevailing public health advice at that time. This commitment is shared by the State Examinations Commission, SEC, which has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations. It continues to be a priority for the Government to keep our schools open now that they have been reopened. The Department of Education and Skills has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to support schools in this effort. The Department has ongoing engagement with the public health authorities so that schools can remain open safely and is working with the partners in education to ensure this is a shared objective. I am very pleased to confirm that, from the very beginning, it has been a shared objective. In addition, the Department has published a range of documentation and support material as part of the roadmap for the full return to school for the 2020 to 2021 academic year. This includes the document entitled, Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021, which sets out the assessment changes for the 2021 State examinations. These arrangements take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during this past academic year 2019 to 2020 and makes accommodation should there be any gaps for the 2020 to 2021 school year, as a contingency measure. The adjustments play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. There will be no change to the length of the written examinations. Project briefs for relevant subjects will issue earlier than usual and practical coursework will be submitted two weeks earlier than normal as a contingency measure. Teachers are being encouraged to plan and undertake these projects as early as possible in the programme of study.

These changes to the leaving certificate assessment arrangements for 2021 will provide reassurance to students, their parents and guardians and teachers and schools. As I said, it is the intention that provision is made through the assessment of the curriculum going forward.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** A tremendous amount of work has been done by the Minister, her officials, teachers, support staff in schools, pupils and parents to ensure that schools opened in

September and remained open. Under our projections, even if we go up to level 5, the modelling is that we will keep our schools open. I am concerned by the caveat in relation to public health advice. We will need to adapt and change the leaving certificate based on public health advice but I need assurance from the Minister for every single pupil who sits the exam next year that there will be a written exam and the structures will be made available to ensure that happens. We are 230 days away from the first English paper in the leaving certificate and we need assurances that the exam itself will take place and that students will not have to worry about standardisation as they did this year.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I confirm again to the Deputy that I am absolutely committed to ensuring the State examinations of 2021 will operate what we might call traditionally and as normal. This is a commitment shared, as I said, by the State Examinations Commission which has statutory responsibility for operating the exams. We are moving in that direction, as the Deputy outlined. There is an absolute commitment from the Government and, indeed, it became very clear at the weekend, from wider society also, that schools would remain open and it is a shared objective. Again, it is a particularly strong shared objective with the partners in education. In recognising that commitment to move forward and to progress as normally as we can in extraordinary times, we are doing all we can to ensure schools will remain open and remain open safely. Accommodation has been made for the adjudication of the 2021 leaving certificate in terms of the exam paper, the wider choices and issues like that will be identified on the day for students.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I thank the Minister for that reassurance. It is important that whatever resources are needed are made available for the class of 2021. Some 2,820 students are going to sit a written exam this November because they unfortunately could not do so last June. What specific resources are being made available for those particular students to assist them and ensure they reach their full potential in the written exam? Are the resources being made available from their old schools or from the Department to assist them in preparation for that exam?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The Deputy is quite correct that more than 2,800 students have registered to take the exam in November. It is important that option was made available to students. They will also have the opportunity, when they have completed those exams, to take whichever of the grades suits or advantages them best, be it the calculated grade they received or the final grade they will get for the written exam. The exams are being scheduled at times to best meet the needs of the students, in that they are taking place in evenings and over weekends. Again, that is an accommodation for students recognising that they have perhaps moved on and are doing other things. It is a recognition that it is important that they would be accommodated in making the times most appropriate. Measures are also being put in place to ensure that these exams take place locally within their schools which are settings they are familiar with. All financial resources and supports required by the schools are being put in place for the benefit of the schools to allow them to do that.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** What about the students themselves?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** They are being accommodated in their schools.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** That is the accommodation but what about resources to assist them in preparing for the exam? I am not talking about the physical accommodation but tutorials and assistance. These students have not sat in a classroom since last March.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am afraid the time is up and we cannot go back on this. We must move on to Deputy Connolly.

## Schools Building Projects

**7. Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the details of the analysis undertaken in relation to the need for school capacity further to an application for a school extension at a school (details supplied); the findings of the analysis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29990/20]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** My question is very brief and to the point. Merlin College in Doughiska, Galway is turning away students. It turned them away last year and this year as well. It has been refused an extension. What analysis has been done of the capacity of that school to continue functioning as a school when it is turning away pupils?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** In order to plan for school provision and analysis of the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a geographical information system, GIS, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. With this information, the Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises to determine where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary levels. Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, the Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date data on significant new residential development in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes as there is a constantly evolving picture with planned new residential developments, which the Deputy will appreciate.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, depending on the circumstances, be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following: utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools, extending the capacity of a school or schools or provision of a new school or schools. Under Project Ireland 2040, the Department continues to make progress to increase the infrastructural capacity in the schools sector in order to meet demographic and other demands.

Following an assessment of the Galway city school planning area in which the school referred to by the Deputy is situated, the Department is satisfied that there is adequate capacity available or planned to cater for projected enrolments and therefore an extension to this particular school is not required.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I have the greatest of respect for the staff of the Department but something is very wrong with the analysis here. We have been through this with Educate Together in Galway, where there was a battle to show there was a need. Merlin College in Doughiska is a very good school with 650 pupils. Last year, it turned away 70 applicants. This year, it opened its admissions for next year and within two weeks it was oversubscribed. As of yesterday it had 135 applications for 120 places and there are still weeks to run on that. I do not understand what analysis has been carried out. This is a school in a city which is the fastest growing in the country. It is one of five destined to grow

more, as outlined in the development plan. We know the school is oversubscribed and is struggling gallantly with a range of difficulties, including not having DEIS status. It is simply asking for an extension to cope with the numbers. Will the Minister please address that?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** It is my understanding that there are 11 other post-primary schools in the Galway city school planning area. It is also my understanding that the demographic analysis is correct in terms of using geographical information systems and using data from a range of sources which identifies where the pressures for schools places across the country will arise. With this information the Department has carried out a demographic exercise. In regard to what the Deputy is talking about, that is, the additional school accommodation needed, it is the view of the Department that sufficient places are available in the post-primary schools in the area to meet demand, although I appreciate the case the Deputy has made for the school in question.

The long-term projected enrolment in the Galway city school planning area is set to peak at 7,839 in 2024. On the completion of planned capital projects, there will be capacity to cater for 8,697 post-primary pupils which will also cater for additional housing developments in the area.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Those are a little like the figures in the budget, in that they are Monopoly figures. This school is turning away students. There is no capacity in the area and students have no other schools to go to. The welfare officer is at the school, trying to find placements for sixth class, and being told to go to Athenry. That is not viable because there is no transport. The school is turning away students.

This school was a public private partnership and the one positive aspect of that was that a contingency was provided for 33% future expansion. The capacity for extension was built into the planning for the school and the school representatives are now asking for that extension, given the numbers they are turning away. I understand that the Minister has to give me a standard answer, but surely she can commit to looking at this school because of the numbers being turned away. I have just read out the figures. The school is oversubscribed. It had 135 applications for 120 places and there are still two weeks to go. The school turned away 70 students last year. I simply ask for a review of the decision.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I do not take from the genuine case that the Deputy is making for this school, nor do I dispute the figures she has given. I must say that the Department, in looking at all the available options, is satisfied that sufficient places are available for all post-primary pupils in the school planning area, going forward. However, I will say to the Deputy that the planning and building unit of the Department is currently reviewing all 314 school planning areas to ensure that all pupils will have places, going forward, and the school in question will be a part of that review.

*Question No. 8 replied to with Written Answers.*

## State Examinations

9. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education if the State Examinations Commission will stand over the leaving certificate results of students that sit these exams in November 2020; her views on whether the leaving certificate examination in November 2020 will be comparable to previous years considering students having been out of school for several

months, many were unable to finish practical examinations and are unable to take oral examinations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29868/20]

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** Will the SEC stand over the leaving certificate results of students who choose to sit the exams in November of this year? Can those exams be comparable to those of previous years, considering the students have been out of school for months, unable to undertake practical exams in several subjects and oral examinations and course work have not been finished?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The SEC, which has operational responsibility for the State examinations, has informed me that some 2,800 candidates have applied to sit the November 2020 leaving certificate written examinations. These exams will commence on Monday, 16 November, subject to public health advice.

To ensure comparability with the calculated grades system, the examinations will be based on the normal question paper format, content, structure and duration as in previous years. Candidates will be graded on the basis of their written papers only, except for five subjects where project work had been completed prior to school closure last March and these marks will be included in the grading of these subjects.

The marking of the November examinations will rely principally on the expert judgment of the SEC chief examiner and members of the senior examining team, based on the content of the examination papers and the demands of the marking scheme. This expert judgment approach will ensure that the standards applied in the marking of these examinations will be fair and valid for these candidates who form a small subset of the overall candidature for leaving certificate 2020.

The SEC sets out the national standard for the leaving certificate and other examinations and operates independently of my Department.

Leaving certificate candidates sitting the written examinations in November who opted to receive calculated grades will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the calculated grade and the written examination. These results will have the same status as the leaving certificate results for previous years.

The 2020 applicants to the Central Applications Office, CAO, will have their final leaving certificate results forwarded to the CAO, using their best results of the November examinations and their calculated grades, where applicable. They will receive any relevant CAO offers that their results indicate as a deferred CAO offer for the 2021-2022 school year.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** I thank the Minister. Was the main reason not to proceed with the exams in July and August that the SEC would not stand over the exams? What is different now? It would not matter whether the exams were held in July and August or are held in November and December because the same issues apply. Students have been out of school for months and have had little or no teaching. Their course work may not even have been finished in some subjects and little revision was undertaken. Project work was not completed, orals were not taken and practical exams in some subjects did not proceed. How can these exams be comparable to the leaving certificate exams in previous years?

I believe no assistance is being given to students who are undertaking these exams. The Minister did not reply to Deputy Naughten when he asked about that. I have previously asked

a parliamentary question about this matter and was told that absolutely no assistance has been given even though students have been out of school since March.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I want an answer to the question I asked about what direct supports will be provided to students to prepare them for these exams, considering they have been out of school since last March. That is a basic request.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank both Deputies. To put their questions in context, the prevailing circumstances of the pandemic at the time meant that it was not possible to house the traditional exams as they are normally experienced. The Deputies will recall that in April, the written exams were deferred until July. On 8 May, a further decision was taken because of the pandemic that it was not possible for those exams to be sat in July and the calculated grade model was introduced. That model was first mooted by students and, following consultation with partners in education, it became the agreed model. The importance that the 2020 students would be afforded an opportunity to have a pathway forward to take up whatever opportunities in life they wished was recognised. The only mechanism to do that at the time was the calculated grades process. That was the reason the calculated grades process was introduced.

As the Deputy outlined, the students who will undertake the leaving certificate exams in November have already left school and it is not possible for the schools to re-engage with them. It is in the interests of the students that they would have the opportunity to choose between the calculated grades process and the exam process, and that is why the November exams were put in place. That was a part of the original agreement in May and will be the process, going forward.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** The Minister did not answer the question about the SEC. I thought that one of the reasons the exams did not proceed in July and August was that the SEC would not stand over them. It has been a tough year for the leaving certificate class of 2020. Those students have been out of school since March and did not get to sit their exams. When they got their results, there was a mixed reaction, and most felt dismay when they received their teacher-allocated grades. Many were downgraded in up to three subjects and the points for many courses went up. It has been a very tough year for those students and we need to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in any way as they go through the years because they were the 2020 leaving certificate students. We need to learn from the mistakes of this year for our current sixth year students to ensure they get the fairest possible system to sit their leaving certificate exams.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I reiterate that the reason the exams did not take place at the traditional time, which would have been June, or the deferred time, which would have been July, was because of the prevailing circumstances at that time. It was not possible at the time, under public health advice, for exams to take place. For that reason, the calculated grades process and the opportunity to take the written exams in November were introduced. I am not clear on the Deputy's point. Is she asserting that the exams in November should not take place? I think it is right and proper that the opportunity is afforded to students, should they wish to avail of it, and they can then choose between the calculated grades process and written exams process, whichever benefits them most.

The marking of the November exams will rely principally on the expert judgment of the SEC chief examiner and members of the senior examining team, based on the content of the exam papers and demands of the marking scheme. This expert judgment approach will ensure that the standards applied in the marking of these examinations will be fair and valid for these

candidates, who form a small subset of the overall candidature for leaving certificate 2020.

### School Staff

**10. Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education her views on the upcoming loss of a teacher in a school (details supplied) and the progress or lack thereof in reducing class sizes in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30223/20]

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I wish to express my support for St. Louis Infant School where some parents in my constituency send their children. They have written to the Minister seeking reassurance on the imminent loss of a teacher. They have said that they would usually accept this reluctantly, but given that we are in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, they are very concerned about the implications for class sizes caused by the losing of a teacher. Given yesterday's budget, will this school be able to retain its teacher?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy for his question. The staffing schedule is an allocation mechanism that uses enrolment bands to determine the number of classroom teaching posts allocated to a school. This is a long-standing arrangement, as the Deputy will be aware, for allocating teaching posts to our primary schools in a fair and equitable way based on their respective enrolment. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally, irrespective of their location. For the 2020-21 school year at primary level it operates on the basis of one classroom teacher for an average of every 26 pupils, which is historically the lowest level. I am very pleased to say, as the Deputy himself has mentioned, that under budget 2021 as announced yesterday, that this will be further reduced to a ratio of 25:1 from September 2021.

The staffing arrangements for primary schools also include a provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolments for the following September. The school referred to by the Deputy was allocated a temporary teaching post on this basis as the school had indicated that it was expecting an enrolment of 334 students in September 2020, which was a projected increase of 39 pupils. My Department has recently received an enrolment return of 277 pupils from this school as at 30 September and it is clear that the school has not experienced a growth in enrolments. Instead, its overall school enrolment has gone down from last year. This school is 57 pupils below what it had indicated as its projected enrolment for September. The school has submitted an appeal to the primary staffing appeals board which will be considered at its meeting later this month which is the usual process, as the Deputy will be aware. This process is ongoing and the school will be informed of the board's decision in due course.

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** The school is looking at an average size of 30 pupils in a class, which is significantly above both the 26 that we started with and the 25 which will be enabled by budget 2021. I underline again the issues on room capacity, the need for social distancing for health and safety reasons in a pandemic, and the loss of teaching time caused by the loss of a teacher and exacerbated by school closures, which increase the health and safety risks. I hope that the appeal will take into account the realities that this school is facing, the overly large class sizes that it is now going to face, and the health and safety issues that school has highlighted. I hope that the promise of budget 2021 will also reach this school.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** This is an issue that is arising throughout the State with schools that are just narrowly missing out on the school census. These circumstances change. Some are related to Covid-19, like Glasheen school near me, where many of the parents may work in hospitals and universities, who may perhaps be international and who may not be there next year. Many such schools have lost out. They may be in old buildings where breaking up classes is not an option. I know that additional teachers are mentioned in the budget specifically for this purpose but the issue of the many schools that have lost out on teachers needs to be dealt with urgently.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank both Deputies. As I have already outlined, the school staffing schedule is 26:1 and will in the future be 25:1. I acknowledge, as referred to by both Deputies, the current situation with Covid-19 and I confirm again that a substantial package of measures was put in place to ensure that schools could operate as advised under the safe schools reopening plan. A package in excess of €375 million, which has been increased in recent months, was made available. Among the package of supports was minor works programme funding, which was given to schools so that space could be reconfigured within schools and general purpose areas reimaged as required to give the additional capacity. Equally the substitution panel was introduced for the primary schools so that in an instance where a teacher was unavailable to work, a substitute would be available immediately and classes would not have to be subdivided.

I reiterate that the appeals process that is in place is working independently. The adjudication from that appeals process will be issued in the next number of weeks.

### School Staff

**11. Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure reduced class sizes in schools, particularly in a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30213/20]

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I thank the Minister for attending this morning to answer these questions. The announcement yesterday that the class sizes will be reduced by one point is and will not be ambitious enough. Sinn Féin's alternative budget proposed two points. Recent figures also released to my colleague, an Teachta Ó Laoghaire, show that 1,300 schools throughout the State have class sizes exceeding 30 pupils, and, disappointingly, 38 of these are in County Clare. Will the Minister confirm her plans to reduce pupil-teacher ratios in schools?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. As she will be aware, under the programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil-teacher ratios in primary schools. The budgets of 2016 and 2018 improved the staffing schedule by one point on both occasions to its historically lowest level ever of one teacher to 26 pupils. I was delighted to build further on this progress yesterday by announcing a further one-point reduction in yesterday's budget. The staffing schedule for the next academic year now stands at one teacher for every 25 pupils, which is a historically low figure in this country. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that fewer pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September.

There is no change in the current school year to the staffing of the school referred to by

the Deputy in the question submitted by her. The school staffing schedule for 2021-22 will be published next year, and at that stage, schools will be able to establish their staffing arrangements for the following school year. The staffing process, as I have outlined earlier, includes an appeals mechanism where schools that might not be satisfied have an opportunity to submit a staffing appeal to an independent appeals board. The published appeal criteria include the specific criteria for small schools, and schools are entitled to make such an appeal to the independent board.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I appreciate that we are making a step in right direction but the Minister has to admit that we are not going far enough. Our class sizes are too big and our school buildings themselves are bursting at the seams in many parts of the country. One case that I have been asked to bring to the attention of the Minister is Clooney National School in County Clare. The principal contacted me and relayed to me that because of the enrolment figures for 2021, the school is due to lose a teacher. He also conveyed to me the worry that this is causing him and his staff with the anticipation of what is coming next. I hope the Minister will agree with me that there have been many challenges in getting our schools reopened and this has been a topic on all teachers' and principals' minds. I hope the Minister will also agree that the principal, Mr. Greene, should not have to be worried or concerned about how we will be able to maintain social distancing next year if he loses a teaching post.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy and reiterate that there has been an unprecedented financial package allocated to the schools sector in recent months which is in excess of €375 million. This is unprecedented and never before were resources of that nature allocated to the education sector. This underlines the determination and commitment of the Government to recognise the great importance of the role played by the education sector in our society. That commitment was continued yesterday, as referred to by the Deputy, with the opportunity to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio from 26:1 to 25:1. Substantial progress has been made in recent years, given that in the 2019-20 school year the average pupil-teacher ratio was 15:1. The EU class size is 1:20. We are slowly but surely making our way towards that ratio.

I would assume the package that was introduced yesterday will positively enhance all schools going forward. In regard to the school referenced by the Deputy, there is no change to the staffing of the school in the current school year. When the staffing schedule for 2021-22 is published early next year I am sure that the school referenced by the Deputy and other schools will be able to establish their staffing arrangements for the year going forward.

## School Enrolments

12. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the recent change in enrolment policies issued by a religious organisation (details supplied) and the impact it will have on parents; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28353/20]

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister for taking this question. I would like to speak to the sibling-first policy and the impact it will have on many parents. This came as a surprise to parents and families, particularly those hoping that their children will go to the same primary school. I understand this change impacts on Catholic schools and does not impact on other school patron bodies. One particular family that has been in contact with me has a child already in fifth class and other children hoping to attend the same school. The sibling-first policy will

have an impact not only on their family and quality of life but on areas of their life.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 all schools must have drafted new school admission policies. These new policies have been approved by the respective patrons and are now published on individual school websites. They will apply for admissions to schools from September 2021 onwards. The Act requires schools to set out clearly their selection criteria in their admissions policies. Schools and their patrons have discretion in regard to their admission criteria and how they are applied once it is non-discriminatory and deemed to be fair. If a school wishes to include a selection criterion for siblings, it can do so, as it is permitted under the Act. The criteria are to be applied by schools and the order of priority is a matter for school themselves.

Patrons of schools, including the Archdiocese of Dublin, are not required to consult or seek approval from the Department of Education in regard to their selection criteria. However, the archdiocese has informed the Department that its position is that the siblings, step-siblings and-or children of the parish remain in the first category for the allocation of places. The Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can between them cater for all pupils seeking places. Parents have the right to choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applications than places available, a selection process may be necessary and may be carried out and this may result in some students not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister for that clarification. I understand that the policy primarily impacts on oversubscribed schools. That said, I think the sibling-first policy would impact negatively, particularly for the boards of management in terms of voluntary contributions for the schools and the issues facing principals as well in allocating places. While I appreciate the Minister's response and request that she forward it to me, I ask that further consideration be given to this issue in regard to schools in Dublin because it is going to be a surprise to parents come September 2021.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I will forward the information to the Deputy. I would like to reiterate the obligations here. The Act requires the schools to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admissions policies and provides that the schools and their patrons have discretion in regard to their admissions criteria and how they are applied once it is non-discriminatory and fair. If a school wishes to include a selection criterion for siblings, it can do so as it is permitted under the existing Act. The criteria are to be applied by schools and the order of priority is a matter for the schools themselves. The patrons, including the Archdiocese of Dublin, are not required to consult or seek approval from the Department of Education in regard to their selection criteria. The archdiocese has informed the Department that its position is that the siblings, step-siblings and-or children of the parish remain in the first category for the allocation of places, notwithstanding the points made by the Department in regard to oversubscribed schools. I will ensure the documentation requested by the Deputy is provided to him.

*Question No. 13 replied to with Written Answers.*

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Special Educational Needs**

14. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she will take to cater for the increasing numbers of special needs pupils at primary level; if she has assessed the impact of the curtailment of supports for such children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29739/20]

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** This is a similar question to the one I asked earlier and so the Minister of State does not need to repeat the answer.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should just read the question.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I prefer to avail of the 30 seconds to ask a question. I pointed out earlier how the lack of access to speech therapists is having a direct impact on the education not just of the children with a learning disability but of other children in those classes as well. What is the Government going to do to ensure that speech therapists are taken away from contact tracing and returned to doing their work?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** The Deputy has raised two questions today, neither of which were in regard to the questions he tabled. Speech and language therapy provided by the HSE is slightly outside of my remit but nevertheless within the school inclusion model we have put in place a pilot project in 150 schools and we now have received investment to roll that out in 200 schools. We will be using speech and language therapists in respect of whom recruitment is under way. We will also be using occupational therapists and crisis and behaviour specialists as well. This will revolutionise the school setting for children with special needs.

On the recruitment of therapists, owing to the Covid pandemic many therapists were redeployed to the HSE. I reassured the Deputy earlier that from my perspective within a school environment the NCSE is allowed to recruit these therapists directly without having to rely on the HSE therapists who are I understand being taken up with contact tracing. I will raise the issue with the Minister of State with responsibility for disability and the Minister for Health. I am not privy to the minutiae of whether these therapists are still being retained in contact tracing within the HSE or whether the majority of them have returned to their work. I can understand why they were redeployed in the first instance but obviously we do not want it to be to the detriment of children with special needs who need these services.

Within the school setting, which is my remit, I can reassure the Deputy that the school inclusion model, for which we have received funding for over 80 therapists in yesterday's budget, will be expanded to other community health organisation areas, on top of the already selected community health organisation areas. We hope next year to cover another three and perhaps another three the following year, which would be nine in total. That is the ambition. It would be groundbreaking for children with special needs in the school environment and it is something I am determined to do.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I thank the Minister of State. I understand her remit. I have taken up this issue with the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health, the chief executive of the HSE, the Minister for Defence and, today, the Minister of State, who are the five people in authority across this area. I am making a very simple request, namely, that Defence Forces personnel or retired Defence Forces personnel be asked to do the contact tracing work, inquiring of people about their movements over the last number of days, such that therapists can return to providing

front-line services to schoolgoing children. The service may not be provided in the school but these are schoolgoing children and it has an impact on every pupil in a class. Will the Minister of State, as part of the co-ordination that takes place across Government in regard to the disabilities sector, commit to ask that this action be taken immediately?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I can give a commitment that I will bring the Deputy's concerns to the attention of the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities and the Minister for Health. I want to be clear in regard to the school inclusion model and the therapists within a school environment. They are not in lieu of a service that should be provided by the HSE. They are a complementary service which should enhance the child. As I mentioned to the Deputy earlier, we can see from the interim evaluation we have got back from the pilot demonstration project that it has had a beneficial effect on children in terms of their listening skills and improving their confidence.

I will go back to the Deputy's substantive question when he asked about school places and the absence of those in certain pockets around the country.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I did not actually ask that question. It was with regard to Covid-19.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** It is actually about the increasing numbers of special needs pupils at primary level as well as about Covid-19. I will mention briefly that, obviously, substantial supports were given regarding Covid-19. With regard to Dublin, the letters of second notice of section 37A under the Education Act 1998 are going out today to 26 different schools to ensure they provide special class places because it is something I want to eradicate completely.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I will come back to the Minister of State's earlier reply when she talked about additional SNA supports. I welcome that additional resources are being put in there. The specific point I will put to the Minister of State is that the SNA exceptional need review took place over the summer. The results of that were available to the Department at the beginning of August. The schools, however, were only informed more than six weeks later in October. They must either go and recruit those SNAs or, if they were unfortunate enough not to succeed, go through the independent appeal process. In practical terms, this means that although the Department decided in early August that schools needed additional SNA support, those SNAs will not be in place until after the Hallowe'en break and until after the longest term in the year. Does the Minister of State believe that is an acceptable situation?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** It is important to stress that the allocation of SNAs for this year was frozen. It will remain unchanged until September 2021 and then the front-loading allocation system will kick in. No SNA was taken away from any school. The Deputy is right that there is an exceptional review process. That is available for schools if they need to challenge the fact they need additionality in terms of an SNA. It was very clear, however, and I and the Department worked closely on ensuring no SNA would not be replaced in terms of the school reopening. A significant investment of €14.7 million was put in the school reopening plan for the special education sector to ensure there would be no absences of SNAs, and if there was, that they would be immediately replaced. They have a critical and crucial role in terms of children with special needs being able to interact in a school environment. We now have an unprecedented 18,000 SNAs throughout the country. I will also review the exceptional review process mechanism to ensure it will be streamlined in a more paper-friendly way, as it were, for the schools.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**School Staff**

**15. Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education if the feasibility of pairing students of very high-risk families to very high risk teachers via an online learning platform will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25941/20]

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Like other Deputies, I congratulate the Minister. I am sure, however, she would be the first to tell me to congratulate those in the school community who allowed and facilitated the return to school. It has made a huge difference in the lives of many families. Unfortunately, however, many people have not been able to return to school. They include those in the very high-risk category, both teachers and families. Will the Minister consider an online platform that will pair those two groups of people to allow both to return to the thing they love, that is, the school community?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As the Deputy will be aware, my Department has published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision for pupils who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk due to Covid-19. It is important that pupils in these circumstances maintain a meaningful connection with their class and school to continue their learning from home successfully. Schools have discretion to manage and redistribute their teaching support resources to best meet the learning needs of these pupils. Supports may include a teacher who is also certified as very high risk to Covid-19 who cannot themselves attend school and may be in a position to provide remote teaching to very high-risk students.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, and HSE have also published guidance on the return to school for at-risk groups. It outlines that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the very high-risk and high-risk categories can safely return to school, and it is important for the child's overall well-being that they would choose to do so. This is consistent with public health advice internationally regarding at-risk family members. The priority is that the household continues to follow all current advice on how to minimise the risk of coronavirus through regular hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing. I am also reassured by the public health evidence to date since schools have reopened that supports the international position that schools are low-risk environments for Covid-19 and are not key drivers of transmission in the community.

It is also important to acknowledge the enormous work schools have undertaken to ensure they are safe places for their pupils, and the Department has provided a suite of guidance to support schools in this work following engagement and consultation with all of the education partners in the development of this guidance.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I welcome that the possibility of online remote learning pairing is an option for those very high-risk teachers and students. I am speaking, however, about those people with a rare disease. I have had the pleasure of working with many of them. Rare diseases are awfully misunderstood. There is often not a huge degree of knowledge within general practice, and often the patient becomes the expert in that disease relating to other international bodies. While I understand that returning to school is the best possible option in the broad scheme of things, we must understand that in circumstances where we all juggle risk in every part of our day, we make risk calculations. We must trust parents of people with a rare disease or where there is a family member with a rare disease that returning to school is not safe. We must trust those families to make that decision. I urge the Department to be flexible on this

point. It is not about opening the floodgates. It is about trying to trust those families.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I will reiterate clearly from the outset that both the international and national evidence to date is clear that schools by their nature are safe environments. There is also an absolute recognition that the resources and measures required as part of the roadmap for the safe reopening of our schools have been put in place. I absolutely acknowledge a huge debt of gratitude is owed to the school communities in ensuring those measures are being implemented. All the expert advice available to us at the minute reiterates time and again that schools are safe environments. I acknowledge the role played by everybody to ensure that is the reality. Equally, I acknowledge that even as late as last week the evidence has shown there has been no material difference in terms of the rate of Covid-19 since before students returned to schools and once schools opened in this past month.

I reiterate that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and HSE have published specific guidance regarding the return to school for risk groups. It outlines that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the high-risk and very high-risk categories, can safely return to school, and they make the point it is important for the child's overall well-being that he or she does so.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I take on board the point the Minister makes and the genuine way in which she approaches this. I wish to raise the case of a specific person, Ms Jann Rynne, who was, sadly, diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia, CLL, in 2011. She has been cocooning since February. Two of her older children have moved out of the home and are living with another family member. They have made the decision as a family not to allow the two younger children return to school. They are doing so because, internationally, CLL patient organisations record that 90% of CLL patients who contract Covid-19 are hospitalised and, unfortunately, 37% of patients with CLL who contract Covid-19 pass away. That is a calculation that family must make. We are all making those calculations. I ask the Department to do everything it can with this case and others.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I acknowledge there are individual circumstances. I am not aware of the individual circumstances of the case referenced by the Deputy.

I appreciate that there is anxiety and anxiousness around Covid-19 but I reiterate that everything we are doing in our schools is underpinned by the best public health advice available to us. I reiterate also that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE *12 o'clock* have published guidelines on the safe return to school, particularly for children who may have family members designated to be at risk or at very high risk. It is their recommendation that schools are safe places and that in terms of the health, advancement, socialisation, academic development and all the other aspects of a child's well-being it is in their best interest that they would return to school and be catered for within the school environment.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have time to squeeze in Deputy Brian Stanley's question. He might pose it and we will go to the Minister for the response.

### School Staff

16. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure that school secretaries employed by schools are properly remunerated for their work. [29972/20]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The question relates to the position of school secretaries. Currently, they have to sign on the dole during the summer, at Easter and at Christmas. They do not have set rates of pay, sick pay or pensions and they are left in a precarious position. The previous Minister agreed that they would use the facility of the Labour Court to resolve these disputes and try to find a way out of this but that has changed. What will be done for school secretaries who played a crucial role over the past seven months in terms of keeping schools going? They are the kingpin of the school in many cases and we cannot continue to treat them the way they are being treated.

**(Deputy Norma Foley):** I reiterate that I appreciate the very valuable contribution made by school secretaries and other support staff in the school environment. I have witnessed it and I am very conscious of it.

I have met with Fórsa, which represents many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of the school secretary role, I have put in place special arrangements for the coming school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from Covid-19 cannot work. I have also extended the employee assistance service to all school staff, including secretaries.

On foot of the chairman's note to the Lansdowne Road agreement, the Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator.

Fórsa tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and school management bodies met Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing, as the Deputy is aware, and I support the continued engagement of all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Members will be very sad to hear that we do not have questions today on promised legislation.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Ceann Comhairle will have to try to hide his disappointment and compose himself.

### Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What happened to women and children behind the high walls of Ireland's mother and baby homes casts a long and a dark shadow. For decades, these homes were shrouded in secrecy and the awful abuse of single mothers, the forced separation

of families and the horrors of what happened in places like Tuam is still hard to comprehend. Those who survived these institutions, those who did not survive and their families are entitled to justice and to the truth.

I am sure the Taoiseach received thousands of emails and letters from survivors and families regarding the fast-tracking through the Oireachtas this week of the Bill relating to their records. There are huge concerns over the lack of consultation regarding this Bill and there are serious questions as to the reason the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, Deputy O’Gorman, is proceeding with this approach.

The main concern is the intention of the Minister to transfer part of the commission of investigation’s archive to Tusla without keeping a copy and a plan to seal the remainder of the archive for a period of 30 years. This will prevent people accessing their records from the Minister’s archive and it will stop families accessing information about disappeared family members or babies buried in unmarked graves. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that this is very wrong. It also means that all the information, the files and the records that show how abusive the system was will be withheld from the very people who are entitled to the truth.

The role of the State and the Government should be to remove the veil of secrecy surrounding mother and baby homes, not to reinforce it. The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, has yet to credibly explain why he is taking these actions. He says that it is a requirement under the legislation to preserve access to valuable information and evidence but that is not correct. There is no legal obligation under the 2004 Commissions of Investigation Act on the Minister to seal these records thereby preventing people accessing their information. In fact, the Commissions of Investigation Act enables the commission to deposit these records with the Minister for children on its dissolution. It is also not credible for the Minister to suggest that allowing survivors and families access to their records could in any way impede or undermine the operation of the commission. In fact, as the Taoiseach well knows, under data protection legislation survivors have the right to access their own data. Surely allowing people to access their information and records serves only to advance the cause of truth and justice. Rather than being bound to secrecy, the Oireachtas could legislate to unseal records and evidence gathered by the commission.

The proposed legislation needs to be scrapped. The Minister needs to produce an anonymised index of the records held. He needs to consult with survivors and their advocates and then draft the appropriate legislation that meets the needs and rights of survivors and the moral obligations of the State. That is the right thing to do.

Provision should also be made to enable survivors decide how to handle their records in the future. There is also a need for a dedicated archive to be set up at Sean MacDermott Street. I believe there is great merit in that proposal.

I believe that everyone in this House wants to see justice and truth for those women and children of the mother and baby homes. However, the Minister is doing the wrong thing and he is causing enormous alarm and great upset. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene immediately and that we would work together across the House to resolve this very important matter.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. From my own perspective, the situation with regard to mother and baby homes represented a very dark period in our history and an appalling approach to the treatment of women and mothers and, at the time, the separation of child from mother. I accept the norms of later years but as an individual and as a parent,

the separation of child from mother is something I can never get over but that was the practice at the time. In the modern era, in some respects we have moved on a lot in terms of creating support for families and mothers in challenging situations.

I do not believe this should be a matter of dispute in the House. I regret the degree to which the Deputy has cast aspersions on the Minister's intentions and motivation, which are very sincere and heartfelt. The legislation is being brought forward to provide urgent and critical legal clarity surrounding the future use of a database compiled by the mother and baby homes commission. It is genuinely being brought forward to preserve invaluable information, not to put it beyond reach, as has been reported: that is not the intention. The Bill will make it possible for the database that has been compiled by the commission to be accessible under current legislation and make it available for use under future birth information and tracing legislation. It is important to state that the purpose of this legislation is also to preserve all of the records which the commission has compiled in the course of its work and it does not otherwise alter the governance of the commission's archive under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004.

The urgent issue in front of us is to ensure that we preserve the invaluable cache of information and not lose it forever. As Members know, in the course of its work, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation has compiled a database of the mothers and children who were resident in the main mother and baby homes. The commission and the Government agree that this database will be of considerable assistance to those involved in providing information tracing services to individuals who were residents in these institutions. The database includes information extracted from institutions whose original records are now held in the main by Tusla. The legislation has been advanced to address concerns raised by the commission about the need for it to redact personal information and the impact which such redactions would have in terms of effectively destroying this database. The impetus for this Bill derives from the necessity to secure an urgent, bespoke solution to protect the complete records of the commission, including the database, before its expected dissolution by the end of this month.

The commission is due to submit its final report to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs by 30 October 2020 and then stand dissolved. Prior to its dissolution, under law it must deposit all commission records with the Minister. In the normal course, such records are then sealed for a period of 30 years prior to their transfer to the National Archives. This is a requirement of the Commission of Investigation Act 2004 and one we are bound to follow.

In advancing the legislation today, we are ensuring that an incredibly valuable and useful set of data can be used into the future and can support - I stress this - that essential information and tracing component that would otherwise be lost. It is critically important that we acknowledge that the commission received testimony from individuals who were former residents of mother and baby homes under a guarantee of absolute confidentiality. That is a commitment to many vulnerable people with real lived experience of post-trauma which cannot be reneged upon. This is not just simply a historical matter; it is a real living issue for many people. I will take further questions on that but this is about enabling people to access their records in time and to balance that. This Act is necessary before the end of this month to preserve these records.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We all share the Taoiseach's view and all of us find it difficult to reconcile that Ireland, not in the dim and distant past but in the recent past, was such a hostile place for vulnerable women and their children. I said in my opening remarks that that is a shared view and the correct view. This, therefore, is not simply data. This is information and testimony that relates, as the Taoiseach set out, to real living people who have been traumatised

and are on a journey in search of information and truth. They are in search of their own information, their own story, the stories of their love ones and, in some cases, the story of children that never emerged from these institutions and were buried in mass graves. We all know that.

The truth is the Minister has not engaged with the survivors. He has not engaged with their advocates. The truth is also that access for those people and their families has to be a tantamount concern of the State so the notion of sealing these records for 30 years, a time span in which surely many survivors of the mother and baby homes will have gone to their great reward and will never find the full truth and have access to their records, is unconscionable. Rather than defending this legislation, which the survivors, their advocates and their legal advisers all agree is unnecessary, unwarranted and causing distress, I ask the Taoiseach that we operate on a cross-party basis to resolve this matter to the satisfaction of the survivors in line with legal obligations. The Minister does not have to act as he is acting and I appeal to the Taoiseach to take a wider perspective.

**The Taoiseach:** I appeal to the Deputy to do it cross-party. She is not doing it. She has come in attacking the Minister's bona fides. The Minister wants to help. What he is doing is sensible and the right thing to do before the end of October. Does the Deputy not see that? I have no doubt the Minister will talk to the Deputy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach is attacking me, actually.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not attacking the Deputy. I am just saying if the Deputy wants cross-party-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** He is being very aggressive and it is entirely unnecessary.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not aggressive at all.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach should go back and listen to himself.

**The Taoiseach:** I am simply saying the Deputy is wronging the Minister and not accepting his bona fides. I am sure the Minister would be more than willing to talk to the Deputy's spokesperson and other spokespeople. In the final report of the commission, the section on the confidential committee will reproduce the anonymised testimony of each individual who appeared before it. While the testimony will be anonymous and slightly summarised, people will be able to see and recognise their story told in their own words. The commission has said to the Minister that there are issues. The Minister agrees with the commission on the need to preserve the data because the data can be used in the future for tracing and assisting people. If we do not preserve the data and all the testimonies provided to the commission, that capacity to provide a comprehensive service in the future will be undermined. That is why the Bill is being brought in. It is not the final act in all this but it enables us to preserve the records and enables Tusla to be in a position in the future, with further legislation, to improve and enhance the capacity of people. Obviously there is a balance of competing rights. It is clear that the Bill is necessary to resolve the serious legal and practical issues raised by the commission in relation to finalising its records in accordance with the Commissions of Investigation Act. Most significantly:

... the Commission considers that it is obliged to redact sensitive personal information before depositing the records with the Minister... The Commission believes this database would be of considerable assistance [it agrees with the Deputy] to those involved in providing information and tracing services.

However, it accepts that redacting personal information would effectively render the databases and related records useless for this purpose. The Minister concurred with the commission's assessment of the current and future value of the databases and deems it necessary to introduce this legislation to ensure complete records can be appropriately preserved and protected in the public interest ahead of the dissolution of the commission on 30 October 2020.

I can provide further data to the Deputy or others if required. We are willing to work here. The motivation is a positive and genuine one and I ask the Deputy to accept the Government's bona fides on this.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** If ever there was a demonstration that there is one law in this country for the rich, the powerful and big business and another for working people, we saw that demonstrated in the Four Courts yesterday, where KPMG, the liquidators of Debenhams, sought and got an injunction against Debenhams workers. This means workers who have been treated in the most despicable fashion by their employer and are engaged in an official dispute to fight for justice and fair redundancy now face – these workers include constituents of the Taoiseach - the real prospect of finding themselves imprisoned if they continue in their entirely peaceful and legitimate fight for justice. It is outrageous that should be the case. Workers face the prospect of jail and the wrath of the law; meanwhile, Debenhams, which has treated these workers disgracefully and has manipulated if not broken company law in their efforts to hide assets from these workers, and KPMG, which makes a fortune in contracts from this State and will no doubt be handsomely paid for their role in this process, face no interrogation for their role in this situation. It is appalling. This company tactically unloaded €200 million of debt onto Debenhams Ireland, which had nothing to do with that firm. This is the company that stood up in the courts and gave evidence in April to a court of law that the online business worth €30 million was part of Debenhams Ireland, which every worker knows because the sales of that went through each individual store of Debenhams Ireland, and a few days later then said it was not part of Debenhams Ireland even though there is court testimony to that effect. What is Revenue doing about that? What is KPMG doing about that disgraceful treatment?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Stop the clock please. Do not waste my time. Stop the clock.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please do not get involved in debating, discussing or criticising what has gone on in the courts. You are here a long time now and you know the precepts of separation of powers. Please do not go there.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** What I am talking about is the failure of the Government to address the situation whereby Debenhams can abuse workers like this. KPMG has very serious questions to answer about the way it is handling the liquidation process, given that there is court evidence from Debenhams that the online business was part of Debenhams Ireland's operation. Every worker knows it to be the case, but nobody is doing anything about it.

Kieran Wallace told workers at meetings that the State could step aside as a creditor and allocate supplementary cash. It made a €1 million offer. If there is nothing the Government or KPMG can do, how come it offered €1 million? If it can offer €1 million it can offer €10 million. I and the workers do not accept that there is nothing the Government can do.

Will the Taoiseach say publicly that no worker, truck driver or anybody else in this country

should break the picket of the Debenhams workers? Will he convene a meeting of KPMG and the shop stewards, with a presence from the Government, to discuss how we can get a fair deal for these workers? Will he instruct KPMG to allocate extra cash? If it can offer €1 million, even though it withdrew the offer, why can it not offer more?

**The Taoiseach:** I am interested in a resolution of this and I am not going to pretend that there will be an optimal solution. I do not want to take people up a hill and bring them back down again empty-handed. My assessment of this is that of course the workers have been treated very badly by the company. The company has gone into liquidation. It is in difficulty in the UK. As the Deputy knows, the UK does not want to know about it. Mandate and ICTU have worked on this and I intend to engage further with them.

I have asked my officials to review the entirety of this to see what can be done practically. It is all very well to articulate the issue as well and as eloquently as the Deputy does, but we all have to work within the law. The Government cannot instruct the liquidator or the High Court process. The Deputy knows that. There are legal frameworks we have to navigate. That is the reality. Every politician would love to say to everybody that they would love to resolve an issue and provide funding. Unfortunately, it is never that simple. Others may pretend and articulate that it is, but it never is.

I admire and salute the strength, courage and tenacity of the workers. The Government provides statutory redundancy and so on. We are now entering into new territory. Where I see things evolving is that employers can renege on their obligations in the future if the Government is always there to bail them out. That is a potential solution. Irrespective of companies reneging on or failing to honour their collective agreements, the Government ends up being the bank of last resort of those collective agreements.

The legislation should be changed in order to put workers on a par with others. In other words, where a legal collective agreement has been entered into workers should be on the same level as every other creditor in terms of getting their entitlements and obligations. That is something that will need to be changed. Whether such a change, even if introduced in the short term, can be applied retrospectively is an issue.

In the meantime, my focus, notwithstanding yesterday's court decision, is to see whether we can create some space to assess whether something can be done to alleviate the situation for the workers concerned. As I said, I have asked my officials to look at this issue. Whatever we can do legally and in a sensible way we will do. I have remained in contact with the workers on this.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is long past time for action on this. We now face the prospect that ordinary working people - most of whom are women - who are not criminals and should not be criminalised, and have worked long, hard and loyally for Debenhams and have been treated despicably, could end up in jail. The Taoiseach needs to act urgently to prevent that. He should be under no illusion. They will hold this Government and previous Governments responsible for their plight because the failure to address all of these issues after Clerys is the reason they are in this mess now. The Government better take that responsibility.

Can the Government instruct the liquidators? Kieran Wallace said that unless the State voluntarily instructs the liquidators to allocate supplementary cash to the workers nothing can be done. The State can do it. The proof of that is that it offered them €1 million, a pathetic figure. Where did it come from? How could it offer the workers €1 million? If it can offer them €1

million it can offer them the €10 million necessary to give them the two plus two, and then the Government and Revenue can chase the company for the assets they are clearly hiding using accounting tricks. The Government can do it.

I ask the Taoiseach to join me publicly in saying that no truck driver or worker should cross the pickets of Debenhams. Then they will not have to defy an injunction. If workers do not cross the pickets, there is no injunction defiance. Will the Taoiseach convene a meeting with the shop stewards, unions, KPMG and the Government to discuss a resolution?

**The Taoiseach:** Mandate is the union that has been working on this. The Government will continue to engage with it-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Not the shop stewards.

**The Taoiseach:** I presume the shop stewards are part of the union. I do not know why the Deputy is making that demarcation. I will also engage with ICTU because this has wider implications.

The Deputy is not correct in saying that because €1 million emerged from the process that €10 million can emerge from it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Where did the €1 million come from?

**The Taoiseach:** That is wonderfully said, but it is not entirely grounded in reality. Certain people, the Deputy included, have created the idea that this can be solved easily knowing full well that it cannot, unfortunately. There has been much interaction on how to get this resolved. The Government does not instruct liquidators and is not in a position to do so, despite what the Deputy said consistently in his contribution.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** He did not-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy Boyd Barrett.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government cannot instruct.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, the time is up.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** As a member of the Regional Group, I welcome the budget announced yesterday. The phrase “a wartime budget” is apt. I particularly welcome the increases in the health and education spend. I share some of my colleagues’ reservations that an opportunity has possibly been lost to create social change in order to encourage migration to the regions, remote working, affordable housing and the overall tenet of rebalancing Ireland. I hope that is something the Government will address.

I wish to highlight the €10.1 billion capital allocation, which is also welcome. Will the south east get its 8.89% *per capita pro rata* share? I remind the Taoiseach of the last capital tracking index from 2018 to 2022 of large-scale capital enterprise. In that, the south east got €97 million. Cork and Kerry got €902 million and Dublin got €5 billion, a rate which is 15 times more *per capita*.

The major road projects announced yesterday are, I am sure, welcome to constituents, but an upgrade to the N24 to create a southern linkage from Rosslare through Waterford, Tipperary or Cork and on to Limerick to join Galway and Mayo was not mentioned. This would see

a step change in the southern region road connectivity and would benefit multiple counties. It is affordable, it makes economic sense and it is absolutely consistent with green thinking of improving road and possible rail links to the ports of Waterford, Rosslare, Cork and Foynes in Limerick.

There is no mention of specific funding or recognition of Waterford as the future fulcrum of south-east regional economic activity and the driver of same. There has been no announcement on our urban regeneration and development infrastructural funding for the North Quays project. There has been nothing to signal the upgrading of University Hospital Waterford as the lowest-funded model 4 hospital in the country. I correct the record from the last time we spoke, as there is no second cardiac lab diagnostic activity taking place in Waterford at this time and our cardiac waiting list is growing almost exponentially.

Beyond that, there is nothing to recognise the primacy of Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, in the south-east technical university proposal. This is the most highly functioning institute of technology in the country, garnering the highest rate of EU research funding of all institutes of technology. The recent transformation grant was announced of €5.1 million, which places it behind all the other regions with a national university. That hardly seems fair, and we have been seeking capital refurbishment and developments for more than 30 years. With our Waterford metropolitan area strategic plan, our border has not been extended and we cannot take in Tramore or New Ross, although borders in Limerick and Cork have been extended.

What is the Government's future attitude and commitment to fairness for Waterford and the south east? Do we matter in health, education and economic revival? The south east is currently the worst performing region in the country and prior to Covid-19, Waterford had the highest city unemployment in the country. Will the Taoiseach commit to future funding so as to bring fairness for Waterford and the south east? Will he commit that this will be delivered in the lifetime of this Government?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for his question and raising the matters relating to Waterford in particular. Any previous Government with which I was involved put much investment into Waterford. As a former Minister with responsibility for education, I know the land we purchased for Waterford Institute of Technology was essential to its growth. It has developed into a very fine institute of technology and it can now move to becoming a technological university in association with the institute of technology at Carlow. It is essential for Waterford and progress is being made in that regard.

There are approximately 7,000 people working across 36 IDA Ireland companies in Waterford and there is great potential for further foreign direct investment. There is some very good quality companies in the indigenous base that can develop. Working with the institute and its technology research base, along with others, Enterprise Ireland can help the growth of entrepreneurial companies in Waterford and more generally across the south east.

A former Minister, Mr. Martin Cullen, was responsible for some very substantial and significant infrastructural investment in Waterford. Knocking a few doors in Waterford in recent times, I picked up that people had nostalgic memories of him in Waterford because of that.

I get the Deputy's point on the future and we want to think about how we can advance the area. The technological university process is moving on. The Deputy knows the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is drafting a memo for

the Government on a funding package for the North Quays development. The urban regeneration and development fund provides opportunities for a number of projects of that kind to be resourced and developed. We will proactively move to see how we can help Waterford to develop that exciting project.

The second cath lab in Waterford has gone to tender. That is a step forward and the deadline for the receipt of applications is 16 November. It is envisaged that the bidding will commence in the first quarter of next year. I know the Deputy will be tenacious on this and keep at us on the timeline but it is happening and it will happen.

The €5 million for the technological university is important for the south east. It is important money that should be spent. Waterford and Carlow institutes of technology have moved to an advanced stage of the process of establishing that technological university, and this will have very significant implications across the board.

We have significant commitments in the programme for Government on the development of cities and Waterford is critical in this regard. Connectivity, including road connectivity, is vital, especially with the growing importance of Rosslare and so on. Public transport is also important, and I know the Minister for Transport has significant ambitions around city public transport networks, as well as rail more generally.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I thank the Taoiseach for his comments. I agree with the Taoiseach that it is probably more than a decade, when Mr. Cullen was a Minister, since Waterford could look at any kind of significant capital infrastructural spend from the Government. It is probably a testament to that being the case that I am standing here now.

In Waterford and the south east we are absolutely ready to play our part in the economic revival of Ireland. We have fantastic innovation clusters and a vibrant agrifood sector. We have a college performing way above other colleges in the country, as is our hospital. All we are asking for is an acknowledgement of this and fairness. We are not looking for a handout but we are looking to be helped up so we can make a really significant drive for the regional recovery of Ireland. We can play a major role and we are ready to do it. We are looking for a Government commitment to fund it so we can achieve primacy in this country.

**The Taoiseach:** Fairness is a valid ask. The programme for Government identifies and recognises Waterford as a regional city and investment must follow that designation. The recovery fund in the budget of €3.4 billion is over and above the Covid-19 contingency fund and it will provide opportunities for infrastructural development, reskilling and retraining, as well as supporting investment in jobs.

There are some very good quality companies in the south east and Waterford, in particular. My experience has been that it is important to leverage those quality companies to create an indigenous entrepreneurial activity. Many people from multinationals have gone on to create their own companies, as the Deputy knows. We must work on that agenda. I often felt we could have done better with financial services in Waterford from a foreign direct investment perspective, and I am keen on that.

We want regional development and we need to rebalance the country's economy and society. This means doing far more for cities like Waterford than what has happened in the past two or three decades.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Baineann mo cheist leis an ngéarchéim atá ann ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta, go náisiúnta agus go háirithe i nGaillimh, agus an ról faoi leith atá ag polasaithe agus beartais tithíochta an Rialtais, atá ag cothú na géarchéime sin.

Today I walked from my privileged accommodation to the Dáil, which is perhaps less than 600 m. I counted 16 homeless people living in doorways. Nine of them were outside the Gaiety Theatre; the drama venue was closed inside while the drama continues outside on our streets.

Yesterday the Government had a golden opportunity to do something different. We were talking about Monopoly money of billions of euro, and every respected institution is telling us to spend so we can help with the solidarity in communities by building them. We should finally realise that we cannot talk about an economy without talking about people. Yesterday I listened to the speech of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath. I call him the passive Minister or the Minister of the passive tense. He is the Minister of the saorbhriathar. He spoke about rents and house prices rising without any responsibility or looking at the causes of the homelessness I mentioned or the increasing waiting lists, which are directly related to Government policies.

The Taoiseach might tell me that homelessness is complex but I can pre-empt that by agreeing with him. Some people are on our streets because of complex problems but the vast majority of homelessness and the numbers on housing waiting lists are caused by Government policies. Yesterday the Government gave the vast bulk of public money to private landlords through the housing assistance payment, HAP, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and long-term leasing. I could name people in Galway who have been waiting for more than 15 years and have never been offered a house. That deserves an inquiry in itself. The housing assistance payment has been the only game in town since 2016. It was enshrined in law by Fine Gael and the Labour Party. It is time for the Taoiseach to do what his Minister called for yesterday when he was not using the saorbhriathar and said we need a radical reappraisal of how we deliver housing.

Can we leave ideology behind for once? We have people on the street and huge numbers of people on waiting lists. I could go into the figures for Galway. Will the Government make a commitment to building public housing on public land as an integral part of the solution?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy agus aontaím léi. Níl aon amhras ach gurb í géarchéim na tithíochta an ghéarchéim is mó atá againn lasmuigh den choróinvíreas, mar gheall ar an easpa tithíochta do ghnáthmhuintir na tire, agus go háirithe na daoine nach bhfuil aon tithe acu in aon chor. Bhí bém sa cháináisnéis inné ar thithiocht phoiblí go háirithe a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá sé i gceist againn 9,500 teach poiblí a thógáil an bhliain seo chugainn agus 10,000 gach aon bhliain ina dhiaidh sin. Sin an aidhm atá againn agus an príomh-rud ná go bhfuil na háiseanna agus an t-airgead ann chun é sin a chur i bhfeidhm.

I agree with the Deputy's emphasis on commissioning and building public housing alongside affordable housing. We need specific targets for the building of social homes. The HAP has grown up in recent years. I believe in rebalancing it. The less emphasis we place on the HAP and the more we place on increasing housing stock, the better. That is what we are determined to achieve through the social housing Bill. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, believes passionately in that, as does the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I took a particular interest in this myself. I wanted direct builds. Local authorities should start building. I am saying to local

authorities throughout the country that the funding will be made available. We have changed regulations to allow them to work faster and more effectively. They should go out and build social housing.

In the short term we have moved on homelessness in light of the Covid-19 situation. The system acquired some capacity from March onwards. The Minister has put out a call for housing. We are trying to build more units for single people who are homeless, a cohort for which there is an absence of suitable accommodation. Yesterday's funding package is very strong on homelessness. The aim is to drive down the numbers. We must make that a priority and proceed in line with the policies of the NGOs at the front line of homelessness issues. The private sector will have a role to play, but to do its job effectively the State is not limited to creating conditions for construction to happen. Critically, it must directly enable the building of social housing and ensure the critical skills are there to deliver it over time. That is why multi-annual funding is required to underpin the social housing programme. That has been built in. In other words, agencies will not be living from year to year, wondering if they will get the funding next year to follow through on what they start to build this year. Multi-annual funding is critical to the realisation of social housing targets and I am very committed to it.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The worst thing about this is that with each Government, language means nothing. I hear what the Taoiseach is telling me, but the reality is that the Government is putting more than €1.2 billion directly into the private sector under the three schemes I mentioned. I did not mention other programmes such the help to buy scheme, which the Parliamentary Budget Office has clearly shown did not target the right people.

I really tire of this type of language. The Taoiseach did not put money in the budget to rectify the housing crisis. Homelessness is a symptom of it. In Galway, we will very soon have the same number of people on the HAP as in social housing. Can the Taoiseach imagine that? He is looking perplexed. The housing assistance payment has been the only game in town. We have privatised public housing. The Taoiseach keeps talking about social housing. The HAP is not a social housing programme. It is private housing temporarily lent to the State so the landlord and the developer can make a profit. The only person who loses out is the tenant, who has no security.

The Government made a further allocation to the Land Development Agency, which is clearly doing the job of a developer. Galway, one of the five cities destined to grow, has no master plan. Those responsible for Ceannt Station, the Galway Docks and the Dyke Road area are all doing their own thing. The city council is playing an inactive part in what the previous Tánaiste acknowledged is developer-led development. We have a major housing crisis as a consequence of Government policy. The Taoiseach did not avail of the opportunity to change that radically.

**The Taoiseach:** Just because Deputy Connolly says we did not does not mean we did not. We did. I do not use language lightly. I have not been in Government for ten years. The housing assistance payment has been in place for about that length of time, maybe less. Dismantling HAP now, as the Deputy seems to be advocating, would immediately create homelessness. The housing assistance payment is a very large intervention. Yesterday we provided funding for 9,500 direct builds, to be provided by local authorities and approved housing bodies. There will be 10,000 units every year after that. That gives us a target of 50,000 on the social housing side. That is the largest target ever, though I accept we have a larger population now than before. I will not go into which intervention is the biggest. The important issue will be delivery. The

policy changes have been made and the funding has been provided and ring-fenced for local authorities and approved housing bodies to build social housing at scale over a five-year period. The money is multi-annual.

The Deputy is correct in some respects. The housing assistance payment became a way for local authorities to say they were resolving social housing issues through a rental process. In time, that crowded out the private market to the extent that the State made it unaffordable for many people. I never favoured pursuing that policy exclusively. I have always believed there should be a balance between social housing and a strong and vibrant private sector. We also need affordable housing to ensure that young couples can realise their aspirations to purchase a home. Delivery will be the key to getting the job done.

*Sitting suspended at 12.48 p.m. and resumed at 1.10 p.m.*

## **Financial Resolutions 2020**

### **Financial Resolution No. 7 - General: Motion (Resumed)**

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in relation to finance.

-(Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation)

**The Taoiseach:** Three and a half months ago, the new Government was formed at a unique moment in our history. The general election in February delivered the most diverse Dáil ever. It also demonstrated clearly the urgency of a range of critical social and economic issues. Little more than a month later, a pandemic began which has so far led to the deaths of 2,425 people on this island. The impact of the pandemic has been dramatic on every level. Every single aspect of our social, economic and cultural life has been impacted. It has caused the largest public health crisis in a century and the fastest-moving economic recession ever recorded. In response, we have had to work intensively to protect lives and livelihoods.

The Government which Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party agreed to form involves at its core a shared understanding, an understanding that we must work together to help our country through this crisis and to deliver sustained progress across our full term. Our programme for recovery and renewal is the most comprehensive and ambitious ever agreed between Irish political parties. It marks a decisive move in public policy in key areas and reflects a fair balance between different needs and interests in our diverse and modern society.

The budget marks a major statement of intent by the new Government. It is a progressive and ambitious budget. It shows our absolute determination to get the country through this pandemic and to address urgent challenges including health, housing, education, climate change and Brexit.

Since the end of June, we have been working intensively to manage the response to the pandemic and develop a comprehensive range of actions across the Government's priorities. A

new system of Cabinet committees has operated to ensure that each priority receives detailed scrutiny. Ministers and senior officials have been involved in a new level of policy review and development and at all stages the focus has been on developing cross-government actions. In July we announced emergency measures to expand public supports for those in need and protect as much of the economy as possible. We provided for direct aid to individuals and businesses and also implemented new actions on expanding social housing, tackling climate change and reducing pressure on public health services.

The full budget for 2021 which we have now published has involved major work and co-operation across the Government. A budget of this scale and ambition would normally require a full year to prepare. However, it has actually involved a deeper than normal level of debate and review. I wish to acknowledge the constructive and intensive work of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, in preparing the budget.

Although I understand that members of the Opposition feel the necessity to criticise everything as not being enough, the facts show that budget 2021 is the largest public investment programme in the history of the State. It is a decisive move to deliver national recovery and it is an equally decisive statement of support for strong and effective public services which serve all of the people. It will significantly improve key health services. It will launch a dramatic new era of social and affordable housing. It will step-change education for the most vulnerable students. It will empower people with disabilities with new and too long denied opportunities. It will enable action to meet new and more urgent targets for tackling climate change and protecting our biodiversity. It will support businesses and communities as we confront the harsh reality of the historically damaging decision of our neighbour to leave the European Union. It will begin a new era of North-South co-operation as a foundation for a lasting and shared peace and prosperity on our island. Most important, it shows a way forward for our country, to a time after the pandemic when we not only confront major challenges, we overcome them.

In the seventh month of the pandemic, it can be very easy for us to forget just how sudden and dramatic its impact has been. The rate of unemployment soared to almost 29% in April. Gross domestic product fell 3% in the second quarter compared with the same period last year. Although this decline was less than that experienced in other countries, in some sectors the impact was devastating.

Over many years, through consistent State investment, our place in the European Union and the work of the Irish people, we have developed resilient export sectors. Technology and computer services, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and medicines expanded strongly, with industrial production recording by far the strongest gains among European countries. These industries, which are so often attacked by the left and far left in our country, have once again acted as a stabilising force for the economy in a time of crisis. They have enabled the State to put in place support for other sectors and for society as a whole.

The contraction in domestic demand here was one of the steepest in Europe. Sectors where physical distancing is difficult or impossible, such as tourism, hospitality and transport, as well as culture and the arts, have been gravely hit. The scale of disruption visited on our economy and our people cannot be overstated. Throughout the pandemic, our front-line people in the public service and private sector have been courageous, innovative and highly effective in their response and I thank them for it.

Since taking up office, the Government has acted to counteract the worst effects of the pandemic, providing lifelines for households and businesses. The July stimulus plan contained an unprecedented range of actions to support households and businesses in the face of the Covid-19 shock. Critically, we also provided the health service with the funding it needs to respond to the public health emergency.

Like many other countries, we are borrowing heavily to protect our people and the economy through the crisis. We expect to run a budget deficit this year of just over €21 billion. For next year, we envisage another large deficit of €20 billion. Those who claim that this somehow proves we should have been spending more anyway are fooling no one. A pandemic such as this has never before occurred in the modern global economy. It has changed short- and medium-term conditions dramatically. In normal times, and were we alone in seeking to run deficits of this size, we would face immediate and serious problems. However, all countries in the euro area are running large budget deficits, so we are by no means an outlier in this regard and nor do we wish to be.

Critically, historically low interest rates and the reformed monetary conditions in the euro-zone give us an opportunity to make sustainable investments in a strong recovery. It is important to note that approximately half of this borrowing will be used to finance public investment. Basic economic principles tell us that well-designed public investment, by boosting the future capacity of our enterprise-based economy and future tax receipts, will reduce rather than increase the burden of the national debt. Unlike in the previous crisis, a new monetary policy by the European Central Bank, ECB, and especially its extensive bond-buying programme, has pegged government borrowing costs at exceptionally low levels. Moreover, the ECB has committed to large-scale bond purchases until the Covid crisis is over. As a result, the State can borrow long-term money at zero or even negative interest rates. In such circumstances, well-designed public investments financed by borrowings can pay for themselves. This cannot be without limit and we must be aware of future refinancing costs, but it gives us an opportunity to implement the major investment programme outlined in the budget.

It is clear there will be a need to bring down the national debt relative to the size of the economy so that we do not overburden future generations with debt. I could not disagree more with the members of the Opposition who keep crying for more and act as if this level of borrowing should be a new normal. At some point, there will be a need to eliminate the budget deficit in order to build resilience to the next economic shock. With that in mind, we will set out a medium-term trajectory towards a balanced budget in the stability programme update in spring. At that stage, we will have much greater clarity about the lasting impact of the pandemic and the final form of Brexit.

Some 60 years ago, Seán Lemass set out a new route forward for our economy and the country. He believed in public investment, in opening up to the world, in supporting education and that economic and social actions needed to go hand in hand. This core philosophy has underpinned progress in the decades since. This Government is absolutely clear in stating that public investment has a central role to play in our economic revival. That is why in budget 2021 we are increasing total capital expenditure to its highest ever level. This allocation will fund jobs-rich, highly productive and greener public investment to support recovery, boost business confidence and create new jobs in the near term and over a longer period. With private investment currently depressed because of the highly uncertain outlook, our approach is to bring forward public capital spending to stimulate the economy during the crisis, while also building capacity for the recovery. In so doing, we are sending the signal that this Government is committed

over the coming years to invest in our society, to tackle our infrastructure needs and to drive our transition towards a low-carbon digital economy. We are investing now for the future well-being of our country. Not to do so would place a burden on future generations just as surely as does government borrowing. The figures on which this budget is based are as robust as they can be in the midst of a fast-moving recession and public health emergency. However, they reflect the consensus of independent bodies on what we can assume today. I acknowledge the work of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, as an essential independent voice in reviewing core assumptions and policies. The ongoing uncertainty about both the pandemic and Brexit inevitably means we will have to continue to react as events and information evolve. This is why we have decided to identify a recovery fund with an allocation of €3.4 billion. This will ensure Ireland retains its ability to react quickly and comprehensively to all developments. It reflects our determination that our ambitious plans will be implemented.

The impact of the pandemic on businesses throughout the country, and therefore on hundreds of thousands of jobs, has been dramatic. As I have said, particular sectors have been hit harder, and the fact that we do not yet know when we can plan for a full reopening deprives them of any clarity about the future. The measures we have funded so far represent the most dramatic State involvement in directly supporting businesses and jobs we have ever seen. Our objective is to save as many livelihoods as possible for the moment when we can not only reopen, but again make concrete plans for the future. Key subsidies for retaining jobs will be continued, as will exceptional payments for people who are unemployed because of the pandemic. These payments will continue to be at a level far higher than is provided in any other jurisdiction on this island or our neighbouring island. As a result of this budget, we will take a significant step forward in providing direct support for businesses. The direct payment of up to €5,000 per week recognises the particular problems of businesses which cannot trade effectively due to public restrictions. This will be an enormous benefit to smaller and medium-sized businesses in particular.

We are also implementing a series of additional Brexit supports. As I have mentioned here previously, the part of our economy which may be worst hit by Brexit is that part which is already most hit by the pandemic. The new supports are designed to help businesses to trade and innovate in whatever emerges as the final form of Brexit. I will tomorrow go to a meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the European Union where Brexit will be our first major topic for discussion. As I told the Council President, Mr. Charles Michel, in Dublin last week, Ireland expects the London Government to honour its commitments under the withdrawal agreement. The Northern Ireland Assembly has also called for the full implementation of the withdrawal agreement.

As for the overall relationship between the UK and Europe, we remain committed to trying to forge as close a relationship as possible while protecting the core integrity of the European Union's laws. This is a Government which is unequivocally committed to Ireland being a positive, active and constructive member of the EU. We will never agree with those in this House who snipe at the Union at every opportunity and refuse to acknowledge how a strong and effective EU is a core national interest for Ireland.

Our ports and airports must now step up their work in preparing for January. Businesses need to develop the expertise and procedures required to trade with Britain in the new reality. The funding which we are providing in this budget will not undo all of the likely damage of Brexit, but it will make a major contribution to softening its blow.

The recession has also had a particularly dramatic impact on the employment of younger people in the workforce. They are disproportionately represented in certain sectors and less secure jobs. The business and job support measures we are implementing will help them, but more needs to be done, especially for those who may have lost their jobs permanently. This is why we are implementing a major expansion in schemes to help people to go back into the labour market or to take up new opportunities. Over 9,000 places will be provided to help people to upskill or reskill. There will be 4,000 more apprenticeships and over 1,000 more Springboard places.

I have heard a range of Sinn Féin speakers, in particular, claim that the poor and disadvantaged are getting nothing from this budget. The opposite is true. Who will benefit most from these new job supports and training places? Who will benefit most from the health and education measures we have announced? Who will benefit most from building social housing and dramatically increasing homelessness funding? In the often angry and loud denunciations we have heard from parts of the Opposition, there has been a general disinterest in how so many of these major initiatives will benefit people who are marginalised and disadvantaged in our community. Supporting businesses to create jobs and giving people the skills to fill those jobs remains one of the most effective and sustainable anti-poverty programmes that can be implemented. We need strong businesses and good jobs to generate the money to support the weakest in our society.

The urgent need to protect lives and livelihoods while building a sustained recovery has limited our ability to cut tax or increase direct State payments. However, within the obvious limit of having to be sustainable, we have been in a position to implement key targeted improvements. The significant increase in child dependant allowances will help the poorest families most. Increases in the fuel allowance mean that the impact of the carbon tax will be fairer. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will oversee a record social protection budget next year. When one takes these measures and combines them with the budget as a whole, the facts show that this is a progressive budget where the largest benefit will be felt by lower-income families. That is not an empty claim. It is not a political slogan. It is an independently verified fact. This does not fit well with the left populism which dominates parts of the Opposition. It is obvious that they have no intention of letting the facts get in the way of their well-worn speeches.

One of the many areas where they are refusing to acknowledge the impact of this new Government is housing and homelessness. By every measure, this is a step-change budget for action on housing and homelessness. This area has been allocated €3.3 billion, which is by some distance the largest amount ever allocated. More importantly, this will enable a range of urgent new actions. I strongly believe we need a new direction in the level of social housing and how it is built. It is a sad commentary on the cynicism of Sinn Féin that it has decided to attack the Minister and the Government over the failure to build enough social housing during the time when all construction was suspended because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This cynicism has continued with the attempt to dismiss a housing budget which has been welcomed by voluntary groups and organisations nationally and throughout the country.

Next year the Government will fund 12,750 extra homes under its social housing programme. Critically, the vast majority of these will be new builds, directly commissioned by the State. We will continue the urgent work we began in July to refurbish unused social housing units and to retrofit social housing to improve comfort and reduce energy costs. We believe in public housing and in a more active and direct role of the State in delivering it, and this budget proves our commitment. It is also essential that we help people who are finding it difficult to

buy a home. Support for affordable housing is an essential part of a balanced and comprehensive response to the housing pressures our society is feeling. The Government has allocated substantial resources, in particular €110 million for a new affordable purchase scheme and for accelerated delivery of cost rental homes. No one should be in any doubt that tackling homelessness is a core priority for this Government. In the coming year, direct funding for homelessness services will increase by 31%. This will enable a wide range of initiatives including a cold weather initiative, preventative strategies and personal supports. The strong welcome for this package which has come from key voluntary organisations reflects its scale and ambition. Implementing it effectively will be a priority. This will be overseen by a regularly scheduled Cabinet committee.

This is also a budget which demonstrates our commitment to developing accessible and high-quality public health services for all of our people. This is not about delivering small, incremental change. It is about a detailed plan to expand capacity and improve quality across a full range of vital public health services. It represents a balance between urgent action which will have an immediate impact and more strategic developments on critical care areas. While providing major resources for responding to the pandemic, permanent improvements will be implemented. The new funding and policy initiatives which the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has secured will build the capacity, quality and resilience of the health system. I acknowledge the incredible pressure which he and his Department have been under in recent months. They have succeeded in dealing with the day-to-day challenges of this unique time and bringing together an ambitious and comprehensive plan for developing our health services. This includes over 1,200 acute hospital beds; increased intensive care capacity; a new public-only consultant contract; new access to diagnostics for GPs and their patients; fast-tracking key plans for maternity, cancer and trauma care; helping 100,000 people on waiting lists; and securing access for Irish patients to new medicines. These and many other initiatives will be funded and implemented because of this budget.

The budget provides for a major improvement in mental health services. We will work with our mental health service providers and NGOs to deliver the recommendations of *Sharing the Vision*.

Families throughout our country know the distress which can be caused when services lack the capacity or expertise to help when dementia affects a loved one. The important dementia care initiative which will be implemented in the coming year is testament to the hard work of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, over a number of years, along with former Senator Colette Kelleher, in creating the blueprint for this development.

Disability must never be allowed to be seen as simply a health issue. It is touched by the full range of legal, economic, social and cultural policies. This is why progress for people with disabilities requires action across many fronts at once. The €100 million programme of disability actions which will be funded by this budget and implemented by the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, demonstrates our commitment to delivering.

Education is central to every element of shaping the future for our country. This is a Government which believes in supporting education and this is a budget which clearly shows our commitment. More than almost any other area, education is about the interaction of expert professionals with individuals. That is why creating more than 2,000 extra posts in education is at the heart of our programme for next year.

In addition to increasing staffing in mainstream classes, our priority will be to achieve a dramatic change in the level and quality of inclusive educational provision. Teachers and special needs assistants will help thousands of pupils to develop to their full potential and we will move to implement the radical and progressive school inclusion model. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, will ensure that next year sees the beginning of a new push to build an inclusive Irish education system.

In our higher education system, action is required to support inclusion and address key pressures which have emerged during this pandemic. Funding for postgraduate grants will be significantly expanded, directly benefiting students from lower income families. That is something I am very pleased about. A special €50 million fund will be distributed by the Minister, Deputy Harris, to address rising hardship cases at this difficult time.

This Government is committed to supporting actively our national language and the full range of artistic and cultural activity. This is reflected through a combination of direct Covid-related supports and wider initiatives which will be permanent. Méadófar maoiniú iomlán i leith gníomhaíochtaí ar son na teanga Gaeilge faoi 23% an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá ardú suntasach i maoiniú á sholáthar d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge agus TG4. Sonrófar go mion ár dtiomantas chun an Ghaeilge a thacú mar chuid bheo de shaol an phobail le linn na míonna amach romhainn. Braitheann na réimsí seo ar ábaltacht daoine teacht le chéile, níos mó ná aon chuid eile de shaol laethúil ár socháí. Tá éifeacht dhamáisteach faoi leith ar na réimsí seo ag na srianta atá de dhíth chun damáiste phaindéim an Covid a laghdú.

I dtaobh ealaín agus cultúr, d'oibrigh muid chun cúnamh láithreach a sholáthar chomh maith le maoiniú ar bhealaí gníomhaíochtaí a atosú sa bhliain amach romhainn. Tá breac-chuntas tugtha ag an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, agus ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, ar raon tacaíochtaí leathan agus uaillmhianach a chuirfidh siad i bhfeidhm.

The €50 million allocation for live cultural activities and the €50 million increase in the funding of the Arts Council together are an important statement by this Government. This demonstrates our commitment to helping our arts and culture community not just in getting through this difficult period but also in expanding permanent support.

Climate change represents a defining challenge to Ireland and the world as a whole. It is already causing unprecedented damage and it is a core commitment of this Government to implement a sustained and unprecedented programme of action. Last week the Government published the draft Climate Action Bill which will ensure strong targets and accountability. It is to be hoped this critical legislation will be enacted without delay. The budget provides a major financial investment for the actions required to meet these tough new standards. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, will be dealing with these in greater depth shortly as well as major initiatives in public transport, heritage and biodiversity. I acknowledge the remarkable speed and detail which he and his officials have shown in developing proposals in recent months.

It is also important to note that it is impossible to be sincere about tackling climate change but to oppose tough measures required to deliver progress. If we want to decarbonise our society, carbon taxes are not an option, they are essential. However, the carbon tax increase we are implementing will be 100% returned to the people through a combination of funding for a just transition, fuel allowances for lower income families and environmentally friendly farming.

The Good Friday Agreement represented the triumph of the ideal of a shared peace on this

island. As two of the greatest statesmen this island will ever produce, John Hume and Séamus Mallon, said so often, the agreement was a new dispensation for us. It set us a challenge to work together in our common interests. Unfortunately, too often this challenge has been overwhelmed by partisan and political deadlock. To this has been added a Brexit process which has shown how fragile are so many things we took for granted and indeed how little we have done to understand or develop many aspects of cross-Border activity. It is time for us to renew our commitment to building a shared future on our island.

There are those here who regularly attack me for the fact that my focus is on building connections and trust between traditions on our island. To them this is a compromise when the focus should be on one vote and one big victory. I believe passionately that true republicanism and the cause of unity between different traditions and identities can only be successful if we first build understanding and trust. The shared island unit I have established will aid the Government in moving our agenda forward. The €500 million in investment funding for shared island projects demonstrates that this is not about creating another formal structure but about delivering practical action which shows how much can be achieved when we work together.

This funding forms part of an overall budget package which both reacts to urgent concerns and puts in place strategic action for addressing the most important challenges facing our country. It is a progressive budget which will develop critical public services. It will expand the capacity and quality of public health services. It will provide record levels of social and affordable houses. It will develop more inclusive schools and empower people with disabilities. It marks a major investment in not just helping us through this terrible pandemic but in building a stronger and fairer Ireland which serves all of its people.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I welcome the opportunity to speak today. Throughout this pandemic, Irish businesses, small and large, have shown remarkable grit, determination and adaptability. Business models have changed, premises have been refitted and staff retrained as enterprises find new and innovative ways to serve us, their customers, and keep everyone safe. It has been a long seven months and I know people are very weary.

This Government continues to stand in solidarity with every community, employer, employee and their families. As soon as this new Government was formed, our focus turned to the July stimulus. This included actions to help businesses to open, to help those already open to stay open, to get people back to work and to provide financial support and training to those who could not go back to their old jobs. Yesterday's budget was no different and continued the good work started in July. It showed that the Government will continue to back enterprise and our economy through targeted tax reductions and incentives, grants and employment subsidies, and low-cost finance.

Budget 2021 is an unprecedented budget for unprecedented times. In scale, it involves almost €90 billion of public spending and investment. Its purpose is to protect both the lives and livelihoods of everyone in the State. It is a budget for hope and gives us confidence that 2021 can be better.

The pandemic has exposed some of the weaknesses and inequalities in the way our economy is structured. It has prompted us to re-evaluate people's work, the importance of so-called low-skilled labour in our everyday lives, and our preconceptions and approach to public policy in areas such as sick pay, remote working, work-life balance and unemployment insurance.

The previous Government sought to act quickly on the areas that require immediate intervention, for example, the establishment of the pandemic unemployment payment and the enhanced illness benefit payment, but long-term change is also required. I am determined to introduce legislation for statutory sick pay in 2021 following engagement with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, which comprises the Government, business groups and unions, and a public consultation. The reduction in waiting days for illness benefit from six days to three days, as announced in the budget, is a significant first step. It means that all workers, regardless of the reason for an illness, can qualify for illness benefit on day four. It also means that those employers who provide sick pay will see more of that refunded to them out of the Social Insurance Fund.

As the House may be aware, the programme for Government commits to introducing a living wage over the lifetime of the Government. A living wage is different depending on how one defines it. Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a living wage, but it is significantly lower than our national minimum wage. That is not a model we would wish to follow. I am examining ways of transforming the Low Pay Commission into a living wage commission, one that would collect data, carry out research and advise us on fair wages in an independent and evidence-based way, moving towards a living wage over the period of this Government. I would welcome any submission from colleagues in the House on this matter.

I want workers and businesses to know that as we face into uncertain times, the Government is here for them and is on their side. In 2021, workers will see no increase in income tax, USC or PRSI and there will be a modest increase in the minimum wage and a reduction in the number of waiting days for illness benefit. There will be an extension of parent's benefit by a further three weeks to five weeks, building on the work of the previous Government, which introduced it. This will allow parents to spend more time at home with their kids. The earned income tax credit, which was introduced by the previous Government for the self-employed, has been increased to €1,650. This will equalise it with the employee, formerly PAYE, tax credit for the first time and will enable the self-employed to warehouse their 2020 preliminary tax liabilities, which will help to bring immediate relief. The self-employed in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, will be able to earn up to €480 per month, or €120 per week, without losing access to the payment. This will help many self-employed people to make the transition off welfare and back into full-time self-employment.

For business, we have the new Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, which will provide a weekly grant to businesses that, as a result of pandemic restrictions, are closed or have seen their turnovers fall by 80% or more. The maximum grant will be €5,000 per week compared to £4,000 per month in Northern Ireland and Britain. The extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, will be provided for well into 2021. As such, there will be no cliff-edge end of the scheme at the end of March. If it needs to continue, it will. If we are in a position to phase it out, we will do so gradually. The commercial rates holiday is being extended to the end of 2020, which will reduce the fixed costs of doing business. A reduced VAT rate from 13.5% to 9% for the hospitality, accommodation and tourism sectors will help hotels, pubs, restaurants and other businesses, including those in entertainment, tourism and hospitality, as well as personal services like hairdressers and barbers.

Regarding health infrastructure, there will be an increase in permanent capacity, with 1,280 extra hospital beds being budgeted for, 66 additional critical care beds and 1,250 community beds. These targets are not easy to deliver in one year, but we are determined to get them done.

The budget will allow many important school, third level, roads, sporting, transport and other projects to go ahead, including the national broadband plan, which is provided for by a significant increase in the budget for communications and is a project that no one opposes now.

This is a pro-business, pro-jobs and people-focused budget. It is aimed at building what was put in place in the July stimulus to help businesses and workers through this difficult time. The quantum and scope of funding provided by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation to business has been extraordinary. The spend in 2020 has doubled, enabling the provision of targeted and timely grants and loans to business. This included the restart grant, the online retail scheme, trading online vouchers, business continuity vouchers and a range of low-cost loans through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and Microfinance Ireland, among others.

An employment-focused recovery is crucial to leading us out of this crisis and sustaining people in their work. That has been the cornerstone of the Government's approach in this budget. My Department's 2021 budget will be a total of €1.13 billion, which will fund our activities and programmes in 2021. That allocation is the highest ever secured for the Department and represents a 16% increase year on year. The capital allocation of €768 million has increased by some €136 million and the current funding allocation has increased by €16 million. In addition, the Department will have immediate access to at least €100 million from the recovery fund to help businesses to prepare for Brexit. It is worth highlighting that of the additional €136 million in capital funding, €35 million will be provided to IDA Ireland to enable it to provide a further €10 million to fund its property programme to attract foreign direct investment to all parts of the country. So far, seven of the 11 advance factories and facilities have been occupied. We want to provide more. The other €25 million will fund the expansion of the innovative Covid life sciences products scheme.

The value of these investments cannot be overestimated. At the end of 2019, a total of 246,096 people were employed by IDA client companies. While this recession is different from the last recession, it has something in common with it, which is that the multinational sector has held up well. If not for that, there would be a different picture of this year's tax take. The multinational traded sector will once again help to bring us out of recession and back to economic growth. For this reason, it needs to be protected and encouraged and not taken for granted. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation is focused on planning and preparing for economic recovery and ensuring that Ireland remains a competitive and attractive location in which to do business.

Enterprise Ireland's capital funding will increase by €50 million, which will allow the agency to continue providing help for business under the sustaining enterprise fund, the clear custom financial support grant and the online retail scheme as businesses continue to adapt, diversify and go digital. There will be a further call under the regional enterprise development fund. Unlocking opportunity in all parts of Ireland is essential to underpinning the future performance of our indigenous companies and our country's economic recovery. Through Enterprise Ireland, the regional enterprise development fund will invest in projects with the greatest potential to create new jobs, support and sustain existing jobs, and strengthen the economy in individual regions. It will strengthen each region's capacity to innovate in ways that help our home-grown companies to develop into globally competitive successes.

In terms of access to loans, there is extra funding of €14.325 million. This will strengthen the lending capacity under the popular future growth loan scheme to €430 million. It will also

further capitalise Microfinance Ireland by €5 million, allowing it to continue providing its tailored Covid loan scheme to microenterprises impacted by the pandemic. The drawdown and uptake rates of that scheme have been encouraging. The Covid credit guarantee scheme, which was launched last month, offers low-cost loans ranging from €10,000 to €1 million for terms of up to five and a half years. It is only getting started, but I believe that demand will be strong. For 2021, some €25 million is being provided to finance this guarantee.

Aside from these capital moneys, €60 million in additional current money will be allocated in 2021. This will mainly be directed at increasing resources for the Department's regulatory bodies as they respond to and prepare for Brexit and Covid-19. For example, €8 million will be provided to the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, and the National Standards Authority, NSA. The HSA will have a new occupational illness department established within it to deal more with the issue of illnesses being picked up in workplaces, be those hospitals, meat plants or anywhere else. The additional money for the CCPC will enable it to increase its activities and powers under European law once transposed into Irish law, enabling it to fine companies directly that it finds to be in breach of competition law without having to go to court. This will be particularly useful in certain sectors, which I will expand on another day. There will be additional funding for the NSA. Demand for the services of these bodies, particularly in terms of market surveillance and certification, is expected to increase as a result of Brexit. Additional current funding is also provided through the enterprise agencies to enable them to continue to expand their staffing, expand their global footprint and increase their promotional and awareness activities.

Aside from the challenge of Covid-19, the other major challenge facing many of our businesses is Brexit. Preparations for the possibility of having to trade with Britain on WTO terms have been intensifying for some time. Last week, I wrote personally to all 225,000 registered businesses in the country setting out once again what their owners need to do to get them ready for Britain's departure from the Single Market and the customs union at the end of the year. The letter included full information on where businesses can find advice and access funding. It outlined the specific measures introduced to help them navigate the regulatory environment post Brexit. Enterprise Ireland's ready for customs grant has been designed for businesses involved in exporting to and importing from Britain. Businesses can claim grants of up to €9,000 per eligible employee hired or redeployed within the business to a dedicated customs role. Skillnet Ireland's online customs training is available on a 24-7 basis. I strongly encourage all businesses to avail of these and other customs training offerings. The reality is that this new way of doing business is coming and it is coming soon.

There is a significant Brexit spend in budget 2021. Hundreds of millions of euro have been spent by many Departments and their agencies in preparation throughout 2020. There has been funding for compliance, investment in physical and ICT infrastructure and business supports for the agrifood and enterprise sectors. Yesterday's budget announcement provided an additional €100 million for my Department to help businesses to adapt to Brexit. This includes €8 million to undertake new market surveillance and certification, which will be required even if a free trade agreement is in place. There is a provision of €50 million to assist businesses to respond to changes to customs and tariffs, €7 million to help the food processing industry, including the beef and dairy sectors, to adapt, €11 million for local enterprise offices to meet the increased demand for their range of tailored services for small and microbusinesses in the context of Brexit and Covid, and a further €675,000 for InterTradeIreland to provide practical help to businesses trading across the Border.

I repeat that this is a budget for hope. The Government is safeguarding lives and livelihoods through unprecedented financial supports that will assist immediately and in the years to come. We built the budget on negative assumptions, namely, that there would be a no-free-trade-agreement Brexit, no Covid vaccine and the pandemic would continue throughout 2021. I am more optimistic. I think that if we can secure a free trade agreement on Brexit, find an effective and safe vaccine and develop rapid testing, we will find ourselves in a much better position next year than we are projecting at the moment. This is a budget that will sustain us through Covid-19 and Brexit, which are the twin crises we now face, while not forgetting the twin transition, which will be digital and green and for which we are also preparing.

I have listened carefully to the comments and remarks from members of the main Opposition party and I am very disappointed. We have heard the same single transferable speeches we have been hearing for the past ten years, which urge us to spend more, borrow more and promise everything to everyone everywhere. However, when we compare actions with words, we see something very different. We see talk of commitment to climate action but a baulking at the necessary and unpopular measures when put to a vote in the House. We see rents being increased for social housing tenants in Northern Ireland, contrasted with a call for a three-year rent freeze in this State. We see council rates being increased in the North during a pandemic when we chose to freeze the local property tax, LPT. I see eye-wateringly low income supports provided to people who have lost their jobs north of the Border while there is criticism of the fact that we have reduced some payments, even though they are still three times higher than what is available in the North. Only this month, I see the state pension age going up in the North, with all-party support, while we decided not to proceed with our plans to increase the pension age in this State. I see that we are offering a maximum closure grant for businesses that is worth €5,000 per week, whereas the maximum north of the Border is €4,000 a month. I see in Sinn Féin's alternative budget a great desire to stifle our recovery and to do down our country. The introduction of 19 separate tax increases would hit business really hard, just as the abolition of the help-to-buy scheme would hit first-time buyers really hard. I believe Sinn Féin's budget proposals would turn what should be a lost year for our country into another lost decade. The party has no coherent policies and no real vision, only left populism, to use the word it uses to describe its strategy.

Covid-19 and Brexit are undoubtedly the twin crises we must overcome, and overcome them we will. The budget announced yesterday is an important part of doing exactly that. I commend it to the House.

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am very pleased and proud to follow the Taoiseach and Tánaiste in setting out my thoughts on the budget. It is a collective effort and an example of parties in government working well together. There are differences and difficulties but we have knuckled down at this time because our job is to protect the Irish people and that overcomes any immediate political differences. This wish to protect the people is something that should and does unite us in government and I think it also unites this House. In this crisis, we do not differ on that point. I have not heard anybody saying that it is not the correct approach to borrow from the future - from our children, I suppose, or from future years - to protect our people now. That is the right thing to do not only on the principle of protecting our people but it is also, fortunately, the prudent economic approach. It is the proper economic strategy to take at a time of crisis, when people are fearful, private spending contracts and investment stops, that the State should step up to invest and borrow for the future. That is what we are doing.

The first and most important consideration is to protect our people in the here and now. To that end, the significant €4 billion increase in funding for the health service is absolutely appropriate. That funding will go both to immediate Covid measures and also to strengthening and improving our health system in a way that will have long-term implications and give long-term benefits to our people in the form of additional capacity, additional beds and, we hope, additional skills and new ways of doing things that will help us manage the immediate crisis and also protect us into the future. It was particularly important in this budget that we prioritised looking after and protecting our people in the widest sense. In that context, my party is particularly pleased that there is a significant increase in funding for services for people with disabilities. That is an aspiration and interest shared with all parties in this House. It was important that we delivered on that aspiration and now it is important that the money is spent wisely and well so that this republic of ours is one where we really do look after every citizen to the best of our ability and in a way that brings out the best of their abilities. There is a whole series of different policy priorities implementing the national maternity care strategy and other key strategies. In particular, there has been a broad welcome in the House, which is shared by our party, that we have been able to give an additional €38 million allocation to mental health. At this time of crisis, when people are fearful, individuals' mental health is probably suffering more than anything else and it is the area where we most need to offer protection.

The second protection that is delivered in this budget - it is not an easy one but it is a key one - is protection against poverty. It is especially not easy at this time, when jobs are being lost and incomes are uncertain, but there is a series of measures in the budget, particularly the greener aspects of it, which fundamentally meet that objective. The way in which the carbon tax has been introduced this year, and has been set for the next eight to nine years in the measures agreed last night, stitches a security into the measure that it will be poverty proofed. This will ensure the revenues are ring-fenced in such a way that the measure will not lead to a deterioration in the situation of people, particularly those on low income, who suffer from or face the prospect of fuel poverty.

It is very significant that the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, said yesterday that it is clearly and demonstrably the Government position that this is not a tax to raise revenue, but it is to give a signal that we need to make a switch to a cleaner and less polluting way in how we spend our money, what energy and transport systems we use, and what industrial systems evolve in our country. It is clear and agreed, and is now set as custom which will be repeated year in, year out in increasing carbon tax, that roughly one third of the revenue will go towards protecting against poverty. This is hugely important and significant. The way it was done yesterday, in targeting the qualified child allowance, the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance, is the best and right mix of targeting those who suffer from extreme poverty at the lower end of the income distribution chain.

Added to, and helping, that were the huge investments committed to in the budget from the carbon tax and other sources, towards protecting people from fuel poverty in a much more fundamental, long-term way. These investments will give people the option of not having to burn fossil fuels and not having to spend tight revenue on fossil fuels and instead will give them a warm and healthy home, which is probably one of the greatest comforts if a person happens to live in one. This is the best protection against poverty and the best way to improve health.

The fact that the huge increase in money available for retrofitting, two thirds of which is targeted towards social housing and lower income households, is a second major protection for people who may be vulnerable to fuel poverty. It is of huge significance. If we can deliver this

€50 billion project over the next 20 years, where we go to every Irish home to carry out this sensible and intelligent policy, which I believe is not a not divisive strategy, and where every single Irish home is fit for this cold climate of ours, what an outcome that would be for the people of our country. It is not beyond our bounds to have no fuel poverty. Much healthier outcomes for people who have asthma, cardiac and other health conditions would radically improve when people can live in a warm and comfortable home. The Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, is starting this with the training of up 1,500 apprentices with skills in that area, which will grow and expand. This is a doable and achievable project for the next four or five Governments. I do not believe the policy will change because it makes such sense. It will be popular, it will be successful and it will be adopted by the Irish people. As more houses insulate, put a solar panel on the roof, and put in the heat pump at the side, it will be a winning combination. Our companies are good at this, our workers will be very good at this and our households will like this. We started this in the budget yesterday.

A further protection presented in the budget is for security for many of our younger people. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy O’Gorman, having received huge advances in the July stimulus to support the childcare sector, has targeted and focused his additional budget supports for the protection of younger people. In the huge increase in the budget for Tusla, we seek to protect the most vulnerable young people who often need very intensive care and support from the State when they are in difficult circumstances.

There was the decision to further widen that sense of who we seek to protect by bringing in young people with refugee status and others who are coming from traumatic circumstances, by saying that we will invest. Ireland has international obligations and recognises those. We sit on the UN Security Council not just to expand our own immediate short-term interests, but to espouse a form of multilateralism that the world needs at this time. It is important that we back this up by increasing our overseas aid budget, by saying we will look after those young people who are in greater stress and difficulty on the far distant shores of Europe, and that we would give them a safe refuge and welcome here

Less notice was paid to, but it is important to note, the money that will be invested in our young people, and particularly in those who are just starting in third level education. These young people are going to college but there is no sense of collegiality and no sense of connection. That is a real problem. The grant and the support is for students to try to provide that connectivity and to encourage the colleges to provide connectivity in whatever way they can, and not just do recorded online and Zoom lectures. This will mean that college learning and apprenticeship days are not lost for students. This was important as a statement of where we want to go.

The Government has three key aims to invest in health, housing and climate, but the other key measure for young people in the budget was the commitment and the additional funding to roll out housing, social housing, cost-rental housing and private housing supports in a variety of ways. I believe this is a critical way we can protect our young people in order that they can have a viable future and a sense they can settle down and raise a family because they will be able to build and create their own home. That is critical. This is where the strategic decisions were made, but they were difficult decisions. Anyone could rightly argue that some areas should have received further funding but I believe we are right to stick to the core mission of the Government to invest in health, housing and climate to make this moment one of change. While there are real challenges and real difficulties, it can be used as a turning point to deliver that more secure future for our people.

The budget also invests significantly in protecting nature and in starting to do that. We know that the ultimate security for people will not be guaranteed unless we address the biodiversity and climate crisis we face. While he has not set out the details yet, I was very glad that my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Noonan, has seen a significant increase in funding for the National Parks and Wildlife Service and in his area. We need that attention to the protection of our land, our nature and our natural systems. We are connected to it; we are not separate. We are all enriched by the return of biodiversity. We urgently need to undo and reverse the dramatic loss of water quality and loss of biodiversity on our island over the past 50 years. The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is in a key position and is well resourced to help expand, encourage and support the National Parks and Wildlife Service as it sets about that task.

I now turn to the third area for allocation from the carbon tax that is now set in our programme for Government. I would find it hard to believe that any future Government would not follow such a similar course. The three areas of investment include social protection through the welfare system and through investing in retrofitting our buildings. The third area of investment is in the restoration of biodiversity in our agricultural systems. This is what was delivered yesterday. It was a significant moment in the history of the Green Party. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, and the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, now have a budget where we can focus on asking farmers to actually engage their real skills and expertise in habitat creation and in restoring nature in their own corners and in the right places within the fields on their farms. That will grow and will have profound consequences for the long-term future of our country. It gives those young people going into farming a key role and the skills for these great challenges of our time. It will give them an income as they do so.

It did not stop there. Various measures were set out by the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, this morning. It is not just about habitat creation. It is also about a radical improvement. Thanks to this budget we expect some 500 new organic farmers to go into operation next year. There is a 50% increase in the horticulture budget, which we know we need so we can stop importing all our horticulture and start growing it ourselves. We can do this at home in Ireland. Some 50,000 farmers will benefit from new biodiversity health and safety training. This is thinking long term and investing for the future by upskilling our farmers to give them a central role in how we tackle the biodiversity crisis. It does this in a way that is sophisticated, smart farming. This is where farmers are going and what they are already doing, and what they are stepping up to do.

There is further investment, along with the investment from my Department, in the rehabilitation of 4,000 ha of peatlands. This is the best and most efficient way of storing carbon. Learning from the first steps and then scaling it up is the best way we can meet the 7% target. Restoring peatlands is 20% of our land. That is where we can meet the climate targets in a way that protects biodiversity, creates employment and pays farmers for the key job and important skilled work that needs to be done now.

A national soil survey will be conducted across 16,000 farms as part of the smart farming development initiative and will get down to a really local level. We we will meet our climate targets through scientific, highly skilled, nature-based farming, and that is what was committed to in the budget yesterday. I was particularly proud of that section among the many changes that were announced.

Funding will also be provided for a national land review as committed to in the programme

for Government. That will be centre stage and critical to the future of forestry, farming and rural Ireland. It is at the centre of any land use review or plan. It will form the basis of our plan to create jobs for young people throughout this country in a much more balanced, stable and secure way. We will create jobs for which people are well paid for their vital skills. That is the green recovery that is ahead of us and that is what is being funded in this budget. It will give people confidence that we can do it step by step. Going green is good for people. That is what we seek to achieve. It is not a cost or a burden; it is a better way for a better future for all the people of our country.

I mentioned retrofitting in relation to energy, and transport is also important in this regard. Progress here will take time because it takes time to build transport systems, to get through the planning process, but we are starting now. There is a clear sense of direction in two or three ways. First, it requires electrifying everything. If we are going to reach zero carbon in transport, we must remove diesel, gasoline and other fossil fuels and use our own renewable electricity instead. That is why we are going to support the taxi industry with a scrappage scheme that will allow drivers to convert to the really high-quality new cars which will start coming on to the market. An historic order is coming from Irish Rail so that our train carriages will be run by electricity and electric battery rather than by diesel. We are making changes to the VRT system to make it cheaper and easier to switch to these new cars. The changes are not meant to be punitive or revenue raising. They are necessary to comply with international law and because we want to send a signal that it is cheaper and easier to make the leap towards an electric transport system.

Another important trend in the transformation of transport is the return to the concept of local. One of the opportunities arising from this cursed virus is the restoration of life at the centre of local villages, towns and city suburbs. I refer to the 15-minute city concept, which is the opposite of what we have seen in this country for decades, with ever lengthening commutes, ever further sprawl and ever longer time stuck in traffic, which is not good for anyone's wealth, health or happiness. Instead, we are trying to bring life and jobs back to local areas by creating local active transport systems. We have committed €360 million in this budget for such systems, which is only a start but which will transform every village, town, city and rural area, making it safe to walk or cycle to school, for example, and meaning that people will not necessarily have to commute all the time and can engage in remote working. People will not have to drive ever longer distances.

There are two small projects in that area to which I will refer now. One is within my own Department and the other is being delivered by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. The national broadband plan is now on track and on target, and if anything, we are going to accelerate it to deliver it earlier than originally planned. The demand for high-speed broadband is clear and everyone needs that connectivity. The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is in charge of the town-first policy whereby broadband connection points will be installed to create remote working hubs.

This budget is also all about protecting small Irish employers and their workers at this time. Most people working for the public service will be able to get through this crisis because their wages are still paid every week and many people working in large FDI companies are doing well, as the Tánaiste said, in this difficult time. The sector at most risk is the Irish SME sector, including family businesses and small local businesses, and in that context this budget went big in every way possible, including through the employee wage subsidy scheme, the PUP and now the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, payment which will help companies in particular

difficulty. That is strategically the right and most important priority at this time, because if we lose that heart of our economy, we will not be able to pay for all the other measures. If we do not protect those family businesses, people's mental health will suffer. They will not be able to take the loss of the pride they have in those businesses. It is on that welcome measure that I conclude my comments on budget 2021.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** When the Government came to draft this budget, it did so against the backdrop of great crises and challenges for Ireland. It was written against the reality of lost jobs and incomes and the tragedy of lost lives. This pandemic is undeniably the most serious crisis we have faced in living memory, and as Brexit looms large on the horizon, there is justifiably a great deal of public anxiety and uncertainty. This is an emergency budget and the emergency is real. Covid-19 and Brexit, two enormous crises in their own right, taken together create unprecedented challenges for us.

We were told that this budget would deliver the certainty for which workers, communities and businesses are yearning. However, behind the hype of the billions we see that so many people are once again let down, left out and short-changed. Fuair siad faic ach tá laghdú ann do na céadta mílte duine ar an PUP. Tá faic ann do chíosóirí agus do chúram leanaí agus tá ardú ann i gcánacha carbóin. There is nothing but more cuts for the 250,000 PUP recipients, nothing for renters or for childcare and a hike in carbon taxes. I have no doubt that we will overcome and prevail because the Irish people have demonstrated the very best of who we are over the past seven months. They have risen to the disruption, pain and loss wrought by Covid-19 with kindness, compassion, togetherness and resilience. We have seen real social solidarity and the task for the Government yesterday was to meet the standard set by our people. While the budget did many things that we welcomed and for which we argued, it fell short of that standard.

The pandemic has shone a bright spotlight on the things that are wrong in our society, including the perpetual housing crisis, the never-ending overcrowding of our hospitals, the record waiting lists for treatment, the lack of fairness in our economy, especially for low-paid workers, and the travesty of denying the State pension to workers who have done their bit and paid their way by the age of 65. The crisis revealed the importance of affordable childcare to families and to the functioning of a modern, sustainable economy. It also laid bare the heartbreaking consequences for people with disabilities, their families and carers of decades of poor funding and under-resourcing of the services upon which they rely. The pandemic should have been a wake-up call for this Government to fix these things with determination and energy. The budget was an opportunity to begin the work of righting these big wrongs while ensuring that workers, families, communities and businesses have the supports they need to make it through this crisis. This was an opportunity to make a real and meaningful difference for people who have had their lives turned upside down and to provide people with certainty in times of great turbulence, but the Government failed to grasp this opportunity and got it badly wrong.

Yesterday the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, described this budget as one of hope and confidence and there is no doubt at all that hope and confidence are exactly what our people need. However, to generate that hope and confidence, the Government has to deliver real, tangible, felt improvements, not just slogans, not big figures and certainly not soundbites. When we look beyond the headline figures of yesterday's budget, we would be hard-pressed to see how it delivers on the Minister's claim. The reality is that while the Government talks up big figures, many will see only crumbs from the table. If the Minister really wanted to provide hope and confidence, he would have done things very differently. Sinn Féin in government would have done things differently. We would have given certainty to workers, families and small

businesses so they can get through this crisis, and we would have also planned to rebuild in a better, fairer and stronger way.

Our first priority is for those who are struggling, those who are just clinging on, having lost their jobs and incomes as a result of this pandemic. We would have reversed the cut to the pandemic unemployment payment. That is what the Government should have done but it chose not to. In fact, the Government is going to cut this payment again in January and then end it in April. The cut is mean, it is economically short-sighted and it shows that this Government, despite all the nice words in yesterday's speeches, simply does not get it. The Government does not really grasp the hardships facing families who have to make ends meet at the end of each week, when the cost of living is already sky-high and when utility bills up are being hiked up yet again. It does not get that they still have to put food on the table and provide for their children. It does not get that they still have to pay the mortgage or pay the rent.

The failure to restore the PUP exposes those who have lost their incomes through no fault of their own to a greater risk of poverty. It also drains money from the local economy, which has serious consequences for local businesses that are already under huge pressure to stay open and keep their staff at work. Confirmation of the Christmas bonus, while welcome, is no consolation prize. The cuts to the wage subsidy scheme have made it not fit for purpose. The Taoiseach should remember that we worked constructively with the Government to ensure that we had an effective, fit for purpose wage subsidy scheme, but that is no longer the case. The scheme excludes 153,000 low-paid workers in their entirety. Employees with gross weekly pay of less than €151.50 are not eligible for any subsidy whatsoever. What is that all about? Businesses will now only receive €203 per qualifying worker instead of €410. How can the Taoiseach stand over this? It is simply not good enough. The Taoiseach's approach is very short-sighted. All of us know, and have acknowledged, the importance of maintaining the relationship between workers and their employers in a state of readiness for when the economy picks up again. A thoughtful Government would invest properly in sustaining that connection because it makes economic sense.

We need creative ideas that have a real chance of reviving hospitality and tourism, the sectors that have been laid low by this emergency. Bar workers, restaurant staff and tour guides are among those who have taken a frightening financial hit. Tens of thousands of these workers have not seen a day's work since March. The businesses they worked for have their backs to the wall and are literally struggling to survive. The reduction in VAT for the sector is welcome. However, the Taoiseach made heavy weather of it and he certainly took his time. Sinn Féin proposed a tourism and hospitality voucher scheme back in June. This idea would stimulate activity in the economy by injecting hundreds of millions of euro directly into the tills of businesses that are struggling. Our scheme is detailed, fully costed and has the backing of key industry figures. As well as supporting thousands of jobs, it would have allowed people, who otherwise would have stayed at home due to financial constraints, to get out and about at the appropriate time, spend money and enjoy themselves. The Taoiseach did not take this idea on board. However, just as he came to the idea of a VAT reduction late in the day, the Taoiseach could still adopt this scheme now and make a real difference to these sectors.

During the election in February, housing was the number one issue on the doorsteps. The stories of those in housing distress were, depressingly, very familiar: couples disheartened because the price of a new home is beyond them but who do not qualify for council housing; other families, after years on local authority lists, waiting for a home that never materialises; young people paying extortionate rents to landlords; and no light at the end of the tunnel because suc-

cessive Governments abdicated to the private market the State's responsibility for the provision of housing. That is what has happened on the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

This budget could have been a watershed moment for housing but that moment was squandered. Sinn Féin has said we need to see the delivery of affordable and social housing on a scale never seen before. That means 20,000 social and affordable homes in 2021, which is the level of delivery we need. The Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, stated that even when the State was much poorer, we still managed to build public housing and that we would do so again. Unfortunately, the housing measures announced do not match the spirit of his words. There is a housing scheme that puts more money into the pockets of developers and does nothing to deliver homes that are affordable to the average worker. I had to rub my eyes in disbelief when I realised this budget provides for only 593 real social homes in 2021. I can only imagine what those families waiting years for a home will think when they discover this, but I can tell the Taoiseach that they will not feel they have been heard, and they will not feel they matter to his Government.

This budget is disgracefully silent on the needs of renters. There is nothing in the budget to bring down sky-high rents or prevent renters from being evicted. What we got was a billion for landlords and zero for renters. Sinn Féin would reintroduce a ban on notices to quit and evictions, cut rents and ensure no rent hikes for three years. That is the kind of direct action that renters needed in this budget. Instead, this Government has hung renters out to dry once again. The reality is that what was announced yesterday for housing was simply a blueprint for more of the same. It will ensure that the housing crisis created by Fianna Fáil, and deepened by Fine Gael, will continue. It will guarantee that the struggles of those couples, those hopeless families and those exploited young workers will go on and on. That is not acceptable.

The pandemic has shown that the model of childcare provision being followed by the Government is not working and that a re-imagining of how childcare services are provided in this State is urgent and essential. Yet, there is no plan to improve childcare services in the budget. There is nothing for families paying the equivalent of a second mortgage in fees, nothing for 27,000 childcare workers on low pay, nothing for service providers who have struggled to keep the lights on and the doors open during this crisis. Now is the time to start making childcare more affordable for working parents. Sinn Féin showed how fees could be slashed by two thirds over the course of two budgets but the Taoiseach chose to ignore that. Now was the time to deliver a living wage for childcare workers. Sinn Féin would have immediately increased the pay of childcare workers to €12.30 per hour. The Government also ignored this. This morning, parents, childcare workers and service providers will be looking at this budget with utter dismay and disappointment.

Our health service was buckling under immense pressure long before anybody uttered or heard the word "Covid-19". Decades of underinvestment and mismanagement by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and years of bad health policies have left our hospitals and our people cruelly exposed during this pandemic. That is these parties' legacy.

The failure to increase bed capacity, particularly intensive care bed capacity, is a damning indictment of both parties' periods leading government. The Government even failed to use the vital time that the lockdown in spring bought to get more ICU beds into the system. It was identified as far back as 2009 that we needed to double our ICU capacity, but we actually entered this pandemic with even fewer intensive care beds than we had more than a decade ago. If ever there was a time for a government to realise the importance of a strong public health service and

to invest properly in it, surely that time is now. Even during the throes of the greatest health emergency in living memory, however, the Taoiseach's Government again refuses to give our health service the resources it needs. It refuses to do what needs to be done.

It can be done. We can have a health service that meets the needs of our people. In our budget proposals, Sinn Féin showed how we would begin the work of transforming our health service. We would have ensured certainty for our hospitals by delivering a net increase of 1,110 new acute beds, 100 intensive care beds and 2,500 nurses. We would have provided the investment needed to tackle dangerously mounting treatment waiting lists and to provide adequately for mental health services and cancer care while meeting the challenges posed by the virus. It is utterly scandalous that this budget did not provide medical card coverage for terminally ill patients.

The Government's budget only guarantees a continued sense of crisis in our health service as we face the second wave of Covid-19. A net 41 additional ICU beds and an extra 500 acute beds are not even half of what is needed to turn things around and to ensure that our hospitals are ready and prepared for what is to come. Now, when we are in the grip of Covid-19, is the time to strengthen our health service and to turn the tide of years of doing things the wrong way. The Government again has failed to do the right thing and it will be ordinary people who will pay the price for that failure.

On top of this, the Government did not deliver pay equality for nurses. At this stage, that is shameful. While I am sure nurses appreciate the recognition and support, their superpowers do not extend to an ability to pay their bills or feed their families with applause.

It is not only nurses the Government has failed but other public sector workers who entered their posts after 2011. These workers, including section 39 workers, have stood on the front lines during this pandemic and it is high time that this Government stood up and delivered fair play and fair pay.

It is very telling that the move that has been made on pay is in the form of a miserly 10 cent increase in the minimum wage. This is an insult to the thousands of low-paid workers who kept us going through the darkest days of this pandemic. The Taoiseach will recall that almost overnight many of these workers were suddenly classified as essential. When the chips were down, it was not to highly paid bankers, corporate landlords or millionaire business executives whom we turned. In our time of need, we turned to those who stock shelves in supermarkets, delivery van drivers, supply chain workers and cleaners. The lesson was very quickly learned that these workers were always essential. They are the very workers who rely on a meaningful increase in the minimum wage to pay their bills, put food on the table and to pay rent or mortgage repayments. They are the very people who have been left behind by this budget.

It is lost on no one that all of this is happening at a time of pay bumps for Deputies and when the Taoiseach's Government has gone on a spree of hiring highly paid special advisers. The lack of fairness and genuine solidarity with people who have lost so much is truly staggering.

Only last week, I shared with the Taoiseach the poignant words of those who felt swept under the carpet by the Government during this pandemic and who found themselves on their knees. These were stories of citizens with disabilities, their families and their carers. We have to remember that the disability sector was grossly underfunded and under-resourced even before Covid-19. This emergency just brought things to a head.

I welcome the allocation of €100 million for disability services but it never should have taken this long to do right by these citizens. I commend them, their families, their carers and their service providers because they have taken a stand. People with disabilities were not only the forgotten people of this pandemic but also the people forgotten by government after government, in budget after budget. Much more needs to be done. This budget allocation must be the first step in ensuring that people with disabilities, their families and those who care for them are never forgotten again.

The allocation of €8 million for the Stardust inquest is also very welcome. It is something for which Sinn Féin has repeatedly called. These families have fought long and hard for four decades to achieve justice for their lost children. I am sure we all hope that they will see that day of justice through the inquests.

The absence of fairness in this budget is again seen in the Government's decision to hike the carbon tax by almost 30%. This is a lazy cop-out by the Taoiseach's Government. Instead of going after big polluters, it has decided to place the burden on workers and families. This tax applies to all the things people cannot do without, including petrol to get them to work, gas to cook their meals and home heating oil to keep them warm. It strips away the benefit of the modest increase to the fuel allowance.

Without affordable alternatives, a carbon tax will not save the planet and will not reduce our emissions. It will just make the lives of struggling workers even harder. Similarly, the increases in motor tax will affect those who can least afford a tax hike as well as those in rural areas who are heavily dependent on cars for transport. These are all the wrong calls and they display a real lack of progressive thinking in addressing the challenges facing our environment.

At the general election this issue of the State pension was of great concern, as the Taoiseach will know. We made it clear that every worker should have the right to retire at the age of 65 with their State pension, if he or she so wishes. That remains our position. As we face into an unemployment crisis, especially a youth unemployment crisis, it beggars belief that the Government would insist on 65-year-olds signing on for a jobseeker's payment or being forced out the door to work while waiting for their pension. That flies in the face of the values of the Irish people.

People at the age of 65 have earned the right to be treated with respect and dignity. It is their heavy lifting and their lifetime at work that enabled us to build our schools, hospitals and roads. They have put in their shifts and have paid their dues and their taxes. The Government should have done the right thing in this budget and restored the State pension age to 65. The pension age should never have been increased in the first place and this was an opportunity to end this disrespect shown to our older workers. I am disappointed that the Government did not take this opportunity. I wonder how the Taoiseach will explain this decision to people who have worked hard all their lives and who he continues to deprive of that basic right.

We have an entire generation of younger people who have known little beyond economic crises for most of their adult lives. First, there was an economic crash created by greedy bankers and now a pandemic has brought so many plans and aspirations to a halt. The challenges facing the class of 2020 echo those faced by the class of 2008, who stepped out of school or college and into a working life surrounded by a collapsing economy, crumbling job prospects and little hope for the future. That crisis was made all the worse by the policies of austerity and cuts inflicted on workers and families by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments.

Now, the young people of the austerity era, who saw their potential and hopes quenched by the recklessness of those at the top and by the failures of Governments, are joined by the young people of the pandemic. A decade ago, young people were scattered like wild geese to Australia, to America and to Canada. The reflexive action of Governments like the Taoiseach's Government has always been to export the problem of youth unemployment. Now, however, even that last resort of the lonely departure lounge is cut off because of the global nature of today's crisis. It is not possible to export the problem this time. The Taoiseach and the Government must face up to it with ambition and new ideas.

We must do much better by our young people, and we have to give them a future at home. There is a real risk that their opportunities and their chance at progress and prosperity will be swallowed up by the Government's poorly thought-out response to this pandemic. I refer to the danger that they will remain locked out of home ownership and locked out of decent jobs and careers, and that they will continue to pay extortionate rents or live at home with their parents into their 30s. Young people cannot afford a Government that repeats the disastrous mistakes of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the last decade. They want a future that is decent, safe and secure. They want a chance at making it. I think we can all agree that this is precisely what they deserve. Why, therefore, has there been no action from the Taoiseach's Government?

Young people will bear the brunt of the choices and mistakes made today. Where is the vision, the ambition and, more importantly, the plan to meet head-on the crisis of youth unemployment now facing Ireland? Where should our young people now turn for their sense of hope, their sense of confidence and their sense of purpose? They will not find it in this budget and they will not see it in this Government. The failure to deliver a strategy for dealing with youth unemployment is a monumental mistake that will come back to haunt our society. Let us not forget the seanfhocal: mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Young people, when properly supported and encouraged, can be and will be the engine of our economic and social recovery. We will not stand by and allow the potential of another generation of young people to be wasted. We need action now to secure their futures.

This should have been a budget that laid the foundations of a stronger, fairer and better Ireland. It should have been a budget to provide relief for workers and families and resilience for our public services. It should have been the start of a recovery for our economy and a plan to rebuild. Instead, what has been delivered is a stopgap budget, one that will see us standing still instead of moving forward. We said that the great danger now was not that the Government would do too much, but that it would do too little. We said that the Ireland that emerges from this crisis will be determined by the decisions taken now. This is not only a time for big spending to achieve short-term outcomes, but also a time for big investment in the things that really matter to ordinary people. It is an opportunity, amid all the volatility and uncertainty, to reset our society and rebuild our economy in a way that ensures our people are never again so badly exposed. This is the opportunity that the Government has decided not to take.

The Government has passed it up for more of the same, at a time when more of the same was the very last thing our people needed. Workers and families are crying out for a fresh start. After a decade in which the banks, landlords and vested interests were prioritised by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, this budget should have been the budget where, finally, the well-being of ordinary people was put first. The Government's refusal to do this reminds us that we need change like we have never needed it before. The pandemic has not dampened the appetite for change that was so strong last February; it has, in fact, strengthened it. Things are difficult and gloomy right now, but I will never give up on the belief that workers and families can have a

good, prosperous and safe life in the aftermath of this crisis. Giving up is not a runner. The goal of building a stronger, fairer and better Ireland still shines brightly in these difficult times. It is such a pity and such a wasted opportunity that this budget fails to advance that vision of our country's future.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Yesterday was a truly historic occasion. It was the first budget announced outside of this House and the largest budget in the history of the State. It was also, however, a missed opportunity to make the most of a crisis. We have often heard that phrase used. I refer to using the great deal of funding available to the Government to transform Ireland. The Government has borrowed a huge amount of money, but there will not be major change for real people watching this debate. I welcome many aspects of this budget, and I have said so publicly. Unlike some others, I will not engage in being completely negative. There are aspects of the budget concerning businesses which I really welcome. I also welcome the ring-fenced funding for some groups, particularly those with disabilities, whom I have spoken about at some length here. I am not sure, however, that this budget will have much impact on the lives of ordinary people. In fact, it could be regressive.

This time last year, the biggest worry we faced was the threat of a no-deal Brexit, a threat which still hangs over us. The onset of Covid-19, however, has been a major disruptor, and being a disruptor means that it can actually have a positive impact as well. Things that were unthinkable last year have become reality this year. We have all heard the harrowing stories of loved ones lost, livelihoods changed and people struggling. The pandemic has exposed for all of us aspects of Ireland that were hidden underneath the carpet and out of sight. As my colleague, Deputy Nash, has detailed so incisively, the pandemic has proved beyond doubt that Ireland is a country with a two-tier health service inside a two-tier economy. Everybody has known for decades about our two-tier health service and how some people are being treated based on their incomes and not on their medical needs. All Deputies know the impact that this has had on the lives of people, and how they are forced to wait for treatment for years, with their loved ones anxiously hoping for a positive outcome.

The Labour Party has been campaigning for years for this wrong to be addressed, and we are now calling for a new social contract in Ireland. I encourage the Taoiseach to look at this idea. We have an opportunity to change Ireland and the Taoiseach has an opportunity to change Ireland. In the middle of this global pandemic, yesterday's massive stimulus budget was the greatest chance that any Irish Government has ever had to finally move towards a universal, public, single-tier health system, and to finally do what Dr. Noël Browne tried to do some 70 years ago – to create an Irish national health service.

What did the Government do yesterday? Did it take the radical steps needed as we face the most challenging winter that our health system has ever faced? The answer, obviously, is that it did not. The consequences for people who have suffered because of this state of affairs will be serious and, potentially, long-term. I refer to patients who cannot be seen to because they are on waiting lists and health workers who are stressed beyond breaking point, while doing their utmost to provide services to the public. They have all been let down by this budget. They do not need any more applause or kind words. They need safe staffing and resources. The collective mental health of our health workers cannot afford to be sold a pup now when it comes to increasing staffing numbers. I listened to the Minister for Health's press conference today and he has to deliver.

The Government has claimed it will deliver an additional 1,146 acute beds and hire an addi-

tional 16,000 staff next year. The Taoiseach knows I will monitor this matter month by month. Some 12,500 of those staff have to be in by April, according to a commitment given in this House by the Minister for Health. Will that be done? That is 3,500 from April to December and 8,500 very soon. We must remember those figures because I think people are hoping they will be lost. They will not be lost. I will remind the Government of them all the time. I doubt they are achievable. The best example we have of the health system dealing with large numbers of new recruits recently was the Be On Call for Ireland campaign, and we all know where that ended up.

The Government says it will increase the number of ICU beds from around 280 to 321 by the end of 2021. The real issue here is that we are at about 53% of our total requirement of ICU beds, so we basically have to double them. We needed to use the last few months to do that. We are not going to deliver and we should have been using that time. We might get to a very bad place like the North, which is going to struggle over the next few weeks. We should bite the bullet and do what the Labour Party has proposed, which is to buy private capacity hospitals outright. It would not be a panacea but it would help. Instead of throwing bad money after good by renting them, we should just buy them. Trust me, they are available.

The amount of money being set aside for new consultants simply does not add up. I have done the figures. I listened to the Minister today and gave him a chance to explain them. No Minister in the history of Ireland has ever made so many commitments to consultants. I keep reminding him of it. I would love for him to deliver on those commitments but I cannot see it based on these figures.

The extra 1,250 community care beds are welcome. As the Taoiseach knows, I have a deep concern about how they can be delivered on time and with the staffing in place. On non-Covid healthcare, I am still waiting for the comparisons between last year and this year, three weeks later. If we cannot deliver on those figures, the beds and the staffing outlined in this budget, we are going to have very difficult conversations about how we prioritise people over the coming months.

I welcome what has been provided for mental health and disability, though I have a real issue with the provision for disabilities. I have spoken an awful lot about sections 38 and 39 and my God, that money needs to be targeted. I am not saying that is all the Government's fault. I think the Taoiseach knows what I am saying. It needs to be targeted. I met many people regarding that again this week.

This next issue is within the Taoiseach's gift when it comes to healthcare. There is a man watching this today whose name is John Wall. Others know him as well. I dare say he is a friend of mine at this stage, after a number of years. He is from Ennis in Clare and he is terminally ill. The Taoiseach knows who he is. It is downright mean that commitments were made by the Minister for Health in Fianna Fáil's election manifesto and in the programme for Government to give medical cards to people with terminal illnesses. Only €600,000 would deal with this issue because many people who are terminally ill have medical cards anyway so that would deal with the rest of them. I implore the Taoiseach to please sort this out. These people are terminally ill. Nobody in Ireland, and certainly no one in this House, would dispute the fact that they deserve not to be worrying about medical cards and medical bills. That is the one small ask I make of the Taoiseach. I spoke to Mr. Wall last night and he is very upset about this.

I do not just have questions about health. I have issues with the Government's housing fig-

ures as well. I respect the ambition of what is being put out there but I am just not sure if these targets are deliverable in reality. I listened to what the Tánaiste said this morning and I do not believe they are deliverable in 2021. I also think the help to buy scheme is a farce. It acts as an incentive to drive up prices and facilitates the speculation of developers. All anecdotal and statistical evidence shows that. That scheme is not going to be a success.

It is clear to anybody who studied the detail of yesterday's budget that both Fianna Fáil and the Green Party were quite passive when it came to the actual deliverance of the budget. It comes across as being very much Fine Gael oriented. There was a long list of commitments to businesses but very little for workers. We know about the PUP not being restored and that a range of tax breaks were left in but there is very little for actual workers and very little to help people maintain their incomes. It is unacceptable that the Government could not deal with the minimum wage and only accepted the recommendation of a 10 cent increase.

What we have in Ireland is not just a two-tier health system but a two-tier economy. That is no longer in dispute. Every economic indicator, from the Central Bank to the Department of Finance's own projections, paints a picture of two radically different economies in our Republic and two radically different experiences for the people in those economies. The first economy, which is centred on the multinational sector, particularly pharmaceutical and IT companies, is thankfully thriving. Unlike others, I welcome and support that. Such is the growth in this sector, with its many well-paying jobs, that in spite of the shutdown of many parts of the economy this year, GDP is only expected to decline by somewhere between 0.4% and 2.5%. That is a phenomenally small contraction considering everything that has happened. However, that does not tell the full story, because the second, domestic economy, is on its knees, with the Central Bank estimating that domestic demand will fall by at least 7.1% this year. The bottom line is that the official numbers are now indisputable and are showing something the Labour Party has been highlighting for many years. Official Ireland is now finally, at long, long last, waking up to the fact that we have a two-tier economy in our country. There is one economy for the well paid, the comfortable and the well connected and another for low paid workers, struggling families, young families and stressed out citizens. One economy has been relatively well insulated from the effects of the pandemic, while the other has not. Is it any wonder that we have a two-tier health system when it sits on top of a two-tier economy? It does not take a genius to work out which tier of the health service lower paid workers and low-income families are most likely to have to use, or to work out which one of those two, on either side of that breakdown, are suffering the most during Covid. It is always the poorer. The statistics show all of this.

We had an opportunity in this budget to use the disruptor of Covid in a positive way to deal with the issue of childcare. We have a fascinating situation where the owners of privatised childcare, in the mainly privatised childcare system in our country, are not very happy. The parents who have to use the service are not very happy. The workers who went to college for years, who have third level degrees and are being paid under €12 an hour are not very happy. The Government had a capacity this time around to begin the process of reforming and dealing with that situation. It was a golden opportunity which is now gone out the window. We have to invest in our children and our childcare provision. This was the opportunity to act as a disruptor and it is now gone.

If one takes any family in the country with a couple, possibly working in retail, who have young children, one could ask what this budget will do for them. Will they be able to buy a house after this? No. Will their childcare costs in any way go down? No. Will their incomes in any way be higher? No. This is actually a regressive budget for that couple with one child,

or a couple of children. The Taoiseach need not bother shaking his head. Do the statistics.

**The Taoiseach:** The statistics are there.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Yes, do it out.

**The Taoiseach:** They are independently done.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Do the statistics out. Put them out on a page and show me how they are better off. How in the name of God can that young couple with one or two children living in Dublin, working in low-paid jobs, potentially retail or something similar, be better off? Do not start this craic of being thankful for having jobs because that is not acceptable to me. That is why this budget is a missed opportunity.

There are some good things here that I would support with regard to business opportunities and supports for businesses. I previously worked in Fáilte Ireland. I appreciate that industry and how difficult it is. The €10 million for Cork Airport and Shannon Airport is a pittance, considering that Shannon Airport is losing €1.3 million a week in revenue, but I support the measures in general.

However, the real people watching, such as the old age pensioner living in a council house in Rearcross, bringing in a bag of coal in the evening, are worried today. There is no change for the young couple with kids who are trying to get on in life. That is why, despite the scale of this budget, this is a regressive budget for real people and working people who have to make ends meet. It is not proportionate and it is not fair. That is an indictment of where the Government's priorities are in the biggest pandemic we have seen in this country in over 100 years.

*Sitting suspended at 3.02 p.m. and resumed at 3.22 p.m.*

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** When we all knocked on doors in January and February this year, Covid-19 would have been the last thing we thought of. Job losses were not a predominant matter raised at doors and nobody knew what a pandemic unemployment payment or a temporary wage subsidy was. We did not think we would be spending €1 billion on personal protective equipment and most people did not know what it was. It has been a very strange year and most people cannot see beyond it now. As we discuss this budget, it would have been very difficult at the start of the year to imagine Brexit being pushed into second place.

This budget is for what will happen in 2021. When the Minister for Finance opened proceedings yesterday, he focused in his first few lines on the prudence of recent years. He argued that this permitted this Government to borrow during the pandemic. I will focus on this aspect as it should be challenged.

Fiscal conservatism or prudence has dominated, meaning we underinvested in public services like health, housing, childcare, disability services and so many more. When the pandemic hit, for example, we saw how exposed we were with the number of available ICU beds and hospital beds in general. Getting a short-term fix was very expensive, although it had to be done. There was also a knock-on effect on the economy. It is quite clear this underinvestment or failure to invest in the solution that is Sláintecare was far from prudent. It would be fair to say it was reckless.

We can see the way housing has been funded, with large sums of money being paid through temporary measures like the housing assistance payment, as opposed to dealing with the cost of

land and embarking on a large-scale housing building programme of social housing, producing houses that are both affordable to rent and buy, with knock-on consequences for individuals and the economy. Again, I ask if that is prudent.

When the pandemic hit and we went into lockdown, those who could work from home were being advised to do so. Suddenly, childcare became a major issue, although it had been an issue for decades. Our failure to build a sustainable system of childcare that is child centred and affordable was significantly exposed, but yesterday's budget did little to reverse those policies. If we are to rebuild better after this pandemic has passed, different political choices and philosophies will be needed.

I will also speak about prudence in the context of borrowing. Our ability to borrow is about recognising that we are in a changed environment within the EU. There has been significant underinvestment in infrastructure in the past ten years in particular, with everything from broadband to public transport. The pandemic and the change in the way the EU functions is an opportunity to reverse this. Italy, with a much lower credit rating than Ireland, has this year sold three-year debt with a negative interest rate. There has been no difference in how EU supports have been given based on previous performance.

In yesterday's budget we included less than €600 million for capital infrastructure. We could have borrowed €1.5 billion to more than triple that capital expenditure to more than €2.1 billion to fund long-term investment in infrastructure. We have a huge amount of catching up to do in such investment. This is an opportunity to do it and we should and need to take it. We need to do it to catch up on what should have been done but also to provide good quality jobs.

The European Central Bank has provided €1.4 trillion in money to governments via the pandemic emergency purchase programme. Fiscal responsibility is not just about balancing books or fiscal conservatism. It is about having ambition for our country. It is about borrowing and spending wisely but getting value for money in return for wise investments that we must make. It is responsible to borrow and invest in our country, and yesterday, although the Government did that, it did the bare minimum.

In ten years we will look back at 2020 and realise that although it was an awful year, it was also a year that could have been a turning point. Yesterday we got 66 permanent ICU beds, which is welcome, but we know we need 250 of those beds. We saw little change in a housing policy that has not worked and which is wasteful and costly. Included in the package were long leases of up to 25 years at market rents, which would be equivalent to paying a monthly mortgage, and the developer will own the house at the end of that 25-year period. It just does not make sense.

The temporary wage subsidy scheme was introduced as part of the Covid-19 supports and it was the correct approach when the virus hit. I absolutely acknowledge that. It is really important we keep people connected to their jobs if those jobs can be sustained. The wage subsidy and pandemic unemployment payments have been essential, but the rates were cut in September and it is proposed that they be cut again in January, with the termination of the scheme at the end of March. This not only creates an added layer of fear for those who are already struggling but it will have a big impact on the spend in the domestic economy.

Those who are being supported through these payments are not putting the money in savings accounts but rather they are spending in the domestic economy. The proposed changes are

short-sighted and damaging and they could lead to further jobs losses in the domestic sector. The failure to provide assistance by continuing with the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment or benchmarking social welfare rates against minimum essential costs of living has left many people anxious for the future.

The timeline for the support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, SURE, programme indicates that we will not be included in the first tranche of European Commission funding. On 7 October the Commission presented the European Council with proposals to grant fiscal support to 16 member states via the SURE instrument. Ireland would be eligible to recoup a substantial majority of the expenditure already incurred under the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme. This was confirmed to me in reply to a parliamentary question. This scheme is designed to support member states with efforts to protect workers and jobs, such as short-term work schemes, and to support some health-related measures. I asked about our application to this scheme over the summer months and was advised that the application was only at the preparation stage. Why was this the case?

The establishment of a €3.4 billion recovery fund promises additional resources to fund Government decisions next year. In one breath the fund is described as “targeted” and in the next it is “flexible”. I do not understand what that means. It cannot be both. None of us has a crystal ball, but we can already see which sectors will be most impacted. Young people are over-represented among recipients of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. They are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be on the payment’s lower rate. I would have expected to see some specifics on the approach to be taken.

The State is driven by two economies. One is composed of multinationals, including the IT and pharmaceutical sectors, which are doing extremely well. Meanwhile the domestic economy is really struggling. Corporation tax rates have performed well, although they were categorised as “volatile” by the Comptroller and Auditor General in 2018. While the 12.5% rate is very favourable, many firms pay only a fraction of that. When the Committee of Public Accounts examined corporation tax receipts in 2018, our attention was drawn to the fact that 70% of all corporation tax is paid by the top 100 companies. Some 37% of corporation tax is paid by just ten companies. This clearly demonstrates the risk of our reliance on this tax take, which could begin to evaporate. Changes at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, are inevitable. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, acknowledged this yesterday and stated that such changes would present challenges for Ireland by reducing the profits taxable here. Anticipated reduction in corporation tax revenue from that sector makes it all the more important to focus on building the indigenous economy to mitigate that risk. Doing so will build the resilience we know we will need. I expected a big focus on that in yesterday’s risk assessment.

The performance of income tax during the pandemic, despite the high rates of unemployment, reflects the unequal effect the pandemic has had on workers. Job losses have primarily hit lower-paid and precarious workers in the hospitality, retail, entertainment and travel sectors. Fewer than half of the jobs lost this year will be recovered next year. Just as we need strategies for job retention, we need to be ambitious about job recovery. Investment in infrastructure could play a much stronger role. That form of investment is prudent.

The reductions in VAT for the hospitality and tourism sector will no doubt be welcomed by that sector, albeit with doors closed it is very difficult to see how that will have an immediate impact. We cannot tell what will happen in the medium term. Other supports may well be re-

quired. There is no question that the sector requires support, but there must be a *quid pro quo* in the form of an improvement in working conditions in that sector, which is characterised by poor pay and conditions.

The continued failure to introduce a national sick pay scheme has left the most vulnerable workers in Irish society facing further anxiety about their future. They are still completely reliant on their employers' willingness to pay sick pay. In the sectors most affected by the virus, a small minority of employers do so. Workers cannot be forced to choose between remaining at home when they are ill and putting food on the table. As well as being a detriment to workers' well-being and livelihoods, this is a glaring weakness of the Government's Covid-19 strategy. To see the damaging effects of this policy we do not need to look much further than the meat industry, in which an estimated 95% of workers have no access to a sick pay scheme and outbreaks of the virus have had catastrophic consequences.

The sectors which have been most affected by the pandemic, that is, hospitality, tourism, events, etc., are heavily reliant on young workers and precarious working conditions. Young workers can no longer turn to the sectors they have traditionally relied on for employment. Youth employment is now at 36.5%, with under-25s accounting for 21% of Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment receipts despite constituting only 11% of the workforce. Ireland's young workers were locked out of secure employment and life choices following the last recession. There can be no return to that kind of normality. The normality of 2019, when 80% of our young people could only avail of precarious employment, represents a failure we must reverse. We can no longer export the crisis of youth unemployment and rely on other nations to provide young people with the opportunity and hope the State has consistently failed to offer.

Covid-19 means that many cannot see beyond 2020. Not only will Covid-19 continue into 2021; Brexit is also a looming concern. There is no doubt that there will be long-term consequences. International tourism was a really important component of recovery from the last recession. It is difficult to see how that could return in the medium term. We have to recognise that we are an island nation. Yesterday's budget included some money for ports and airports, but the 140,000 jobs directly and indirectly supported by the aviation sector and the estimated €8.7 billion of our GDP attributable to international tourism were not even referenced. This sector must be allowed to recover or at least survive. I would like to hear some specific proposals in that regard, because we will need our airlines and tourism sector.

Finally, despite a projected deficit of the order of €20 billion, Covid-19 has not reordered the priorities of this budget in the way people have changed theirs. That is the biggest missed opportunity in this budget. People want quality public services and they want their infrastructure brought up to scratch. They want secure jobs and they want inequality to be dealt with.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The devil is always in the detail with budgets. Despite the headline-grabbing figures for this budget, digging into the detail reveals some very severe problems. I was absolutely gobsmacked to get an email yesterday from a young woman who is a science graduate pursuing a postgraduate qualification in public health. She applied for a job as a contact tracer and received a contract from CPL, an agency. It was a zero-hours contract with no sick pay that could be terminated at any point. The hours offered were not guaranteed even on a weekly basis. People need to understand how shocking that is. Whatever view one has about the current situation and the strategies relating to Covid-19 that are to be pursued, we simply cannot get back to anything like normality without having a professional, well-resourced and well-staffed contact tracing regime. That is key to moving beyond lockdowns. In spite of

that, this is how science graduates and those studying public health are being treated. They are being offered hire them and fire them zero-hour contracts with no sick pay and at pathetic salary levels. It is a shocking disgrace. Needless to say, the graduate to whom I referred, and many of her fellow graduates, are unlikely to take those jobs. Who would work under those conditions? Instead, the graduates are looking at other employment possibilities.

This is not just absolutely shameful treatment of people whom we desperately need in order to combat Covid-19, it is also subverting the public health effort. It is risking lives and public health to try to fight Covid-19 on the back of cheap labour with rotten conditions for the workers who are operating on the front line. It is shameful and beggars belief.

Of course, it is not the first time we have seen such a situation. Several months ago, I revealed on foot of a nurse contacting me that CPL, the company that is offering these zero-hour contracts to contact tracers, was offering rotten contracts to nurses and other healthcare workers who offered in the Be on Call for Ireland initiative. Those workers bravely volunteered to fight Covid-19 only to discover they were being offered hire them and fire them contracts. The nurse who contacted me contracted Covid-19 after being employed via CPL. She was not given sick pay. That is how the contact tracers whom we desperately need will be treated. God knows how the testing people are being treated. More generally, the penny-pinching approach to recruitment to all areas of the Covid-19 response threatens to completely derail and undermine the response we need to deal with the pandemic. It is an absolute shocker.

The contract states that there is no obligation on the company to provide the worker with work and there is no obligation on the worker to accept the work offered. It states that the company gives no guarantee that hours will be offered to the worker on a weekly basis. Who on earth would take a job like that? Is that how we wish for people to be treated? It is unbelievable that people being recruited for possibly the most important job in terms of dealing with Covid-19 are being offered hire them and fire them contracts. I thank Fergal Blaney and *The Mirror*. The newspaper contacted the HSE to confirm these facts and is putting the story out as I speak. It was shocked that this could be true, but the HSE confirmed all the facts.

This situation is absolutely disgraceful. Is it any wonder that the State has failed consistently to ramp up the health service or the number of nurses, doctors and public health teams we desperately need to recruit when it is treating healthcare workers in that manner? The pay apartheid system whereby those recruited after 2012 are seen as being worth less than those recruited previously is undermining the State's ability to recruit healthcare workers we desperately need to man ICU and acute beds and to staff the contact tracing regime.

On other aspects of the health response, I was shocked to read the small print of the health budget. One would think additional money would be put into health research in the health budget when we desperately need scientific research in the area of developing vaccines and therapies, but not a single extra cent was put into health-related research. That is shocking. The overall budget for Covid-19 response in 2021 is €8 billion less than that in 2020. In other words, the Government is gambling, without evidence or basis, that it will be able to get away with spending less in 2021 to combat Covid-19 in spite of the fact that the rate of infection is going through the roof. It is clear the Government has no strategy to deal with Covid-19. If it were to have such a strategy, that would critically depend on contact tracing and testing, but this is how the Government is going about that aspect.

The Ministers who were present earlier have left the Chamber. I refer to the lack of supports

for taxi drivers and arts workers. Why on earth would the Government put a cap of €120 on the income people can earn over and above the PUP? That will affect people who have run up costs over the past year and have had no income. Now the Government is putting a cap on the amount they can earn over and above the income support, which means there is a disincentive to work. A taxi driver asked me what he is meant to do when he gets to €120. He wondered whether he should tell the customer to get out of the car. It is madness. We need real supports and grants to cover the ongoing costs of those groups, but that has not been delivered in the budget, which is typical of a budget that short-changed the Covid-19 response and the workers whose livelihoods have been hit hardest by the pandemic.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I wish to deal with the issues of the PUP, training and internships and make a point about the Debenhams situation. Before I do so, I point out that the Government has taken a Keynesian turn in the budget. There is significantly increased State intervention in the economy and society. In taking these actions, the Government is in lockstep with capitalist governments globally which are boosting state intervention in order to sustain capitalism itself. In the hands of these governments, including the Irish Government, those Keynesian policies are likely to turn into their opposite within a couple of years, with a bill being presented to working people in the form of cuts, tax increases and the holding down of living standards. Of course, there is an alternative, which is to present the bill elsewhere and to tax the super wealthy in society. I have no confidence whatsoever that the Government will be prepared to do that. In order for the bill to be presented to the super wealthy, the Government would have to be removed from office and replaced by a new Government that does not include Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. We need a left government which is under pressure from a movement from below and puts the issue of taxing the super wealthy onto the agenda. I have no doubt that if and when that happens that there will be real resistance from the wealthy in society. That would open up a contested space where there could be a real intensification of class struggle within society. I believe a movement from below could put such a government under real pressure to go further than just raising the issue of taxing the rich. It could pressure it to implement socialist measures that would strike blows at the dictatorship of the market in Irish society. I look forward to those debates and struggles which I am confident will take place.

In the budget, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, allocated €200 million for training, skills development, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies, job search and assistance measures. Let us remember what happened with one of the last such placement schemes, the infamous JobBridge scheme introduced in 2011. Indecon stated that 59% of those who participated in JobBridge did not even complete their internships, while fewer than 20% of participants got jobs immediately after the internship with their host company. A famous sketch about JobBridge on the “Republic of Telly” programme was a spoof on the Hollywood movie “12 Years a Slave”. Is the Government preparing to go back down the same road now with the masses of young people who are unemployed? I am concerned about that and I have questions about it. I raised a question yesterday about plans for internships where people would be paid €229, or €26 above the jobseeker’s allowance rate, for 24 hours of work. In other words, €1.08 an hour would be paid by the company. I have increased concerns now after doing a bit of research overnight. When I look at the board of Skillnet Ireland, which is being given such an important role in this, I note that there are seven representatives on the board from the business community, three representatives of employees and three officials from the Department, which means there is a majority for the business interests. One of the people on the board of the company is Mr. Ian Talbot, who has been the chief executive of Chambers Ireland for the past 12 years. Many members of the chamber of which he is chief executive

have exploited the JobBridge scheme to try to get cheap labour from young people. This is an issue that I will be watching carefully over the next while.

The Tánaiste stated on “Morning Ireland” this morning that reducing the PUP to €250 in February, as the Government had planned, may have to be reviewed and that funds are set aside in the budget for such a review if the virus is on the up at that point. That does not go far enough. The payment of the PUP should not only be a possibility, as per that comment. The PUP needs to be increased back to €350 per week. If that was seen as a reasonable and necessary rate in March of this year, nothing fundamental has changed in that regard. It should be restored to €350.

I watched “Virgin Media News at 12.30” and saw the reports from the picket lines at Patrick Street in Cork and Mahon Point in Cork. I listened carefully to the workers and their opinion on the ruling from the High Court yesterday which gave an injunction to KPMG against protests outside the 11 stores. The workers interviewed made it crystal clear that they are in the business of effective picketing, by which they mean stopping the vans and trucks from leaving the shops with the stock which they believe rightly is the basis for their redundancy payment which they deserve of right. I believe that the workers who were interviewed on “Virgin Media News at 12.30” represent the views, opinions and sentiment of the overwhelming majority of Debenhams workers who are prepared to carry out effective picketing. If that means scandalously that they are dragged in front of a High Court judge and if that means that they are scandalously threatened with jail, I believe that those workers are of a growing opinion that they should stand for what is right, fight for their claim for decent redundancy and not be bullied by court injunctions in that regard. They are clear that they will place the blame firmly at the feet of the Government, in particular, the Fianna Fáil Party and the Taoiseach, given the many missed opportunities that they have had to resolve this dispute. The budget is an opportunity for the Government. All it need do is set aside €10 million to settle this dispute and the just claim of the workers. Failure to do so will result in a very difficult situation for the workers but, I am increasingly of the opinion, a very difficult situation indeed for the Government.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I am sharing time with Deputy Fitzpatrick. I was in the House earlier this morning broadly welcoming many of the outlines of the budget but highlighting to the Taoiseach the need to make sure that we see fairness and equity in it. Before I go on to other parts of my contribution, I too will reference the Debenhams workers. I heard the Taoiseach’s comments earlier this morning. We need to have some de-escalation of the situation. I am on the record here previously as saying that it appears a tactical insolvency was arrived at. This Government probably needs to atone for the mistakes of the previous Government, which did not close the door after Clerys, probably did not implement the Duffy Cahill report fully and did not look at legislation that would stop companies from moving assets out of the reach of workers who had a pay agreement. Unfortunately, it was not provisioned in the accounts. That is something the trade unions should have a look at in the future. Had that been done, maybe there would be security for the workers there now. That being said, in my own city of Waterford, people gave huge support to Debenhams and to the workers and we still do. I feel very sorry for their situation and I feel very sorry for the escalation that is putting them up in the High Court and is basically criminalising their just call for some redress to their situation. I would ask that senior Ministers would look to try and see, as I say, some de-escalation and some exceptional activity for this one. I know we do not want to create exceptions for everything, but in this case, I think we should do it. It is the right, moral and fair thing to do.

In general terms, I welcome the provisions of the budget. I think most Deputies in the

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House would have to welcome the general breadth and scale of the budget announced yesterday. I would agree it is a wartime budget. On that basis, we have to do exceptional things.

In terms of some of the exceptional provisions of the budget, I welcome the €900 million commitment to local authority rates. That will be a big help to local authorities in the coming year. It certainly helped those who have had the rates waiver. It will help to straighten out the accounts of some of the local authorities as they try to plan for the coming year in dramatically different economic circumstances.

The €10.1 billion capital fund is a certain game changer but I asked the Taoiseach here this morning whether the south east would see its 8.89% *pro rata* capital share of it because we have not seen it previously. I would again put on the record of the House that the previous capital tracker from 2018 to 2022 of large capital infrastructure projects in the State saw the south east get €97 million, Cork-Kerry get €902 million and Dublin get €5 billion - a *per capita* share 15 times greater than that of the south east. Such disparity in funding on capital infrastructural investment cannot continue into the future, particularly if a programme for Government will speak about regional rebalancing and fairness.

I welcome also the €100 million for disability services. Those who have been in particularly dire circumstances this year include parents with children who have special needs and those who are looking for respite and cannot get it. I welcome the funding that the Government has agreed to.

In terms of some of the contingency funding for business, I would point out that this year in the restart grant, the Government announced one restart grant funding date and subsequently announced a second tranche of money. When it did so, it moved the goalposts on the first application date which meant that many companies which had intended to apply for the first one had not submitted their applications in time and were only able to claim the second tranche. I do not want to say it is a little devious, but it is bordering on that area. This is something we must not do in the future. We must signal that if we are to make grant moneys available to businesses, it must be clear and straightforward how they are to claim them.

In terms of Revenue filings, there should be a deferral on some of the strictures of filings this year. The Companies Registration Office, CRO, is not exercising discretion in the implementation of filing accounts. For instance, companies that must do a CRO filing before 13 September will have to file their accounts before 31 October. There is pandemonium out there among ex-

perts in this area who are doing the filing of accounts, such as accountants, but the  
4 o'clock failure to file on the date means one loses one's exemption from audited accounts.

In other words, for the following two years the CRO requires one's company to provide audited accounts. That imposes extra costs on small businesses at a time when they are prostrate at what has happened to them in terms of the economy. I am asking that some exemption be given for those companies this year in order that they do not lose their exemption from audited accounts the following year in terms of late filing.

The same is also true in terms of tax office deadlines in October where companies that claimed the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, must show Revenue how they arrived at their turnover being down. In fact, Revenue gave them an opportunity of five days - not even five working days - in which to make those returns.

Forbearance must be practised by the Department.

I refer to the tax warehousing scheme and those with a 31 October filing date. Will the surcharge be waived for those filing for income tax who apply for the next tax warehousing? That has not been made clear. Corporation tax liabilities do not appear eligible for debt warehousing which should be looked at.

I generally welcome the announcements of funding for health and education, particularly when we are so challenged in healthcare. Recently, I raised industry getting access to NPHET. We can do much more to implement different protocols for fast testing and tracing. That could be the game changer in keeping our economy open and not having to use a circuit-breaker lockdown. Unfortunately we have wasted months when peer countries are implementing these initiatives. We should implement them too.

The 9% VAT rate in hospitality is very welcome and I expect it will do something. I ask that the Government also consider a voucher scheme for the many businesses that are not trading at the moment and cannot benefit from the reduction in VAT. A voucher scheme would incentivise people going out and spending and supporting local businesses.

On balance, I welcome the budget. I hope to see equity and fairness in the capital allocations and service budgets. As a member of the Regional Group, I support and welcome what has been done.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** The background to yesterday's budget is unprecedented and never before in our lifetime have we faced such challenges. This time last year we could not have imagined the situation we face today. I have always said I will support this Government when I feel it is doing the correct thing but I will not support it when I feel it is not.

The Government is faced with a very challenging situation. From an economic perspective we face two enormous challenges, Covid and Brexit and I am pleased that the budget is framed mainly around them. As spokesperson for tourism, arts, culture, Gaeltacht and sport for the Regional Group, I am pleased that the devastating effect of Covid was recognised in yesterday's budget. The tourism and hospitality sector directly employed more than 260,000 people pre-Covid. Those jobs were spread throughout the country and were of enormous benefit to the many towns and villages like Dundalk and Carlingford. I welcome the decision to set aside €55 million for a tourism business support scheme and €5 million for tourism product development. I urge the Minister to ensure that these supports are available immediately for the many businesses directly affected. I would not like to see a situation whereby the supports are in place but access to them is slow and cumbersome.

Covid has had a devastating effect on the arts sector. Many venues throughout the country lie empty which has affected both the artists and those businesses that provided many services to the venues and artists. As such, I welcome the allocation of €50 million in live entertainment supports and the increase in funding for the Arts Council to €130 million. This sector needs our support to get it back up and running and while the support announced yesterday is welcomed this sector will need additional supports the longer this pandemic stays with us.

I am chairman of the Louth GAA county board. I know at first hand the effects Covid has had on our communities and have seen the heroic efforts of our GAA clubs to support those most vulnerable during this crisis. Many clubs in Louth provided the most vulnerable with basic essential services during the lockdown, collecting their grocery shopping, collecting essential medicines and many other vital supports. We must recognise the service that these clubs

provided and now support those same clubs which in a lot of cases are in financial difficulty. I welcome the Minister's announcement of an additional €36 million in funding for Sport Ireland and €7 million for large-scale sports infrastructure. In Louth, the whole GAA family is working tremendously hard to deliver a new county ground in Dundalk. This is an extremely important project for Louth GAA and one that I expect the Government will help us get over the line.

Sport plays a vital part in the lives of many people both young and old. It is a vital outlet for those still lucky enough to be able to participate in it from both a mental and physical point of view. Sport plays a vital role in the mental well-being of those who participate. I have seen this over the years in my time as a player, manager and chairman. Sport is also a vital social outlet for those who enjoy going to matches, with the familiar tradition of heading off to the match, meeting up with friends and foes and the robust discussions that take place prior to, during and after the match.

All of this has unfortunately disappeared this year. The Government must do all in its power to ensure that sporting events and activities can be resumed as quickly as possible when it is safe to do so.

The hospitality sector will welcome the VAT reduction from 13.5% to 9% but what benefit is this to businesses which are forced to close? If a business is closed it will get no benefit from a VAT reduction, even if other schemes announced yesterday like the tourism support scheme will help those businesses who are forced to close. The tourism sector has always relied heavily on the overseas visitor and as we in Louth have seen ourselves but this year we have seen a lot more people stay in this country. This was one of the few good things to emerge from this terrible pandemic. I want the Government to build on this and put in place measures that will support holidaying in Ireland. The tax credit announced earlier in the year is simply not workable. It is too cumbersome and has too much red tape. We need a simpler solution and money in people's hands to be used to holiday here is one. We must make it easy to use and accessible. There was a very successful scheme in the North where food had a 50% price reduction on certain days and up to a certain price. We should consider something like this.

Yesterday, the Minister said that our experience of Covid-19 has reminded us all that our health service is a core public good, important not only for medical services but a bedrock of the nation's social and economic well-being. I fully agree. Many Governments have tried to grasp the challenges of the health service and many have failed. It is now time to develop and implement Sláintecare. We have seen time and again that throwing money at a problem will not solve it. From dealing with the issue of the Louth County Hospital in Dundalk, I know we could benefit by increasing services in this hospital which is a great facility and should be used more. It would take very little expenditure to increase the services in the hospital but the benefits to the local community would be immense. I have spoken to the Taoiseach about this and I believe he sees the benefit.

One area in yesterday's announcement needs more attention. An additional €38 million will be available to implement new measures under Sharing the Vision, our national mental health strategy. Mental health needs our full attention right now, particularly for our younger and older generations. If a person's mental health is not right then life for him or her can become unbearable. There are so many pressures on the younger generation and they need our support. It is important that we help them build their resilience so that they can manage the many challenges they will face, and well-being has a major role to play in this.

While I support the additional funds being made available, I hope that these funds will be used in a way that gives the taxpayer full value for money. During this pandemic we have heard much about how the workplace has needed to change and we have seen this very clearly in the number of people who have had to work from home. This is a positive thing but only if the right measures are put in place. If a person needs to work from home, he or she must have an environment that is right for him or her. Many people who have been forced to work from home are simply working in a spare bedroom and even from the kitchen table. This is not sustainable long term. For working from home to be successful several things must be in place, including dedicated space in the home for work and fast and reliable broadband. If these two things are in place then working from home could become the new normal. Yesterday the Government missed an opportunity to help these workers. There should be an incentive scheme in place for workers to convert a part of their home for work purposes, perhaps in a tax credit or similar. It looks like this pandemic will be here for the foreseeable future and now is the time to support those workers who can work from home. The opportunities this offers include less traffic on the roads, less pressure on public transport, and people having the opportunity to live in areas that are further away from the main cities. The quality of life of many will be greatly improved and it will breathe life into our rural areas. Many in my home town of Dundalk are benefitting by not having to travel into Dublin to work. The companies themselves are also seeing the benefits of working from home with many of them commenting that work productivity has increased. I ask that the Minister consider a scheme that will incentivise those who can work from home to improve parts of their home to make it more suitable for work purposes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move to the Rural Independent Group, which I think has three speakers. I think they have five minutes each.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** No, I have seven minutes and the rest will be shared.

The budget is like the curate's egg, it is good in parts. It has many bad parts too. According to the latest figures, Irish people with mortgages of €300,000 will pay €80,000 more over the course of 30 years than their European counterparts. Why is that? This budget will cripple ordinary people. Na daoine aosta got nothing, not even €5 in their pensions. The ordinary working man agus mná ag obair i gcónaí who, in the words of the Tánaiste, get up go luath ar maidin have been ignored. The carbon tax will penalise all of them, especially those in rural Ireland. They will pay for the so-called just transition and to support Luas, DART and other projects in Dublin as well as a few limited projects throughout the rest of the country.

The N24 project in Tipperary was not mentioned. If there is to be connectivity from Limerick and Clare on the west coast through Tipperary and Waterford and on to Rosslare, that project will be needed, particularly in the context of Brexit. Towns like Tipperary desperately need ring roads and relief roads. Consultants have been appointed to examine the project again. It was designed and approved previously. There were no compulsory purchase orders made, but it went to the notice to treat phase. The routes were selected. Why have consultants been appointed again? There are consultants for everything. If someone wants to sneeze now, he or she has to appoint consultants. Many of the projects announced in the budget will be eaten up by firms, consultants and engagements. There will be no *quid pro quo* or bucks in the pocket.

I support many of the announcements in respect of the arts and other industries. Those moneys are welcome, but will they percolate down to the pockets and homes of the musicians, dancers, other entertainers, light and sound engineers and so on? I have a letter with me from a dance school. Actually, I do not. This letter is from the vice president of the dance schools' as-

sociation. Why in God's name are dance schools dúnta fós? This is the second time they have closed. Thankfully, we have classes of 30 children back in school. I spoke today to Mr. Kevin Langton, the principal of Comeragh College, which has 500 pupils. He and his board of management are doing an excellent job with those students. There has not been a hint of infection, thanks be to God. This morning, a Department inspector arrived and asked to come in, but the principal will not let anyone in but the pupils. We do not need that type of general inspection currently. We trust the boards of management, principals and teaching staff. The dance schools are closed but they should not be. They are being victimised and blackguarded. In many cases, they have only 12 or 15 students in a much larger setting than a classroom. They use community halls like the one in my own village and many more. There is a great deal of inequity.

I have just come from a meeting of the Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht. The arts sector will get €130 million. That is great. The arts community must be supported, but who will support the person in the van with a one-person cabaret show doing gigs or voluntary shows in nursing homes, day care centres and so on? People like that are a vital part of our economy, just as taxi drivers are.

The over-66s have got nothing, not even €5. They got nothing during the pandemic either because of their pensions. All they wanted was for it to be increased to €350. That €350 PUP rate must be restored for the self-employed people I mentioned – entertainers, van drivers, milk men, ready-mix truck drivers, delivery truck drivers, taxi drivers and hackney drivers. We only have hackney drivers in my area because we do not have taxis. We need to support these people because they are not being supported. They did not even get crumbs from the table. All they wanted from the PUP was to get the balance between their pensions of €200 plus and the €350. The €350 must be given back to them. They have dignity and pride in their work, but they are not allowed to work – the Government pulled the rug from beneath them. The dance schools have been closed down twice. Will someone here or from NPHEC explain to me why a dance school cannot operate with the same number of students that are allowed in a small, pokey prefab in a national school? There are many such prefabs, but we should have stopped renting them years ago.

Why will we not approach the European Central Bank? Over the 30 years of a mortgage, an Irish person will pay €80,000 more than his or her European counterpart. That is blackguarding. We can get money at low interest rates from the ECB. Why do we not borrow?

Why do we not deal with the banks? We have allowed the moratorium to be lifted in respect of banks. Last Saturday, I spoke to family members in my area who had received a letter from the sheriff about the repossession of their home because of a bank. Straight away, 60 or 70 such cases landed in to the south Tipperary District Court. It is merciless, relentless and disgusting. The ECB rate is there for us all. Germany borrowed after the Second World War and is still paying it back. We need long-term loans like that. We need the likes of the late T. K. Whitaker in the Department of Finance. There would be a bit of imagination and experimentation, although not reckless experimentation. It is not all about accountants, minding the housing and minding the money. We must give our people hope, solace and support so that they can return to being self-employed, to their jobs and to their homes to look after their partners and families without being dependent on the State. We need to bide our time and avail of low-cost finance in order to support our communities.

The carbon tax penalises rural people. They are paying for facilities in Dublin under the just transition and to hell with the rest of the country. I am all for a carbon tax, but I disagree with

the resolution that was passed last night. We are not able to have a debate on carbon tax – the increase to a rate of €100 per tonne by 2030 is now fixed in. Having a just transition and dealing with it here is fine, but what about the impact on the housewife, the people in cottages, the farmer, the bus driver, the self-employed, the taxi driver, everyone who is going to work and the student who has to travel? There is no public transport. People are being blackguarded. The just transition is not very just for the people who have to pay the piper. We then saw the announcements about more and more public transport being rolled out in the capital city, Baile Átha Cliath.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** In this budget, much of the funding for roads – I believe it is €1 billion plus – will be spent around Dublin, but what about funding for roads like the N71, R586 and R585 in west Cork where we are starved for funding? Of all the road projects mentioned in the budget, I see nothing about roads in west Cork, for example, the bypasses for Innishannon and Bandon. Both projects have been around for a number of years but nothing has been done. This is an outrageous attack on the people of Cork South-West. They deserve to be involved in the budget.

I wish to discuss the carbon tax. What annoyed me was the comment by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, in the House earlier that this would be a winner and people would accept it. Of course we will accept it – we will be given no choice in the matter. It looks like the 37% of people living in rural Ireland will be penalised to sort out 100% of the people living in cities, especially those who need their homes insulated. The Minister kept saying that the carbon tax would be used where people wanted their homes insulated. That is fine, but the people of rural Ireland should not have to pay a heavy fee for it. This must stop. The Minister should not come to the Chamber and claim this will be a winner. It will be a winner for every city. Who voted for it last night? Look around. The Social Democrats, who were delighted to back up the Government, voted for it, as did the Labour Party. The Green Party Deputies are mainly city based and have turned their backs on rural constituencies. The farmer will be hit hard, as will the fisherman and the people who work every day, must take their children to school and drive to work. There is no public transport. I mentioned Mr. Damien Long from west Cork last night. He operates West Cork Connect and drives a bus three, four or five times per day. He receives no state aid whatsoever. If he were Bus Éireann, he would get state aid to the backbone and might not even have to drive the bus. There is no common understanding in this. The Green Party Deputies are talking out of both sides of their mouths. They are talking about taking cars off the road on the one hand and, on the other, there is no public transport service. Without such a service, how does one survive in rural Ireland? The Green Party knew how to do it – hit people in the pocket. Motor tax has been increased. What if someone has an old car and cannot afford to buy a new one?

I do not believe there is a moratorium on mortgages. If that is the case, it is unfair. Publicans in particular but also other businesses are struggling and need the Government to stand up to the banks and negotiate a further moratorium. If it does not, they face ruination. The Government needs to consider this matter now.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** People in rural Ireland are very hurt today because they feel that the carbon tax is being increased to provide shiny new buses and other public transport services in Dublin. Those services will not be provided in rural Ireland and we must be realistic about that. If we took all the money out of the Central Bank, we still could not bus the people in rural areas to wherever they need to go every day, whether it be work, school, the mart or anywhere else. Hauliers are outraged. They are saying that the price of oil has driven up the

price of tyres and they are already finding it very hard to manage at the present time. School bus operators and other bus operators are also outraged.

Farmers cannot do anything without a tractor. The Minister of State knows that a farmer buys a tractor two or three times in his whole life. There is no such thing as an electric tractor and there will not be for many years. The reality is that tractors use a lot of diesel. It is fine for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to have notions about carbon tax. He has a bicycle and he is a good man on a bicycle but that is it. He will pay nothing in carbon tax. We do not want to go back to the days of horses and donkeys for farmers in rural Ireland but that is where they are being directed with the pressure that is being put on them to survive. I note that there was no talk yesterday about providing a ferryboat to take cattle to France and bypass the UK.

I want to talk about couples being thrown off the housing list. If two parents with three children earn more than €33,600, they are removed from the list. In many cases, such couples are in receipt of the working family payment, which is what puts them over the threshold. In the case of the help-to-buy scheme, the cap for a single person is €50,000. That might be reasonable if it were based on net income, but many of these people are paying 50% tax. If they do not qualify for the scheme, they will not be able to buy a house.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We should remember one thing when we are talking about carbon tax. At this exact moment, if a person living in a local authority house in County Kerry finds that the heating is broken, the council does not have the money or wherewithal to repair it. That is outrageous and it is not the fault of the council or its housing department. If the same thing happened in the private sector, a landlord could not claim an inability to pay because he or she did not have the money in the kitty. This is a real problem. We are talking about imposing carbon tax on people at a time when local authorities cannot afford to make repairs to houses in which tenants are living. That issue needs to be addressed immediately.

This is the Green Party's budget and the other Government parties fell in behind it last night and lauded it as a great success. In the future, when members of those parties are knocking on people's doors, when the effect of €1 billion a year in additional carbon tax charges has hit home, when the Government has closed down Bord na Móna and stopped people from cutting turf, when the State has married us to one source of energy, that being ESB or something like it, then the people will realise it was the other two parties of government which let all of that happen on their watch and that they blindly followed the Green Party just for power. The other two parties in government have sold their souls to the Green Party, its policies, aims and idealistic view on life, just to get power.

We have to talk about the here and now. We need to talk about the women and men who will be trying to balance a budget this coming Friday, pay for the cost of living and educate their children. Many parents of third level students have paid thousands of euro for accommodation which their children cannot avail of because the colleges are closed down. These are the real problems people are facing at this time. In response, the Government is coming along with airy-fairy ideas of raising billions of euro in additional carbon taxes. It is totally out of order.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** My initial disappointment in budget 2021 has not lifted. Instead, it has deepened as I have reviewed the relevant documentation and commentaries about the Groundhog Day feel to some of the Government's announcements. It is disingenuous for Ministers to stand up in front of us, the media and the public and make statements about investment,

improvements and measures that have been previously announced. It is disingenuous to deliver the news in such a way as to make it seem like there will be significant additional numbers of social housing units, for example, or extra investment in transport. The most laughable aspect of this Government, so far, has been the consistent undermining of messaging from the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, who might be more accurately called the Taoiseach-in-waiting. Yesterday, he released a press statement before the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, had finished his budget speech. Of course, it is not really a laughing matter. While some in Fine Gael play politics by seeking to damage Fianna Fáil at every opportunity, the people are looking to the Government and policymakers to navigate our way through these unprecedented times.

The general consensus among civil society and those on the left echoes my own view that this budget is yet another missed opportunity. Last night, Rory Hearne and Tony Groves of Tortoise Shack hosted a live post-budget Reboot Republic podcast with excellent contributors from across various Opposition parties, organisations and sectors. Louise Bayliss from Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids, SPARK, was on the panel, as were Anthony Flynn from Inner City Helping Homeless, Michael Taft of SIPTU, Dr. Tom McDonnell from the Nevin Economic Research Institute, NERI, Fiona Coyle of Mental Health Reform and Lorna Fitzpatrick from the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, alongside several Opposition Deputies and Senators. Ms Bayliss made the excellent point that budget 2021 is designed to make sure more people do not fall into poverty but it does absolutely nothing for the 700,000 people and children already in poverty. These are the voices to which the Government should be listening. It would do Ministers good to become patrons of Tortoise Shack and hear the diverse voices that exist outside of their privileged worlds.

Mental Health Reform has cautiously welcomed the €50 million increase in funding for mental health, which is broken down into €12 million for maintaining existing services, even though the organisation had asked for €30 million, €15 million for Covid-related measures, and €23 million for the new strategy, Sharing the Vision. However, organisations like Mental Health Reform know that the Government will often deliver on paper but not in reality. This increase does not go anywhere near the Sláintecare-recommended investment of 10% of the health budget in mental health provision. In fact, it is closer to 4%.

The Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO, has outlined some concerns about the delivery of budget 2021, particularly regarding the unallocated recovery fund of €3.4 billion. In its excellent preliminary budget review, the PBO states:

It is unclear how the process to use the unallocated funds will work; whether they will be capital or current spending; and how the Oireachtas will provide oversight. The PBO suggests that when the Government announces initiatives in 2021 which will be financed by these funds, it should set out clearly which expenditure line is getting additional funds and how much of the overall unallocated amount remains.

The changes in allocations between 2020 and 2021 are not easily identifiable as they are complicated by Estimates yet to come before the Dáil, funding not yet allocated between Departments and COVID-19 / Brexit-specific spending.

The Government's inability to see the larger picture and join the dots is astounding, although it should not be because it certainly is not new. Our access to housing, healthcare, childcare, employment, training, safety, connectivity and all other basic services impacts our mental

health. The largest revenue generator of this budget is the carbon tax, which will undoubtedly have the worst impact on the poorest in society. A measly 10 cent increase in the minimum wage, taking it to €10.20 per hour from 1 Jan 2021, still leaves it far below a living wage, which would be €12.30 per hour. An opportunity has again been lost to introduce a wealth tax. According to Dr. McDonnell of NERI, such a tax would have no impact on 98% of households. We need a wealth tax and for that we need a progressive, left-led Government that cares about the majority of people. Dr. McDonnell has said that such a tax could bring in approximately €500 million. While it would not solve all of our problems, it certainly could be used to address funding and resourcing for childcare, for instance, which, bizarrely, seems to have been completely neglected in this budget.

I have been always a proponent of addressing tax avoidance and have long supported Social Justice Ireland's call for a minimum effective rate of corporation tax of 6%, which is half our headline rate. This would yield approximately €1 billion. Even by taxing corporations at just half the rate we could collect an extra €1 billion.

Due to the lack of transparency in how the budget is delivered, I have received many queries from groups and organisations. The national community action on alcohol project, for example, has said "with alcohol consumption increasing since the imposition of social restrictions in March, it's crucially important that communities are supported to reduce and prevent alcohol harm as Ireland recovers." They have asked when the available funding will be provided to enable delivery of community action on alcohol, and if it is separate to the additional funding announced last year.

Goal 4 of the 2017 national drug and alcohol strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, is to support participation of individuals, families and communities. Action 1.1.1 of this goal explicitly commits to promoting the use of evidence-based approaches to mobilising community action on alcohol. It all sounds very good. The €250,000 multi-annual funding, which was announced in early 2019 by the then Minister of State, Catherine Byrne, was never released for this work. Actions speak louder than words and the Minister's word means nothing to many at this stage.

One impact of Covid that could potentially be seen as positive, and which could also address the climate emergency, is that people have begun to see the value of smaller communities, towns and villages. People have begun to move out of the cities, often to the homes they were forced to leave for education or employment purposes. In dealing with Covid we are being asked to limit our movements and to stay local. Covid is going to be with us for a long time and supporting the development of infrastructure and resources in our towns and villages is the obvious way of achieving this.

There is an opportunity now to support the development of rural communities and to build infrastructure for people to work locally even if their employer is in Dublin. This includes the provision of communications infrastructure such as broadband for those who work from home. It also requires local community office hubs where people can work in proper offices rather than in cramped housing or at a kitchen table. Proper working conditions must be provided and maintained for those working remotely and must not be undermined. People being facilitated to work locally would see the reopening of services such as post offices, doctors' surgeries, shops, cafés and schools. It would also mean a reduction in travel and present opportunities for small-scale, energy efficient office spaces. This Government does not have the vision for that and has lost any connection with, or commitment to, the development of rural Ireland.

Youth unemployment has been hugely impacted by the Covid pandemic. Ireland was already above the EU average in this area, but numbers have again skyrocketed with young people, and in particular young women, being most impacted by job losses and closures due to Covid. Youth unemployment currently stands at around 38%. Given that remote learning is taking place for many courses and colleges there are opportunities for young people to stay in their home towns for longer rather than have everything Dublin-centric or focused on urban centres.

The Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, announced in his speech yesterday that there would be a €5 million investment in facilities for digital hubs and broadband connection points across rural Ireland under the town and village renewal scheme. I welcome this announcement. Has the Government given thought to linking in with closed pubs or businesses to reimagine themselves as community work-share hubs? At a constituency meeting last week, I was informed about initiatives in Seville in Spain, where people can book slots at local pubs, restaurants or cafés for remote working. These premises would usually have a significant number of power points and faster Internet speeds than rural homes. In fact, they might have actual Internet available. In this example it can cost €15 to book a table for three hours, with tea or coffee and a light lunch provided. This could be an innovative and efficient way to support closed businesses to reopen safely, support remote working and support our communities.

The increase in the carbon tax is not a just transition. People in my constituency do not have the public transport that is available in Dublin or access to piped gas. They are largely dependent on oil to fuel their cars and to heat their homes. Donegal is one of the most impoverished and disadvantaged counties in the country. To them this is an unjust tax because they cannot afford to buy an electric car or to match retrofitting funding. I am not against carbon tax but it cannot be targeted at those who can least afford to pay it. This is not climate justice or a just transition. Carbon taxes should target corporations and big businesses that can well afford to pay them.

We cannot mention climate change without talking about farming in Ireland. The point was made at Monday's briefing that we seem to be looking only at Ireland's impact, without acknowledging the environmental cost of importing beef from Brazil, for example. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael continue to work with big agriculture, the agrifood industry and major farm organisations that support the industrial model of food production to the detriment of smaller, more sustainable farmers. During this pandemic we have asked people to support local and shop local. This is equally true of food produce. People generally want healthy and nutritious food. Ireland signed up to the sustainable development goals and declared a climate and biodiversity emergency, but we are not regenerating our ecosystems to produce healthy food with less polluting impacts.

In Brussels, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil MEPs are busy delivering for the industrial food lobby and for Ireland's privileged farmer class. CAP money, the aim of which is to deliver affordable, healthy food to Irish and EU citizens and a basic standard of living to EU farmers, is divided in Ireland on the 80:20 principle. Since 2004, some 80% of CAP money has gone to a select class of 20% of farmers, while the other 20% of funding has gone to 80% of farmers, the bulk of whom are up and down the north-western seaboard. These farmers, who are predominantly extensive beef suckler farmers, receive low farm payments and consistently need top-ups for their cattle rearing to break even or turn a profit. There is €102 million extra for livestock farming in the budget, €85 million of which is for sustainable beef farming, which includes €5 million for new calf-weighing measures for beef farmers raising dairy calves. Where

are the supports to farmers growing local, organic fresh fruit and vegetables and other sustainable crops? As Ireland is a net contributor to CAP, our citizens pay for food to be produced by Irish farmers for Irish and EU citizens. Simply put, the Irish citizen is paying to give the beef and dairy industry a cheap supply of beef and milk for them to process, export and pocket the profit while at the same time eating food that comes from everywhere except Ireland. Food sovereignty is essential for food security to be met in a manner that respects decent work and human beings and has environmentally conscious production. It matters how food, fibre and fuel is made, and by whom.

I will not spend too much time discussing the farcical so-called “largest ever budget on housing” when in reality budget 2021 contained an increase of just 593 new social housing homes to be built, over the previous Rebuilding Ireland targets. It is still following the developer-led, market-driven strategy of lining the pockets of landlords and developers, which led to this crisis in the first place. The private market cannot produce the 35,000 homes we need every year anyway, so the Government needs to ensure local authorities meet their targets and provide the resources for them to do so. This budget has absolutely nothing for renters. I know that hidden homelessness is one of the factors affecting this sector in my constituency of Donegal. Even though it is illegal for landlords to refuse to accept HAP, it remains an issue in Donegal, with the onus on renters to complain and to sort out that problem.

The funding crisis for local authorities has not received much attention. In Monday’s *The Irish Times*, Marie O’Halloran reported that city and county councils have estimated that an additional €300 million is needed in 2021 and a further €190 million will be needed in 2022. Local authorities expect losses of around €367 million this year due to the collapse in revenue because of Covid. There has also been unexpected expenditure of around €90 million on Covid-19 measures. While it is welcome that the Government announced measures to waive commercial rates for affected business, this must be refunded to local authorities. With businesses and shops closed for a period of time there was also a drop in parking income. Other income streams from local authorities have decreased, including in the areas of litter fines, planning fees and other services with expected losses of around €78 million.

Another worrying fact is that this Government’s ineptitude has led to an increase in far-right activity in our communities and online. Ordinary people are angry that it is one rule for the Government and another for the rest of us. For example, junior ministers are getting pay rises while people are unable to afford food. Despite the lull in Covid numbers over the summer very little seems to have been done to increase the capacity of our health service. The far right has been watching the anti-Government sentiment grow and is having conversations online and in communities. It will continue to prey on those who feel left behind by the Government and this budget will further alienate disillusioned voters. Of course, there are many disillusioned by this Government who will not be sucked in by their racism, conspiracy theories, anti-mask rhetoric, homophobia and misogyny, but it is important for us to be aware of their presence in communities and online and to work together to ensure that they do not get a greater foothold in our diverse and modern society.

This budget and the way in which measures have been announced is actually quite shameful. It creates uncertainty for civil society groups, organisations and people who know that the devil is in the detail and that there are often empty promises from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party. It is a wasted opportunity to put society and people at the heart of policymaking. It will make absolutely no difference to the people in the forgotten county of Donegal and will exacerbate the isolation and loneliness that many already feel. We have been talking about

the new normal for the past number of months, community spirit and about us all being in this together, but that has certainly not been demonstrated by those in power. From golf dinners to ministerial pay rises, advisers and cars, there has been let down after let down while our country is heartsore for all the lives lost to this pandemic. I hope the electorate does not forget this year when election time comes around again.

*Sitting suspended at 4.41 p.m. and resumed at 5.30 p.m.*

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):**

In their budget speeches yesterday my colleagues, the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, confirmed this Government's clear commitment, as stated in the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, to the State placing a much greater emphasis on directly building new social and affordable housing. Budget 2021 has provided the resources needed by my Department, local authorities and related agencies to follow through and deliver on that commitment. In total, my Department's Vote for 2021 will amount to over €5.118 billion, an increase of €773 million on the Revised Estimate for 2020 that was agreed in the Dáil earlier this month. The current side of the Vote is increasing by €266 million while capital spending in the Vote will grow by €507 million, a record level of funding that is indisputable.

I will now go through some of the factual, top-line figures to assist some colleagues opposite. The Department has been allocated its largest ever level of funding, which is in the region of €5.3 billion. Of that, €3.3 billion will be spent on housing, which is a 24% increase on 2020 levels and represents the largest investment in housing by any Government in any single year. The social housing needs of more than 28,500 additional households will be met in 2021 and, of that, 12,750 new homes will be added to the available supply of social housing through build, acquisition and long-term leasing. We will provide support for local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, to deliver 9,500 new-build homes in 2021. While others might play with figures and not compare like with like, I wish to be clear that this is a 22% increase on the 2020 target of 7,736. We will be rolling out a range of affordability measures, including €110 million for a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme for first-time buyers and a new cost rental model. We will spend €218 million, an increase from €166 million in budget 2020, to ensure those experiencing homelessness are supported and helped to exit homelessness.

My Department will provide €1.4 billion for water services, and a significant increase of €65 million will facilitate energy efficiency improvements in 2,400 social homes throughout this country. We have already started that work in the midlands. A sum of €60 million is being provided to adapt the homes of up to 10,700 older people and people with special needs and disabilities. We will increase funding to €21 million for the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, local authority rental inspections, and to implement reforms for the short-term letting sector. These are badly needed additional resources. We will provide €150 million for the urban regeneration and development fund and a €192 million contribution to the Local Government Fund. Heritage will get €95.9 million, an increase of 51%, and will be able to access the Covid-19 special fund should it be required.

This budget has provided the resources needed by my Department. Most people understand that Covid-19 has had a major impact on the delivery of social housing due to site closures and delays across design and planning that will take time to make up, but we intend to do so. Contrary to the simplistic and misleading claims of the Opposition, building is not a matter of just turning a tap on or off. Sinn Féin said it would deliver 20,000 homes next year. Where? How?

Planning permission has not been granted for 20,000 homes. Where is the funding for it? Sinn Féin is happy to pluck numbers from the air to make its case sound better, but our plan is a realistic, realisable and funded one that will actually deliver. We have set ourselves ambitious targets. A total of 12,750 social homes will be delivered through build, acquisition and leasing programmes including an increase in new-build activity with 9,500 additional homes. In terms of comparing like with like, this is 1,764 more homes than the 2020 targets. This represents a clear switch from buy to build, and we have not included any voids in that figure either. The Opposition may try to belittle our targets but they are not comparing like with like. We will get on with the serious job of delivering public homes for people who badly need them.

I know that we can achieve these targets. I do not set targets of 20,000 or 30,000 for public house building and just decide that is achievable. I am listening to those with whom we will need to work to deliver on this. Immediately after my appointment, I established a high-level housing delivery group. I meet regularly with representatives of the housing and building committee of the County and City Management Association, CCMA, the housing delivery co-ordination office, the Housing Agency, the Housing Alliance and the Irish Council for Social Housing to set targets that are achievable. These targets are both ambitious and achievable. I have already taken steps to get local authorities building again. I introduced a revised single stage approval process for capital expenditure on social housing projects up to €6 million. This is a key commitment in the programme for Government and means that local authorities will have greater autonomy in constructing social housing, leading to accelerated delivery. This came into effect from 1 September. We have also allocated the single largest amount of funding for voids this year, returning 2,500 social homes to the stock. They will be allocated this year and many will be occupied this year. Furthermore, we will provide funding to bring a further 1,000 voids back into use this year.

We are absolutely focused on new builds and generating additional supply, and I have been very clear with the local authorities about the need to focus on more direct-build activity. As well as delivering more built homes in 2021, the additional housing budget secured will create a pathway for greater levels of activity in the years following - 2022 and 2023. In parallel with this we must continue to provide immediate options to support 15,800 new households to have their housing assistance payment, HAP, and rental accommodation scheme, RAS, needs met. The rug cannot just be pulled out from under the 76,500 tenancies supported through HAP. When others say that nothing is being done for renters, they are dismissing the needs of 76,500 people and the provision that is being made by this Government for a further 15,800 tenancies to prevent people from falling into homelessness.

On affordable housing, the Government believes in home ownership. We are not late converts to this game. We know it has plummeted in the past decade and is now well below the European average, and we are going to put home ownership back into reach. For those people who are outside the social housing bracket, this Government is committed to making good on its promises in 2021. The budget sets out affordability measures totalling €468 million. This does not include the very valuable help-to-buy scheme, which has been extended to the end of 2021 at a cost of €150 million. Although it has helped more than 19,500 people to buy a home, Members opposite have opposed it on a regular basis. This will spread out across our serviced sites fund, the local infrastructure housing activation fund and the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, and an additional €60 million is being poured into the Land Development Agency to activate sites this coming year. Importantly, €110 million will be provided to deliver a new national affordable purchase shared equity scheme for first-time buyers and a new funding model to ac-

celerate the delivery of cost rental homes.

Detailed work has been undertaken on cost rental. A Bill will be brought to this House very shortly and I look forward to debating it with Members on all sides in both the Dáil and the Seanad. This is the first time a new national funding model to accelerate delivery of cost rental homes through the approved housing body sector has been announced. The new cost rental equity loan facility will allow approved housing bodies to borrow up to 30% of the cost of cost rental homes from the State, meaning the delivery of homes at significantly below market price. It will deliver at least 400 cost rental homes next year with the funding we have provided.

Homelessness must be a priority for all of us. Given it is an absolute priority for Government to drive down homelessness and provide permanent homes for people, €218 million is provided in this budget, up from €166 million. I want to thank my partners in the homeless sector who work with me every single week, every day of the week, to drive forward measures to solve our homelessness crisis. We are going to expand Housing First, which, as Members will know, given we debated this last week, is very much about meeting both the housing and health needs of individuals.

Specific funding of €21 million has been allocated to support the housing needs of members of the Travelling community and €60 million has been allocated, as I said, to fund adaptation grants which will support people, including people with disabilities, to remain in their homes.

The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, will shortly outline the Department's plans for local government and planning, and the Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan, will later this evening speak about the significant funding that has been allocated to heritage.

Beidh cúrsaí tithíochta chun tosaigh domsa mar Aire agus don Rialtas. Tá sé mar aidhm agam béis a chur arís ar thógáil tithíochta ag comhairlí áitiúla agus na forais tithíochta, mar na AHBs ar fud fad na tíre. Is féidir linn a bheith mórtasach as an traidisiún láidir atá againn in Éirinn tithíocht a chur ar fáil dár muintir. Tuigimid nach féidir linn brath ar an margadh amháin chun tithíocht phoiblí nó tithíocht ar phraghas réasúnta a chur ar fáil do dhaoine óga. Tógfaimid ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta againn. I mbuiséad 2021 beidh iomlán airgid bhreise curtha ar fáil chun timpeall 13,000 teach sóisialta a fháil sa bhliain seo chugainn - an infheistíocht is mó i dtithíocht i stair an Stáit.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Peter Burke):** I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on what is the biggest budget in the history of the State, with an increase eight times bigger than that in last year's budget. The Government strategy in this budget is to protect those sectors which are vulnerable but viable to ensure we have the capacity, once this pandemic subsides, to absorb the demand in key sectors. With that in mind, it is very important we stand behind our local authorities and that we have achieved a rates waiver extension up to December. This is important considering 30% of local authority income is made up of the rates fund, and it will give local authorities certainty into the future as they plan their budgets in November. It is also important that we work to ensure we give certainty through goods and services income. It takes a huge amount of income to run local authorities, from swimming pools to parking charges, and we need to support them in that regard.

It is vital that businesses in provincial towns are supported and this funding will give them certainty. Some €192 million will go to support local authorities through the Local Govern-

ment Fund, an increase of €36 million on last year. When meeting members of Dublin City Council through the community call forum, I was impressed to see at first hand over a short space of time the methods they have built up to help the most vulnerable in our society, working with State agencies and other bodies to deliver to the most vulnerable on the ground. It is also important that, through our local authorities, we have an increase in funding for Traveller accommodation to €5.8 million from €4.7 million, together with housing adaptation grants for the elderly and those with disabilities. Again, it is very important in a time of stress during the pandemic that we are supporting the most vulnerable in our society.

Planning is a key issue. There is an increase in funding for the urban regeneration and development fund, an important fund that will unlock the potential of many towns up and down the country and, through the local authorities, give them a chance to be ambitious. It was important to secure additional funding in that regard. There is also funding for the Land Development Agency to continue its good work. It will, hopefully, be put on a statutory footing soon in order to deliver homes for society as quickly as possible on public land.

As we try to plan and chart our way out of this pandemic, it is important such bodies are supported, which this budget has done. It is framed clearly to protect the most vulnerable, to support local authorities and to ensure the planning system is robust in order to fulfil the national planning framework, which is important in regard to how we guide and shape our society over the coming decades.

With regard to the €14 million in funding for emergency services, which is a 15% increase on last year's funding, this is supporting the first responders in our society to ensure they have the resources to carry out their work and to protect our society. It is very important to support first responders.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address the House on the budget, the first budget on which I have the privilege to serve in this office.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Now that the dust has finally settled on the spin of yesterday's announcements, it is very clear to anybody looking at this objectively that the housing commitments in yesterday's announcements are underwhelming, unclear and wholly inadequate. The key test here is how much additional capital spending the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage secured above that which was already committed to by the outgoing Government, and how many additional homes above the target already set by the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, in Rebuilding Ireland will the budget deliver. The answer is very simple. The total extra capital spend above the pre-existing commitments is a meagre €160 million. In fact, it will deliver fewer than 1,000 genuinely social and genuinely affordable homes above what we would have got otherwise. There is just €125 million extra for social housing above the Minister's predecessor's commitments, which will deliver only 593 extra social homes. Astonishingly, we heard in the Minister's press conference today there is just an extra €35 million to deliver 400 genuinely affordable homes to rent.

Those figures are the added value that the Fianna Fáil Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has brought to budget 2021. Let me go through the numbers bit by bit. On social housing, the Minister is correct that there will be 10,300 real social homes built or bought by local authorities and approved housing bodies next year. The Minister is also correct in saying that is 1,764 more than will be delivered this year if the target is met. However, as Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy had already promised 1,171 of those.

We have 100,000 households waiting for social housing, when we take into account the council lists and those on the housing assistance payment and in the rental accommodation scheme. We have more than 10,000 adults and children in emergency accommodation funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Tusla and the Department of Justice, and in un-funded hostels. Yet, all the Minister could secure in these budget negotiations is funding for 593 additional social homes. That is truly shocking. Let us look at the corollary: the increased subsidisation of private landlords for social housing tenancies. Deputy Eoghan Murphy, the previous Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, promised to deliver more real social homes than subsidised private rental tenancies for people on the housing lists next year. The current Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has reversed that commitment. Next year, there will be an extra 18,250 subsidised social housing tenancies in privately owned premises, which represents almost two thirds of the total number of tenancies. When expenditure on HAP, the rental assistance scheme, the social housing current expenditure programme and rent supplement payments are combined - the latter payments come from another Department - we see that rental subsidies will breach €1 billion for the first time in the history of the State.

Although an affordable housing plan with targets and regulations was promised before the budget, it has not materialised. Just €35 million in additional funding has been provided for 400 cost-rental tenancies but we do not know if they will be delivered next year or if they will be genuinely affordable. The rest of the additional funding relates to high-risk shared equity loans to allow people to borrow more than they are currently allowed under the Central Bank's macroprudential rules. In fact, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government cannot even get a bad scheme right. He is locked in a battle with his counterpart in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and with his Fine Gael colleague, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in the Department of Finance. They cannot even agree on and announce the scheme for which they have allegedly got such meagre funding.

I do not understand what this Government has against private renters. These are renters who are unable to access HAP. There will be no ban on rent increases and no reductions in rent. The Government's message to these people is very simple: private sector renters are on their own. This Government has done nothing for them.

The meagre increases in funding for Traveller accommodation, disability adaptation grants and homelessness prevention will mean that those who are on the margins of our housing system will remain on those margins under this Government.

One does not just have to believe the Opposition; one can read today's newspapers. The verdict of *The Irish Times* on the housing budget is that "it is really unlikely that anywhere near the original target, let alone the new one, will be built". The verdict of the *Irish Independent* is that the housing budget "is great for builders and landlords". It goes on to say "If Fianna Fáil wanted to show social housing credentials, they certainly weren't in evidence yesterday."

The Government had a clear choice yesterday. It could borrow at historically low interest rates - in fact, negative interest rates at which one is paid to borrow - and invest in a public housing programme that would meet the need for social and affordable housing in our society. It could have invested up to €3 billion directly in real social housing and genuinely affordable homes built by local authorities, approved housing bodies and community housing trusts. Alternatively, it could have followed the same failed path of the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has made very clear today which path he has chosen. He has produced a budget of which Deputy Eoghan Murphy would be proud. It is a

negligent budget which constitutes a dereliction of duty. The hundreds of thousands of people who need social and affordable housing are much the worse off for it. Shame on the Government for producing such a bad budget before spending two days dishonestly misrepresenting the fact that it will not assist those in desperate need of the Government's help to secure affordable homes to rent or to buy.

**Deputy MattCarthy:** This budget was an opportunity to deliver a new vision, particularly for our farming and rural communities. The Government did not take that opportunity. Instead, we have got more of the same failed policies. Those people who need their cars to get to work, including virtually every family in my constituency, will notice little change after this budget except that they will have less money in their pockets as a result of the carbon tax hike. For those renting accommodation and facing increased rents, this budget offers nothing. The fewer than 600 additional social houses to be provided will most likely do nothing for any of the tens of thousands of people who have been failed by the housing crisis of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. For those families and workers who are crippled by high insurance costs, high interest rates on mortgages and increasing electricity bills, this budget offers nothing. For those parents burdened with the highest childcare costs in the world, this budget will do nothing. In fact, to the Government's shame, it introduced nothing at all for the childcare sector, whether for the parents or the professionals who work in that sector.

From the point of view of our farmers, the biggest impact of the budget will again be the increase in the carbon tax which will leave less money in the pockets of people who are struggling desperately to make ends meet. Beef farmers will be especially disappointed in this budget. In our proposals, Sinn Féin had proposed a new suckler scheme that would deliver a payment of up to €300 per cow. This scheme would have supported the farmers who most needed support while also being of benefit to the environment and having a positive impact on rural economies. The Government ignored our proposal and instead propagated beef supports which actually comprise the extension of existing schemes and a paltry additional €5 million in supports in respect of dairy calves in the beef sector. Before entering government, just a few months ago, Fianna Fáil was advocating for an additional €45 million for suckler farming. Perhaps the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, will take the time to tell me where that funding is hidden in the budget. Rather than implementing the type of radical, though much-needed, support scheme suggested by Sinn Féin, the Government has given us a temporary and pale imitation.

The Government's decision to extend Pillar 2 schemes for farmers is welcome and in line with Sinn Féin's proposals but, at this time of crisis, farmers and especially our family farmers need additional supports. This budget provides little in new funding that will directly benefit such farmers. The mooted increase in Department spending will simply not reach farmers. For example, the additional funding announced for TB tests actually just replaces funding lost in EU penalties imposed as a result of Government failures in this area. At the same time, we will see funding for additional farm inspections, Department salaries, office equipment and related expenses.

Farmers will today be struggling to identify what this budget delivers for them, their families and their communities. People right across this State, especially those who live in our rural communities, will be looking on with disgust and despair as this Government decides to give them nothing but additional hardship and charges.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** In the short space of time I have, I will begin with the area of agriculture. With regard to the agricultural budget, there has been much talk about new schemes,

including agri-environment schemes. When one parses the document, however, it is very hard to get details. That difficulty characterises this budget generally. When one tries to delve into the minutiae of the figures and the wall of money announced in the last 24 hours, it is hard to find the devil in the detail. I will speak specifically about matters such as the green, low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, and the transitional period in respect of CAP. We are still unsure as to how that money will filter down through the farm gate to the individual farmer. We will need more clarity on this matter in the coming days because we want to be able to interrogate the figures and to see what their impact will be for individual farm families.

I also wish to raise the issue of the fuel allowance, specifically as it relates to the social protection budget. When we analysed the figures in respect of the payment of the fuel allowance under budget 2021, we noticed that there is effectively a net reduction of approximately €49 in the payment. It is our contention that this is a cut rather than an increase, as the Government has portrayed it. The allowance was paid for four extra weeks during the 2019-20 season, which was worth an extra €98. The budget increase of €3.50 a week will apply for only 14 weeks from January. This additional payment will be worth €49 over the full 2020-21 fuel season. After the failure of the Government to provide an extra four weeks of fuel allowance, as it did last winter, those receiving the payment will be down €49 this winter. Ceapaim go bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag éisteacht.

We are calling on the Government to provide another four weeks of the fuel allowance and reverse the effective cut in the amount that 375,000 people will receive this winter. The four extra weeks of fuel allowance were paid in the 2019-20 season in April. This is key to this issue. Those extra weeks were worth €24.50 a week, or a total of €98. In the budget, those much-needed four extra weeks were not retained. The payment will instead increase by €3.50 from January 2021. That increase, however, will only apply to 14 weeks of the 2020-21 fuel season, and that is worth €49 or half of what people received this year. In effect, this is a cut. The nearly 375,000 people relying on the fuel allowance this winter will have nearly €50 less to spend to keep themselves warm.

In the middle of this pandemic, older and vulnerable people are spending more time at home, but they will receive less this winter than they did in the one just gone. Even taking account of the increase, the value of the extra payment across 28 weeks in 2021 - the last 14 weeks of the 2020-21 fuel season and the first 14 weeks of the 2021-22 season - will be €98, which is exactly the same as what was provided in the four extra weeks in April of this year. Taking that into account, however, we must remember that the carbon tax increase on fuel comes into effect in May, which means that next winter, people will be facing higher heating bills but without any real extra financial support from the fuel allowance payment. We are calling on the Government, even at this late stage, when the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, comes before us, to take on board our suggestion that providing an extra four weeks of fuel allowance this winter will negate the cut.

The technical element of this issue is that the fuel allowance is paid over 28 weeks, from the end of September through to March. The 2019-20 fuel season was extended by four weeks because of the impact of Covid-19. That was worth €98, which in real terms was €24.50 multiplied by four weeks. In 2021, the payment will increase, as I have detailed, by €3.50 a week from January. Over a full 28 weeks that will be worth €98. That higher rate is only being paid for 14 weeks of this fuel season, however, and that will be worth €49. In essence, therefore, people on fuel allowance this winter will be down by €49 compared to the 2019-20 fuel season, and they will also face more expensive fuel costs next winter because of the increase in carbon

taxes.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I understand I am sharing my time with Deputy Cathal Crowe. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on economic activity, in Ireland and globally, has been truly unprecedented. It has had a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of all our citizens. Against an extraordinary and difficult backdrop, budget 2021 is framed to tackle the twin challenges of Covid-19 and a no-deal Brexit. It also addresses broader issues facing our economy and society, and which underpin the programme for Government, by providing for more homes, better healthcare and a stronger response to address climate change in our society.

The total budgetary package amounts to €17.34 billion. The package includes €8.5 billion for public services to address the challenges of Covid-19. Capital expenditure will increase to €10.1 billion, which is the largest amount that has ever been allocated to invest in schools, homes and public transport. Alongside these measures, a recovery fund of €3.4 billion is being established to focus on infrastructural development, reskilling and retraining and supporting investment and jobs. The fund will be flexible in its design to allow the Government to respond quickly.

I will highlight some specific points regarding budget day announcements, and there were many. Regarding income tax, the earned income tax credit to support small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the backbone of our economy and sustain thousands of jobs, is a very important measure. The earned income credit has been increased by €150, from €1,500 to €1,650, and will apply from the current tax year. The divergence between people on PAYE and people who are self-employed has been a major issue for many years. This increase in the earned income credit will give a boost to business owners and is expected to benefit 230,000 self-employed people who make up a substantial and important part of our economy. This will include farmers, shop and garage owners, people running small businesses, sole traders and the woman and the man with the van.

I turn now to the tax warehousing situation. In order to provide additional support for businesses and employers, budget 2021 provides for an extension of the tax debt warehousing scheme to include repayments of the TWSS funds owed by employers and preliminary tax obligations for adversely affected self-employed people. The Government is aware that not all self-employed taxpayers can benefit from the losses provision in the July stimulus. Budget 2021, therefore, provides for a debt warehousing provision to be extended to include the 2019 balance and the 2020 preliminary tax and to allow such taxpayers to defer payment for a period of one year, with no interest applying.

The new Covid-19 restrictions support scheme will also provide targeted and timely support for businesses directly impacted by Covid-19. The scheme is designed to generally apply when level 3, or higher, restrictions are in place. Under the scheme, qualifying businesses can apply to the Revenue Commissioners for a cash payment based on their 2019 turnover, subject to a maximum weekly payment of €5,000. The scheme will be effective from yesterday until the end of March 2021. This is a real cash boost to small businesses, via the Revenue Commissioners.

The help-to-buy scheme for housing is a key priority for the Government. To support the delivery of new homes and help hard-pressed first-time buyers, the additional supports available under the help-to-buy scheme, which were provided in the July stimulus, are being ex-

tended for a further year to the end of 2021. This increases the level of support available for first-time buyers to the lesser of €30,000 or 10% of the purchase price of the new home or the self-build property, and this is an increase from the previously applying €20,000 and 5% limits.

Most Irish people dream of owning their own home. The help-to-buy scheme has the same objective of assisting people to fulfil their dream of owning their own home as the mortgage interest tax relief that applied for many decades, and which helped hundreds of thousands of families to buy their own homes in the past. It has always been traditional for the State to help people, in some measure, with their mortgages and to acquire their own homes. It has been part of the Irish DNA for decades now. Many people in the Opposition, however, are objecting to the principle of the scheme because they are saying that it may provide employment to the builders who construct the houses. That is essentially what is being said.

Irish Water faces several issues, such as not being able to keep up with the demand to connect new houses being built in new estates. Irish Water, therefore, is being given an extra €108 million to bring its total up to €1.3 billion next year. I hope that will help Irish Water to connect new houses, which people need badly, while also allowing it to deal with maintenance and leakage issues.

The schools building programme is very important, and the €740 million allocated this year will allow a great deal of building, refurbishment and enhancement of schools. Funding provided in the budget will also allow for the recruitment of an extra 990 special needs assistants and more than 400 special education teachers across mainstream schools, special classes and special schools. This is a massive increase and, all in all, we are reducing the primary-level staffing schedule by one point to 25:1. This will involve the employment of 1,065 new teachers across the sector, including the special needs sector.

State income support schemes currently assist 750,000 people on the PUP, on the EWSS and on the live register. There have been many calls to increase the PUP, but the people who have been shouting loudest and strongest on that aspect have not fought the case for the people on the basic jobseeker's allowance of €203 per week. I conclude now and I will hand over to Deputy Eoghan Murphy. I got the name wrong earlier.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is it Deputy Eoghan Murphy or Deputy Cathal Crowe?

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I am not sure who is on the list.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I think it is me, according to what the Whips told me.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** Yes, it is.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for sharing time. I welcome the budget announced by the Government yesterday. I will pick up on two statements in yesterday's budget in the time I have.

The first comment was made by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, when he talked about our budget commitment to our strategy being a bridge to a better future. Of course he is absolutely right. This is bridging finance, and we must remember that. These are not permanent changes in how we budget or spend as a country. Borrowing costs are low at the moment and so we can borrow. We can afford to do that now to manage what we hope is a temporary disruption to our livelihoods, society and economy, and to help as many people as possible

through these very dark and difficult times.

However, we as the decision-makers also need to ask ourselves what we will do if these disruptions are not temporary. The second important thing that was said yesterday came from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, when he said that the resources available to us are not limitless. They are not. We will spend €20 billion more both this year and next year than we will take in, and those are just the current estimates if nothing else goes wrong or changes. In this budget, we decided to add €35 billion to the stock of national debt between this year and next year. That is the right thing to do because we can afford to do it now but it is also worth noting that before we came into this year the stock of national debt was already €204 billion. If we add €35 billion it becomes €239 billion. That is not a small increase. It is also worth noting, and I make this comparison on purpose, that in November 2010 the amount of money we had invested in Anglo Irish Bank and the Irish Nationwide Building Society, INBS, was €34.7 billion. We know some of the consequences of the decisions that were made at that time.

To reiterate, I welcome what we are doing and Ministers are making the right choices. I just wish to sound a note of caution when I hear Sinn Féin and others say we should be borrowing and putting even more debt onto the taxpayers of the future. Covid may not be temporary. A vaccine may not be around the corner. The V-shaped recovery may turn out to be false and borrowing costs may not stay low. Every new day under restrictions, this economic situation becomes more precarious for all of us and more permanent damage to our economy is done. I am not being heartless about Covid or the difficult times people are going through, and I am not dismissing the very real needs of people today, but we must think about the non-Covid health damage being done in our society and the damage being done to jobs in our economy. If that damage lasts a very long time, it could perversely undermine all our efforts today to help people through Covid, as well as the social welfare benefits we have in place, other healthcare responses and all the other things we try to do every day to make people's lives better.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** As I only have a few minutes, I will start with tourism. I was happy to see that some investment is being made in tourism business supports and assistance in terms of cash flow for the industry. However, these measures do not reflect the catastrophic situation that tourism and hospitality is in and there is no point in helping businesses without supporting workers too. A 9% VAT rate for the sector would have been welcome back in the summer when representatives from the sector and my party advocated for it. Similarly, the stay and spend scheme is a shambles. It came in just as the country went into level 3 lockdown so it is absolutely useless to the sector at the moment. The VAT rate lasts until the end of next year but the real worry is whether businesses will survive until then.

The budget did not address the ongoing issues with the pandemic unemployment payment. Not reinstating the original payment levels was a terrible move given the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions. The wage subsidy scheme is also not fit for purpose because it excludes 150,000 low-income workers and supports for employers have almost halved. The highest subsidy is now €203. It must be reinstated to its original form for tourism and hospitality, the arts and other sectors that remain closed down. Sinn Féin's proposal would have guaranteed 85% of take-home pay for workers on the minimum wage with wage subsidies of up to €410 per week for highly impacted sectors and €300 per week for sectors moderately impacted by the pandemic.

I also want to touch on the 29% increase in carbon tax, against which I and my party voted last night. This increase is regressive, lazy and very unfair and it affects poorer households and rural areas the hardest. We already know this tax does not change behaviour. It has not changed

behaviour so far and it will not change behaviour if there are no viable alternatives available to people. In its current form it will only make people poorer. This increase is cruel. People want to make changes for the good of our environment and planet, but this Government does not acknowledge that it has a major part to play in that. Slapping higher taxes on fuel is not going to help a struggling family in any shape or form if they have no alternatives for travel or, from next May, for heating their homes. Hiking motor tax on older diesel and petrol cars compounds this issue. Transitioning to electric cars is an essential step, but the changes in this budget will only benefit wealthier motorists while punishing those who cannot afford to buy electric vehicles. That has been the theme of this budget, the same as every other budget I have witnessed in my time as a Deputy. Those who are struggling are yet again hit hardest by the Government and those who are wealthy are left as they were. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party look after a certain type of people and the rest are left abandoned.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** My time is short so I will get straight into it. Yesterday was a fairly extraordinary day and €18 billion is an extraordinary figure for a small island nation. The insertion of €18 billion into the economy over the next year should and will have positive ramifications but I cannot help but feel, now that the dust has settled somewhat, that yesterday's budget was a lost opportunity. The budget will help us keep our heads above water and survive in many ways, but nothing about the measures announced yesterday was in any way transformative. When the dust has settled on this and people are talking about the incredible year that was 2020 and the budget of that year, they will say there were no lasting ramifications. This budget will have no legacy because the measures taken are short term, near sighted and designed with containment in mind rather than the advancement of who we are as a society.

The problems that existed in Ireland pre-pandemic, and the reasons many of us were elected to serve in this House, were childcare, the unavailability of affordable housing, no protections for renters and the abysmal state of our healthcare system. None of those issues will be addressed by yesterday's budget and the €18 billion insertion into our economy. That will be a shame. Yesterday's budget simply lacked ambition. There was no ambition in childcare, very limited ambition in housing and protection of renters and nothing that will push us towards universal healthcare.

In education, an area about which I am passionate, we have a chronically underfunded education system. Some of the announcements over the past decade and beyond and even some of those made yesterday also lacked ambition. It was heralded that we will bring class sizes down from the highest in Europe to a pupil to teacher ratio of 25:1. Is that the extent of our ambition? Are we going to put our hands in the air and say that is a success story or that improvements will look like 25 pupils in a class with a teacher and an SNA or two? That is not progress and never will be.

One of the more worthy aspects of the budget was the announcement of 900 additional SNAs. That is incredible. SNAs are the champions of our education system, but what about the 18,000 SNAs who are already there and the conditions they are asked to work under? Their jobs have no permanence, we have not yet professionalised their profession, and we do not pay them enough. None of that was addressed yesterday. None of the measures even came close.

I heard nothing said yesterday about the digital divide. Would it have been too ambitious to say that, with that €18 billion, we will aspire to get a laptop into the hands of every child who needs one? In that way, should the pandemic worsen and should we have to close our schools like has been done in the North, at least our students can learn at home in the manner they were

not able to a few months ago.

There were some other incredibly poor measures in the budget. One of the issues about which we are passionate in the Social Democrats is the eradication of child poverty. We brought forward a motion on that a few weeks ago, which was voted down. Yesterday, to address the issue of child poverty, our Government provided an extra €2 per week per child under the age of 12, which miraculously increases to an extra €5 should that child happen to be over the age of 12. There are 90,000 children in this country at risk of severe poverty and the Government is giving them an extra €8 a month. It expects them to be happy about that and is clapping itself on the back for it. That is an extraordinary failure of ambition and an extraordinarily poor way of spending €18 billion. It just lacks ambition.

When I think about the problems of yesterday's budget, I cannot help but come back to the ideology that lies behind it. When I think about the people who were standing there yesterday presenting the budget and how tightly they linked themselves to the idea of centrist politics, yesterday's budget encapsulated the problem of those who aspire only to hold the line of centrism. When all a person can do with his or her politics is to hold the line, that person is not seeking to advance who we are as a society. Yesterday we had that opportunity. We could borrow and we borrowed an appropriate amount, yet we have done nothing to address the permanent problems that we have seen in Irish society, and that was a failure of ambition. It was a failure of centrist politics. When people talk about that €18 billion in years to come, they will say it was a wasted opportunity, which it was.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I welcome the opportunity to speak. The Office of Public Works was provided with a gross Estimate for 2021 of €511 million, an increase on the 2020 allocation. Just over €127 million of the moneys allocated are to flood risk management and €384 million is for estate management, including heritage, two important areas where the Office of Public Works will continue to deliver for both the public and the Government.

The OPW appreciates that budget 2021 is taking place within one of the most challenging and uncertain environments of our time and welcomes this continued support of Government. There is little doubt that 2021 will be another challenging year but the Office of Public Works will work as diligently as ever in the provision of critical services, including flood relief and estate management.

One of the most important priorities for the Government is climate change. Climate change will ultimately lead to much greater impacts from flooding. The Office of Public Works continues to lead on the implementation of the Government's flood risk policy for mitigating against the effect of flooding. In doing so, the OPW utilises many different responses, including infrastructure, drainage, planning and ongoing research, to ensure a comprehensive approach to the non-static nature of floods and the effects of climate change.

The 2021 allocation provides the OPW with the continued ability to carry out major flood relief works, consisting of 150 projects, 118 of which represent projects arising out of the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, study and associated flood risk management plans. The OPW will work and assist in achieving long-term sustainability in the area of flood risk management and as such will require continued Government support in the coming years.

The 2021 funding for estate management will continue to support the management, development, preservation and conservation of the State's significant property portfolio under the OPW. While 2021 will present a changed working environment due to Covid-19 measures and changing business requirements of Government and their respective Departments, the OPW will continue to enhance its delivery of an efficient, fit-for-purpose and sustainable estate with funds received in the 2021 Estimates. In the coming years, further investment will be required to address the age and condition of many of our diverse properties and the associated costs in bringing such properties up to the required statutory standards while ensuring optimal use and value for money.

The OPW heritage sites and parks are proving to be of great importance to the State, particularly now, in providing our citizens with recreation outlets during the current pandemic. The dedicated and skilled work of the OPW on the conservation and preservation of our heritage should be commended by all. The OPW aims to deliver upgraded amenities for the public visiting heritage sites during 2021.

In addition to moneys provided under our Vote, the OPW also provides many services and works in collaboration and partnership with other public bodies in the delivery of Government objectives, including those outlined in the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, and the national development plan. For example, yesterday's budget provided for continued preparations for Brexit. The OPW has played a pivotal role in Ireland's readiness for Brexit. It was tasked by Government to plan, prepare and implement works to ensure that sufficient infrastructure is in place at ports and airports to cater for any increase in official checks and controls on trade. The OPW is carrying out this work on an agency basis for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Health Service Executive and the Revenue Commissioners. A considerable amount of work has been completed by the OPW in preparing the required infrastructure at Dublin Port, Dublin Airport and Rosslare Europort, and this will be further progressed in 2021.

Looking at key economic measures for 2021, the work of the OPW not only contributes to developing and modernising the State's infrastructure and estate but also stimulates growth in the market. The OPW carries out large, medium and small-scale capital and maintenance works in all regions of the country. Small-scale capital works and maintenance are especially labour intensive and make a valued contribution to local employment and development, which in turn stimulates the local economy. The nature of this activity is also very flexible in scaling up and down quickly in response to environmental and budgetary conditions. The OPW has a pipeline of construction projects in place with varying lead-in times, allowing for maximum flexibility in accelerating investment. Some of this work is prioritised to commence in 2021.

Before I finish, I pay tribute to the work of the staff of the Office of Public Works, especially our outdoor staff, in an extremely difficult summer. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle's constituency was not exempted from it. We had a significant number of serious flooding events throughout the summer, no doubt as a result of the change in the climate. I pay tribute to the outdoor staff of the OPW, in conjunction with the outdoor staff of local authorities, fire and rescue services, and all others who assisted in a voluntary capacity. It is, unfortunately, becoming more of an issue and I would like to return to the matter in the House during the year.

There are a number of specific issues in the budget, ranging from local issues such as investment in Shannon Airport to supports for the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, of €80 million, the well-heralded supports for tourism and infrastructure, the Covid

supports that businesses badly need, which will be available from the Revenue Commissioners, as well as a number of other initiatives that I welcome as a Deputy for my constituency.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Budget 2021 is the largest investment of money in the history of the State and it is happening at a time when lives and livelihoods are at risk. I was pleased to see €18 billion being injected into this economy. I am aghast that some in the Chamber would say that that kind of budget lacks ambition, when nothing in our State's history has involved that much money being pumped into the welfare of the country. I think the commentary is riddled with clichés. When one digs deep into how the Opposition would fund a greater, more expansionary budget, the facts were laid bare on my local radio station this morning when the Sinn Féin Deputy in my constituency said that it would be based on a platform of taxation. I think local businesses should tune their radios into that and hear that, because they are crippled. Our budget has been designed around supporting them and giving them a base to keep trading and to keep their staff on payroll.

There are a number of issues I would like to address. The announcement of capital investment was of significant importance to my constituency. It is shared with Cork Airport but it is also coming to Shannon Airport at a time when it is ailing and in desperate need of help. I see it as a stepping stone in helping the airport through these lean months, we hope into the spring of 2021. Now is a great time to devise a new aviation policy so that we do not see the continued dominance of Dublin Airport at the expense of Shannon, Cork, Knock and others.

I am pleased to see the VAT rate reduced from 13.5% to 9%. A more streamlined communiqué needs to come from Government about this. There were many questions to my office this morning of how businesses manage it. It is quite simply for each business to decide but I would hope that in most instances, businesses would keep that margin for themselves and ensure that that keeps them afloat, because there are so many at risk of going entirely insolvent and having to close their doors forever. That is one of the measures in the design of this budget. Some may have the capacity to pass it on to the consumer, and it is brilliant if that can happen, but the budget is really to shore up support for businesses.

As a former teacher up until February, I welcome the reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio, which is what the Irish National Teachers' Organisation asked for. Others will paint it as coming up short. This is what was asked for and what was delivered this year.

I know the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, is already looking at the flood scheme in Clonlara and others that need to happen in County Clare. When the review of the Shannon Group is concluded, I hope that some of the Shannon Heritage sites in the mid-west may come under the directorship of the Minister of State's Department.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Budget 2021 should have been the budget that gave workers and families a break. I welcome the positive measures in it but it does not go far enough. It does not give security to those who are worried about their future, given the uncertain times that lie ahead. The failure to reinstate the pandemic unemployment payment is baffling. It should not have been cut in the first place. Not only that, but the Government intends to cut this payment further in the new year. This will simply make the situation worse for many families. The price of fuel has shot up, as has motor tax, and that will have a real impact on the pockets of low earners. It has been framed as a green measure. The reality is the first green measure implemented by this Government undermines the idea of a just transition. Years of underinvestment in public transport means that people with older cars will be penalised for not being able to afford to

change them. Electric cars are expensive and the vast majority of people simply cannot afford them.

Fuel poverty is a major issue and people will be worried about switching on their heating or lighting their fires because of these increased costs. The carbon tax is an attack on those who have very little and it targets some of the most vulnerable in our communities. It is unacceptable. I cannot believe that parties claiming to be left and progressive have supported this tax.

There is nothing in this budget for renters, who are being fleeced as rents continue to spiral out of control. Renters will continue to pay massive amounts of money while the Government could have given them a break like the proposal in our alternative budget. The plans of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government for social and affordable housing are poor and he is continuing the failed policies of the previous Minister.

Childcare was not addressed in yesterday's budget and providers, parents and staff have been let down yet again in this area. People continue to pay fees that are the equivalent of a second mortgage. In Sinn Féin's alternative budget, we outlined what could be done to address the crisis in childcare. We set out our plans to tackle the issue of affordability for parents but the Government completely ignored it. The budget will be remembered for all the wrong reasons by the staff and parents in this sector.

This budget has left many people behind and it attacks the pockets of those who have the least. There is no fairness in it. It is another budget of the haves and the have-nots. Those who were vulnerable last week are still vulnerable this week.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt leis an Teachta Flaherty. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, opened his budget speech yesterday by saying "The backdrop for budget 2021 is a truly remarkable one", and never was a truer word spoken. When the budget last year was presented, it had been developed by the then Government in the shadow of Brexit. It was described as a "Brexit budget". Now, 12 months later, while we continue to prepare for Brexit and the enormous shift and change it will bring to our island, we also must face the ongoing consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The figures continue to get massively worse, particularly in my county of Meath. I will speak briefly to that before finishing.

We are living in unprecedented times but I have no doubt that the budget introduced yesterday will support our citizens and economy in meeting these challenges. It will protect lives and livelihoods and I am incredibly proud to be part of the Government putting forward this budget. I know it is the job of the Opposition to oppose but it is particularly difficult to oppose the budget this year when the Government is throwing everything possible at this in a financial sense in order to give the entire economy and population a lift and try to keep the country on an even keel while getting back employment and business. Once taxes are being generated, we can provide the social services that we all support and promote in this House.

In 78 days, Britain will cease to be part of the EU's Single Market and customs union. Deal or no deal, there are major changes ahead of us because of Brexit from 1 January. The recovery fund being established by the Government of €3.4 billion will be crucial in helping to combat the economic impact of this on the lives of many citizens. Additionally, approximately €340 million of voted expenditure will be spent on Brexit supports next year, including an additional

allocation for compliance expenditure in 2021 to finalise work at our ports and airports. I am glad to see much of that work ongoing or finished. There is also provision for an additional 500 staff to bring the total provision to approximately 1,500 people working for us and doing operational checks. It is incredible to see the facilities in Dublin Port that have been replicated at Rosslare to meet the requirements for facilities in advance of Brexit, even if a trade deal is agreed in the next few weeks.

This funding will be supported by the Brexit adjustment fund and I pay tribute to the Taoiseach on his work during the summer to ensure this was established and Ireland was able to get this into the multi-annual financial framework. Ireland will seek to avail of these funds in the coming years given the disproportionate impact of Brexit on us. I also welcome the allocation of €500 million to a shared island capital fund. This will deliver critical cross-Border infrastructure, which will allow us to realise the full potential of our island on both sides of the Border. My constituency of Meath East has the Dublin-Derry road going through it and I have no doubt that it will benefit. The A5 in the North of Ireland will link to Dublin and give an economic lift that the north west of this country particularly needs. It will have other benefits around the country.

On education, I was interested to hear the Social Democrats criticise the pupil-teacher ratio, which we have brought to another record low. I am really proud to be part of a Government doing that. In my former role as an education spokesperson I argued very strongly about this. The ratio is now at a record low, and while the Social Democrats manifesto during the election called for a steady reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio, it is exactly what the Government is doing. I am surprised the Social Democrats have not welcomed this as being exactly in accordance with their policy. It will make a significant difference in classrooms up and down the country, which is fantastic.

I welcome the supports for hospitality, tourism and the arts, as well as housing. We are all tired of living with Covid-19 and hearing about Brexit. Unfortunately, these are real matters with which we must live for some time. The budget does as much as possible to support us in the period ahead and there is no doubt there will be brighter days.

I have seen the figures for today, including 185 new cases in my county of Meath. Unfortunately, there was an article in a newspaper at the weekend about my local electoral area having some of the lowest incidence of the virus in the country. It was possibly too good to be true but I also know how quickly the position can change. I appeal to the people in Meath to restrict their meeting of other people and keep their social distance. They should comply with all the advice. I am conscious there will be many televised GAA matches this weekend and I have heard anecdotal evidence that some people are planning to have people to their house to watch these matches. I appeal to people not to do it this weekend. We are all starved of football, attending gatherings and that bit of fun, craic and enjoyment. I know Dublin is playing Meath at the weekend but please do not go to somebody else's house to watch the match. I make that strong appeal to my constituents and the whole country as well.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** When I visualised attending the Dáil on budget day for the first time as a Deputy, little did I realise it would be one of the most significant and historic budgets in the history of this great State of ours. I certainly never imagined it would be set against the backdrop of the Covid-19 crisis. Many people have already correctly referred to this budget as a wartime budget because it had to be framed within the challenges confronting us as a nation.

Across County Longford businesses are on their knees. Many were savaged by the first lockdown and several have been plunged back into closure again under level 3 restrictions. For weeks we have pleaded with the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, for a suite of measures that would enable these businesses to recalibrate and give the owners of many family-run businesses assurance and encouragement that there is a way back.

The Covid-19 restrictions support scheme is a welcome response, offering much-needed supports to businesses affected by level 3 restrictions in the accommodation, food, arts, recreation and entertainment sectors. They have now been assured of a payment scheme based on weekly turnover from 2019. From today, businesses may apply to the Revenue Commissioners for a cash payment in respect of trading expenses for the period in which restrictions are in place. This takes effect immediately and that money, in turn, may be used to pay for rent and other business-associated costs while a business is closed or customer restrictions are in place.

From the start of this crisis, the hospitality sector has sought a reduction in the VAT rate and the reduction from 13.5% to 9% is certainly welcome. It takes effect from 1 November and will run throughout the course of next year. It will be a lifeline for many small businesses in County Longford and across the country.

I said at the outset that I never imagined budget day taking place against the backdrop of a global pandemic. Equally, I never imagined a budget day with 95% of the hospitality businesses in County Longford closed and hundreds of employees dependent on the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. As a nation, we are at war with Covid-19. Before this budget, many businesses throughout County Longford were deeply worried and wondered if there would ever be a way back for them. The critics and the hurlers in the ditch will clutch at populism and fallacies to detract from the breadth and enormity of this budget, but it is a budget that truly offers hope. I for one will be proud to face the people of Longford and assure them that this budget delivers on so much of what was sought in education, housing and health. Most crucially of all, it gives hope and a roadmap to a future after Covid-19.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and youth affairs, I could not let this moment go without saying that the budget is a total missed opportunity where childcare is concerned. Absolutely nothing has been done for struggling providers, whose challenges were shown in stark relief by Covid-19. Nothing has been done for the parents paying crazy fees, an issue that mainly affects women, who are pushed out of the workforce when childcare becomes too expensive. Moreover, nothing has been done for those working in the sector, who have studied and hold degree-level qualifications. Many are on the minimum wage or have to sign on for social welfare during the summer. We have spoken about this time and again in committee hearings and in this Chamber. Workers in this sector took to the streets in anger on 5 February this year. This is not a sector that would normally take that type of action, but the people involved are at their wits' end.

I have heard talk of a review, but I genuinely believe that soon there will not be a sector on which to carry it out. The crisis is happening now and we need to see action now. There is no time for more reviews. There have been lots of reviews and consultations over the years. I am a massive fan of consultation and I believe it is extremely important, but we know what needs to be done for the early years sector. The sector needs investment, the workers need a decent wage and parents, particularly women, need to be able to afford childcare. There is no point in talking about a recovery if childcare is not one of its key elements. This budget is a total slap in the face for this sector.

I also want to talk about housing and those who are struggling with rent. So many families, young people and young couples are trying to come up with rent money every month and are barely getting by. They have absolutely no opportunity to save for a mortgage. There is nothing in this budget to help them. One of the only things we see is a carbon tax. There will be an increase in the cost of the fuel people need to heat their homes and the petrol they need to drive to work. There are no alternatives, particularly in rural Ireland. People must have cars to get to work. Now people will be penalised for going to work and heating their homes, which will put more and more people into fuel poverty. They will have to choose between paying their rent or mortgage or heating their houses.

In the 40 seconds I have left I also want to mention pensioners, who have not seen an increase in several years. Not every pensioner is entitled to the fuel allowance or the living alone allowance. In fact, many are not entitled to those payments. They will be particularly affected by the increase in the price of fuel. This group has been forgotten about. It is ironic that our children in the early years sector and our elderly, two of the most vulnerable groups in our society, have been forgotten in this budget. It does not say very much for this Government or its budget.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** No one could have predicted the reality of 2020. We are living through a time that will continue to be spoken about long after we have left this world. This year will be seen as historic for generations to come. The country's economy was in a relatively strong position at the start of 2020. We had entered the year with a budget surplus along with the much-publicised rainy day fund. Employment levels were good and people had relaxed into a sense of security for the future. More people were returning to live in Ireland than were leaving for foreign shores. There was confidence in Ireland again after the years of uncertainty. Despite the concerns about Britain leaving the European Union, Irish fears were not insurmountable. Less than ten months later, that entire scenario has been turned upside down. Covid-19 has swept the globe, leaving a trail of economic destruction that will take many years to repair. The prospect of a no-deal Brexit looms. Ireland is facing a battering from all sides.

Against this backdrop, this budget is critical. The long-term outcome of both of these crises is unknown. The only absolute certainty is uncertainty. This budget offers an opportunity to give some relief to as many people and as many sectors as possible. It is a chance to help those who have been and will be most severely impacted to put some of the jigsaw back together. This budget is the largest in the history of the State. To some, that may sound as though there will be something for everyone. Throughout the country, eager hands are waiting to get their slice of the budget cake. There are those who desperately need it, whose very survival depends on it.

This budget has gone a long way towards offering help. Our strong position going into 2020 and our ability to borrow have made this possible. It cannot and will not solve all the problems. How the funds are allocated by the various Departments will be crucial to the budget's effectiveness. We cannot continue to borrow indefinitely. Our rainy day fund is depleted. We cannot pass insurmountable debt to the next generation.

Personally, I never thought I would see the day when a Government would be acclaimed for spending €40 billion of borrowed money to underpin a budget. It is remarkable that we have had to do this and that we have no other option. It is remarkable that we have the capacity to borrow so heavily to keep our economy afloat. It underlines the detrimental economic impact of Covid-19 combined with Brexit. It is a precarious position, and the next few years will be a

dangerous time for our country and its people. The reality is stark. There is no room for miscalculation or mistakes. We must proceed with caution and mental dexterity. The borrowed money must be put to good use. It must be wisely spent and productively invested. It is of vital importance that the funding allocated across various Departments is spent in such a way as to guarantee maximum long-term benefit. It must be directed to those who need it most and used to deliver services that will be unable to function effectively or may cease to exist without financial assistance. Such circumstances exist in every constituency in Ireland, including my own constituency of Tipperary. Over the coming weeks I will be making representations to each of the relevant Departments.

I welcome the €100 million that has been allocated to disability services. In County Tipperary we have been fortunate to secure funding for three Ability programmes, Knockanrawley Resource Centre in Tipperary town, St. Cronan's Services in Roscrea and Youth Work Ireland in Tipperary town. The aim of the national Ability programme is to bring young people with disabilities or mental health challenges who are not work-ready closer to the labour market using a wide range of person-centred supports. The uncertainty of future funding is a major concern for all three Ability programmes in Tipperary. Staff retention is already seen as a problem for Ability programmes throughout the country, and will become more problematic the longer this uncertainty goes on, with staff looking to secure their long-term future employment. For many who benefit from the programmes, the process has taken a long time, with small incremental steps along the way. This process can only be planned and implemented with programme security and long-term commitment to staff from the funding agencies. I am asking for the extension of disability funding which would allow them to support and develop young people into the future.

The uncertainty surrounding the future of the project has created concern and anxiety for young people on the programme. They are worried that the support they have found so beneficial will not be available to them beyond June 2021. I am asking the Government not only on behalf of the staff of these three centres in Tipperary, but on behalf of more than 160 young people with a disability and their families, for its support to ensure an extension of programme funding to compensate for time lost due to the late start-up and the impacts of Covid. I am also seeking a long-term commitment to provide continued funding to the 70 Ability programmes across the country in order that they can continue their vital work.

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I am sharing time with Deputy McAuliffe.

I am very pleased to outline the key elements of budget 2021 for my Department, which has responsibility for children, disability, equality, integration and youth. It has received an additional €121 million, bringing the total investment for 2021 to €1.95 billion. In the budget unveiled yesterday, one can see the impact of the Green Party in government. It included a carbon tax that protects the most disadvantaged, €100 million additional funding for disability services, support for the arts, €1 billion extra for public transport, €218 million for emergency accommodation and a 24% increase in the housing budget. It is during tough times that social solidarity and equality matter most. As such, what my Department set out to achieve in the budget was to invest in services that support the most vulnerable in society and particularly services that have been at the forefront of responding to Covid-19.

Since taking office, I have prioritised resourcing Tusla appropriately to fulfil its statutory responsibilities and support the most vulnerable in our communities. In the budget, I have se-

cured the largest annual budget increase for Tusla since its establishment. I have increased its allocation to €878 million for the coming year, an effective overall increase of €61 million, or 7.5%, on the original 2020 allocation. The increased level of investment will support Tusla to advance a range of developments required to fulfil its statutory obligations, including meeting the needs of the most vulnerable children and families, giving important supports to community and voluntary sector organisations that deliver services on its behalf, providing care and protection through quality services for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and allowing Ireland to fulfil commitments to bring more unaccompanied minors from Lesbos to Ireland.

A key priority for my Department will be to end direct provision. Doing so will take time. How we will achieve it will be set out in a White Paper the Government will publish by the end of the year. As ending direct provision will take time, we urgently need to improve the standard of current accommodation for people within the international protection system. I am pleased, therefore, that the total allocation for accommodation for asylum seekers under the direct provision system has been increased to an unprecedented €225 million for 2021. This funding will allow my Department to raise standards of accommodation, making a difference in the lives of people within the system while also providing resources to implement the upcoming White Paper and end direct provision.

Responsibility for equality has transferred to my Department and I am committed to putting equality at the heart of all we do. In recent months we have seen that Covid-19 can have a disproportionate effect on the most marginalised communities. I am pleased, therefore, that funding for Traveller and Roma initiatives has increased by more than 25% to €4.9 million.

Youth organisations have been the unsung heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic, adapting quickly to continue their vital support for young people. Research indicates that young people who engaged with youth organisations during the pandemic fared better than those who did not. As such, I am particularly pleased to have secured an additional €5 million in funding for youth services, bringing the total allocation for this area to almost €70 million. The €5 million increase in funding for youth organisations is recognition of their great work and the role they play in the lives of so many young people.

Turning to childcare, in a very challenging year I have maintained the funding to early learning and care at €638 million for 2021. The pandemic severely affected the provision of services. My Department worked intensively with providers to put in place a series of financial and practical interventions to ensure the sustainability of the sector. All childcare providers will continue to benefit automatically from the employment wage subsidy scheme until the end of March. It will support the wages of childcare professionals to the value of €60 million. The funding for 2021 will allow the demands of the various funding schemes to be met, while also addressing key areas such as further increases in funding to the access and inclusion model that supports children with disabilities to access the early childhood care and education scheme, as well as increases for inspections and development of strategy. I understand the pressure the sector and parents with children in childcare are facing. However, we must be clear that any additional benefits must benefit the parents who pay the fees and the childcare professionals working in the services. Mechanisms to achieve these goals need to be in place. Three major expert reviews will report next year and they will inform future investment and reform. I reiterate that I am fully committed to improving pay and conditions for childcare professionals, as well as reducing fees for parents.

In the midst of the Covid pandemic and facing the possibility of a no-deal Brexit, we have a package of measures to support the country through these difficult times. We are investing in children in care, domestic violence services and family support services. We are supporting young people through this difficult time and ending direct provision. Our focus this year must be on protecting the most vulnerable. I believe this budget will achieve that.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I thank the Minister for outlining the investment made by the Government in some of the youngest in society. Yesterday, Fianna Fáil proposed a budget to this House for the first time in ten years. In so doing, it converted the support and votes we received in February into actions and supports for the people of Ireland. We worked with Fine Gael and the Green Party on a shared document. We made changes to how government policy has operated. We supported lives and livelihoods and all those in the grip of Covid, Brexit and climate change. We prioritised public spending over tax cuts, embedded spending in public services that will last for years and invested in the people of this country.

On the Covid pandemic, Fianna Fáil is protecting workers and their jobs through the Covid restrictions support scheme which pays up to €5,000 per week to businesses impacted by closures. The wage subsidy scheme protects workers' earnings. The 9% VAT rate for hotels, hairdressers, pubs and restaurants will protect those businesses in the months to come when they have an opportunity to recover. In the budget, Fianna Fáil has supported workers and jobs.

Many other sectors have also been supported. It might sound like Monopoly money when it is mentioned in the media, but the allocation of €4 billion means more full-time staff to reduce CAMHS waiting lists, €100 million for people with disabilities, €38 million for mental health services, 10,000 real social homes to be built in the State within the next year and 900 special needs assistants.

On climate, the budget and the climate action Bill are climate brave but the Opposition is climate weak. Some members of the Opposition may not state that they are denying climate change, but they do everything they can to undermine the actions this Government and responsible politicians across the world need to take to reduce carbon use.

There are those who wish for and talk about a united Ireland, but the shared island fund actually puts real money behind what a shared island and a united Ireland might look like. I welcome that initiative.

No budget can solve all our problems, let alone when the country is battling a pandemic. However, the values that brought me into politics and which I share with others in Fianna Fáil are the values I see in this budget, which will be the first of five budgets under this Government.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I acknowledge that the budget gave many people hope of surviving financially during the Covid crisis. However, I do not support the measures it brought in under the green agenda as they hit rural Ireland to the core.

Yesterday €3.8 billion was given to health. What will this mean for children with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, EDS? There are two children in my constituency with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome - Leah who is ten years of age and Ellie who is seven years of age. I brought *7 o'clock* these cases to the Dáil on several occasions to highlight not only Leah and Ellie's cases but hundreds of others around the country. I was promised that a pain consultant would be appointed so that children such as Leah and Ellie could be treated here. Currently, there is a pain consultant in Dublin two days a week who is on loan from Belfast. What

happens when Northern Ireland goes into lockdown? What supports will be in place then?

That is not the only part of the problem. On the same issue, there is not a paediatric pain specialist here. I was told by the then Minister, Deputy Harris, that a consultant was about to be appointed last May. I was promised and promised that Limerick would get a specific physiotherapist for mobility to stall the progression of scoliosis for these children and many more. The difference for them is being able to walk in some capacity. Currently, they are taking two one hour sessions per week costing €140 per session and they must travel from Limerick to Dublin by BUMBLEance to get this treatment. They were turned down for medical patches on their medical cards. These are children but they were turned down for pain patches.

Both of them have been put on an occupational therapy waiting list in the past two weeks. They should have been on this for the past two years. They have removed the medical certificates application, which means people who are trying to get to school or medical appointments, such as these two children, are unable to do so. They cannot be put into cars as they cannot sit down and they cannot get to medical appointments.

A total of 603 people of the 73,000 who responded to the Be on Call for Ireland campaign have started working within the health services, according to *The Irish Times*. I appreciate 16,000 are being taken on but that leaves 55,000 people who were on call for Ireland. The Irish have to go abroad to study due to the failure of the CAO system. For example, a physiotherapist who went to the Netherlands to study was one of four in 2016. Now there are 50. Would the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, say that this is good for Ireland? Sadly, no. Over the four years of study, there is a requirement to complete a 15-month placement. The students are encouraged to go back to their home country to complete same. Why do the HSE guidelines prevent Irish students completing placements in HSE clinics? We do not have enough places for them in our colleges and yet when another country educates them, we will not even place them. Despite this, children around the country are in need of physiotherapists who cannot be trained here and who we send to the Netherlands to be trained and then they cannot get placed here due to the HSE guidelines. What does that tell the Minister of State? In 2019, 50 went to the Netherlands and they cannot get placements here. It is completely wrong.

As I stated at the start, we all want to lower the emissions but the budget announced yesterday has destroyed the trucking and busing industry in rural areas. If I want to plug in an electric car in my home place of Granagh in County Limerick, my nearest point is in Charleville, County Cork. If the Government wants us to drive electric, it should give us the infrastructure so that we can drive electric and stop spending everything in Dublin.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I have reflected on this budget. It is an enormous amount of money - €18 billion. No doubt one has to welcome many of the measures in it. What is missing, as I said yesterday, is the transformative action needed.

More than anything else, the greatest challenge facing us is climate change. It must permeate all our actions, and yet we have associated it with a negative tax, a carbon tax, at a time when the loudest and clearest message from the Government is to not use public transport. Do not go near public transport or do so at your peril is the advice, but then we introduce a higher carbon tax. It is not a good message to send out.

I welcome so many of the measures, including the commitment to end direct provision and the extra funding for disability. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will remember Ability

West. It wrote to us all and asked for the training fund to be put back. That would have been a measure of our bona fides in terms of empowering people and having a more equal society. Maybe somewhere the Minister of State could find that tiny amount of money to show that we are serious, not about charity and not about giving crumbs, but about wanting to empower people because it makes for a much better society and a better economy. While the Minister of State is at it, she might look at what they have sought for a long time. She has been at all the meetings and she is very committed. I refer to a cost of disability payment, which they have identified at a minimum of €20 or €25 per week.

We all received representations from those over 66. We told everybody over 70 years of age to “cocoon”, a word I hated from the beginning. However, I played the game for a little while until such time as I felt nauseated with what we were doing and I asked for that to stop. In fairness to the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, he said he would, but the word persisted. We told people in a disingenuous way to stay at home when we had no authority to do that. For those who are working, the ESRI told us in May 2020 that there are only 65,000 people in that category who are over that age who are working. It is a specific sum completely excluded from everything. We talk about us all being in this together. We are clearly not. It is a tiny number of people. The Government might look at that because it has billions of euro put aside in reserve now.

What will we do to make it truly transformative so that we will be prepared to meet our climate change obligations and meet the future infections that will come because our hospital system could not meet it because we had run it down? Home help is something I mentioned yesterday. My time is limited so I will not go into it now.

On mental health, the Minister should set up the independent review panel to review the implementation of the new policy. Take it out of the Government’s hands and out of our hands.

On domestic violence, how can we talk about equality or €18 billion, and still not have enough basic refuges for women and children to go to? The figures are startling. Ireland is obliged to have 472 places and we have 141. Can the Minister of State imagine that I am asking for more refuges because we have not even begun to deal with how women and children are suffering from domestic violence at a cost of €2.5 billion to the economy every year? Imagine that waste. According to a conservative estimate, €2.5 billion is going to waste every year. The same applies to mental health, in terms of cost to the economy. I asked myself what was needed to change this. Certainly, much more consultation on the ground is needed. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will be aware of that. I do not mean to highlight one Minister as opposed to another. It is only that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is from east Galway and I have seen her at many meetings.

I heard the Minister say there is extra funding going to local authorities, which I welcome. I welcome the extension of the waiver, but what is not clear is whether that funding will enable the local authorities to continue providing services. Will I be raising Topical Issue matters, with the permission of the Ceann Comhairle, on public swimming pools? Those in Ballinasloe and Tuam are in trouble. Will this extra money ensure there will be a baseline of services below which we will not go? That might be a bad choice of words when talking about water but we are beginning to drown rather than saying there has to be a baseline for a civilised society. We must have swimming pools. I absolutely support the package for businesses and so on but the irony is that we are supporting private pools but no one can tell me if we can open the public pools.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** This year, 2020, has been a particularly challenging time for people with disabilities and their families. Many people have had their usual daily regimes changed, causing much distress. It is important to acknowledge the remarkable strength families have shown in recent months.

With access to services limited people were under pressure to adjust. The resolve shown cannot be underestimated and I want to thank everyone for their resilience and managing the challenge of living with Covid-19.

Disability service providers have also played an important role, demonstrating great leadership and flexibility in responding to the needs of people with disabilities. I have secured an unprecedented investment of €100 million of new developments in budget 2021 and a further €23 million for initiatives commenced in 2020. That means that the disability budget for 2021 now stands at €2.22 billion, which demonstrates this Government's commitment to supporting people with disabilities. This funding will deliver a comprehensive package of measures to strengthen and enhance services and support for people with disabilities therefore giving them greater choice of dependency and control. The increased investment in 2021 enables us to build on the success of existing programmes and policies such as progressing disability services for children, the person-centered model of day services provision under new directions, and the Time to Move on From Congregated Settings report.

The further development of children's disability service is a key focus for this Government. In addition to the €7.8 million announced in September to address the assessment of need backlog, we will provide 100 additional posts for children's therapeutic services next year. These additional posts in speech and language, occupational therapy, psychology and physiotherapy will provide more timely access to therapeutic interventions. I will also continue to push the HSE to recall all such therapists to their primary roles, instead of being used for contact tracing and swabbing.

One of my priorities since taking office has been to ensure that disability services curtailed as a result of Covid-19 would reopen and remain open under the framework for living with Covid-19. While Covid-19 will continue to impact the level of capacity available to safely provide services, I am pleased to have secured funding to support the resumption of day services. This will maintain the extra day of service provided recently to the 14,000 people whose service was reduced.

Budget 2021 also ensures that funding is in place to enable approximately 1,700 young adults leaving school or rehabilitative training in the coming year. They will be given access and supports and services to meet their needs at one of the most crucial transition points of their lives.

Respite is a crucial support for families, and the Government is committed to creating additional respite places. By strengthening respite capacity we can better respond to the needs of families across the country. I have focused on additional overnight places, particularly for children, as well as an alternative model of respite such as day respite camps and clubs, which will allow greater variety of choice for people with disabilities.

Funding will also be provided to expand and enhance supports for people living in their own communities, including the provision of additional personal assistance hours to support people to live self-directed lives. We will also build on the €2.5 million funding secured last month

to extend the number of intensive in-home packages for people who have high support needs. This allows people to remain in their own communities which is key. I have increased the investment in specialist residential support to support people with more complex needs.

Budget 2021 provides funding for an increased number of residential placements on a planned basis, as well as a response to more urgent case care situations. Funding is also allocated for 2021 to address the inappropriate placements of young people with disabilities in nursing homes, and in line with the programme for Government and our policy, Time to Move on From Congregated Settings, we will continue with the successful programme of decongregating next year. There is also additional funding to provide more community-based housing to enable people to move to homes in the community with the necessary support, and I am particularly pleased to announce today that I am planning to set up a new disability integration fund in 2021. The aim is to help provide funding for the community-based initiatives around the country which demonstrates integration of people with disabilities.

Finally, I am delighted to confirm that an additional injection of €20 million in once-off funding is made available in 2020 for disability voluntary service providers to support the agenda of transforming lives reform programme.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the opportunities that budget 2021 will provide for the improvement of health and well-being for our citizens. I would like to acknowledge the support of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, and my fellow Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Rabbitte, in securing additional resources for health in particular for services for those who need them most.

As stated in our programme for Government, the State has a role to play in promoting good physical and mental health. For each individual, a healthy lifestyle is a key foundation for a better quality of life and reducing the risks from both infectious and chronic disease. The pandemic has put public health and well-being centre stage, and this is now more vital than ever, as we adapt to living with Covid-19.

Some €20 million funding has been secured for health and well-being initiatives in budget 2021, providing us with more opportunities to build on the excellent progress made so far through the Healthy Ireland framework, in supporting us all to live longer and better lives, and helping to reduce the burdens on health and social care services.

The investment secured in budget 2021 will enable us to continue and expand on this work, which has a particular focus on prioritising area-based disadvantaged populations. Our key aims in this area are as follows: to empower people to take responsibility for their own health, and support individuals and communities to live healthier lives; to support both national and local developments through targeted health and well-being initiatives; and the continued Implementation of the key national strategies and action plans on obesity, physical activity, smoking and alcohol misuse.

Some €16 million of this funding will support a range of health and well-being projects such as targeted initiatives to address prevention and health inequalities, integrated alcohol services, community-based and digital services, social prescribing, childhood and adolescent obesity prevention and treatment model, and smoking cessation. It will expand implementation nationally of Making Every Contact Count which provides online training and enhanced sup-

port. It will also fund the physical activity and patient pathway model, warmth and well-being programme, prevention and early intervention for children, healthy childhood programme and data and library services to support health and well-being initiatives.

A further €4 million will enhance the existing Healthy Ireland fund, which is used to enable our partners and stakeholders to provide grassroots health and well-being projects in communities.

I welcome the 50 cent increase in the price of a packet of cigarettes, with a *pro rata* increase on other tobacco products, announced in yesterday's budget. I also welcome the allocation of €21 million for new developments relating to my brief on drugs policy and inclusion health. Some €10 million of this is for the national drug strategy and €11 million for homelessness linked to Covid-19. This funding will enable us both to meet the immediate challenges of Covid-19, and to meet the need for long-term solutions to underlying health challenges. The funding I am providing will make a lasting difference in the lives of socially excluded groups.

Addressing the challenges of drug and alcohol misuse is a key factor in improving public health. The Government roadmap for a health-led approach to drug and alcohol misuse is the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, co-ordinated by the Department of Health. We are now at the mid-point in the strategy and shortly we will set out new actions for its remaining four years.

The Government has prioritised support for families and individuals facing homelessness. A common challenge facing homeless people is health, including addiction and mental health. Some €4 million will be allocated to new developments to address the addiction and other health needs of homeless people.

I am happy to announce €2 million to enhance access to health services for socially excluded groups, including the Roma and Traveller communities, asylum seekers and refugees living in direct provision. Victims of domestic violence and the LGBTI community will also benefit from initiatives provided through this funding.

**Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Damien English):** I thank my colleagues for affording me the time to address a few issues in the context of the budget. I will focus mainly on my Department.

This is a pro-jobs budget, which is what we need if we are to keep businesses open and jobs in place once the various restrictions are lifted. This budget will show our business community that there are supports to help get them through Covid and Brexit and that they will be able to re-employ their staff, reopen and grow their respective sectors. I welcome these supports, which build on those that we announced in May and July. They recognise that more than €20 billion of taxpayers' money was committed to the jobs and business agendas. While this is one of the largest budgets ever where the country is concerned, it also has a major focus on business and jobs by providing life support for certain businesses that are under restriction. Through the PUP, it provides people who cannot return to work life support so that we can get them back to work eventually. It also sets aside more than €22 billion for investment in our health services in order to protect the country, help us deal with Covid, improve the health services and put them in a stronger position. We are trying to protect the economy and allow it to regrow so that we will once again be in a strong position to raise the taxes we need from the economy, employment and business if we are to upgrade those services that we want to invest in in the years

ahead. This is a strong budget in that regard, as it must be.

Our Department will receive an extra €136 million in our direct line budget and we will be able to tap into an extra €100 million from the recovery fund next year. People will say that there is a great deal of uncertainty about. That is why, in an unprecedented move, more than €5 billion is being set aside in unallocated expenditure. There will be €3.5 billion plus in the recovery fund, which will be used to fund various business and jobs schemes and initiatives as the year rolls on. In terms of health and social protection, more than €2 billion will be set aside as a contingency fund. We are well placed. While we want to be optimistic about getting through Covid-19 quickly, we must recognise that a budget must be prudent, take the pessimistic view about what might happen with Brexit and Covid and set aside the requisite resources. Naturally, we hope to be in a strong position to grow the economy in 2021 and 2022 to give us the resources we need if we are to get the public finances out of a deficit position and grow services.

The VAT reduction to 9% in respect of the hospitality sector is very important. The new CRSS will be a major support to businesses that are under restrictions and whose turnovers are down to 20% or less. The €3.4 billion recovery fund will give us the firepower to react as the year progresses. We have committed more than €10 billion to capital infrastructure, which is a matter that we touched on in earlier debates. During the financial crisis ten years ago, we did not have that capital financing available to us. Thanks to the long-term planning of the past four or five years, we are in a position this year to invest more than €10 billion in capital infrastructure. This will create jobs in the short term and strengthen the economy and the country in the long term. Investing in education, hospitals, roads and rail will stand to the country in the long run. It is important that we do this.

I wish to raise a matter that affects Kildare, Meath and other areas, namely, the DART+ expansion. Money will be allocated to pay for new electric carriages, which will help the DART to expand into counties around Dublin. Apart from the green agenda, this will make it easier for people to access transport when they return to work. Likewise, there is a commitment to review the capital plan in the first quarter of 2021. That will give projects like my own Navan railway an opportunity to be considered with a view to seeing where they fit into the Government's plans and to have money allocated to them. We will have a thriving economy again, but we must invest in infrastructure in every county now to ensure that.

I chaired the retail forum, which spent the past couple of months not just engaging with Members of the Houses on ideas around business and so on, but with the national representative bodies of businesses, in particular retailers. We got some great ideas from them and our local businesses in Meath and Westmeath. They fed into initiatives in the budget to try to protect retail and other business sectors. The main message has to do with online retail. I welcome that more than €10 million has been allocated - €5 million in our Department's budget and €5 million in the recovery fund - to fund the successful online retail scheme, which is run by Enterprise Ireland. That scheme and the online trading voucher scheme try to encourage retailers not only to have a physical presence on the street when they are allowed to be open, but also to develop online offerings and services. There is considerable potential and opportunity for the Irish retail sector to win back not only some of the market share that it has lost to online retail companies from outside the country, but also some customers from abroad. That is what we are trying to do.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** The €100 million in additional funding for disability services is welcome and I commend the Government on this allocation. I commend all those families and

providers that worked so hard to bring this about. That they were left so long and had to fight so hard is an indictment of this and previous Governments, though, and much more needs to be done, but it is a good first step.

Although I welcome the allocation, I do so with caution. It is apparently for new measures, but Sinn Féin proposed an allocation of €130 million in current funding and €20 million in capital funding, which is needed to meet the costs associated with Covid alone. Will we see the budget's allocation being made available immediately to allow the restoration of services?

Elsewhere in the budget expenditure report, away from the headline figure, we see that it is envisaged that day services are only to be reopened one extra day per week. This still leaves a 40% reduction in such services for people with disabilities. With this meagre increase in provision, will there be any extra support for transport so that people will be able to access these services? Additional money was found to reopen our schools fully and resource extra school transport. As such, why discriminate against people with disabilities?

While I am discussing day services, the Government needs to give a commitment – the Minister of State has done so, but I wonder whether she will hold to it – that if new restrictions are brought in, day services will not be suspended or reduced again. The people who depend on these services have suffered enough from closures. There is a commitment to keeping schools open so long as doing so is safe. The same should be the case in respect of day services.

Although the allocation is to be welcomed as a first step, it falls well short of the actual figure needed to even begin to address the many issues faced by people with disabilities and their families, carers and service providers. The post-budget analysis conducted by Social Justice Ireland, SJI, designated that “no progress” would be made in terms of poverty reduction for people with disabilities and their families and carers. SJI points to the fact that “the Budget did not ... introduce a cost of disability payment”. It also states: “If people with a disability are to be equal participants in society, the extra costs generated by their disability should not be borne by them alone.” This is why Sinn Féin’s alternative budget document proposed a total package of more than €300 million for the disability sector, including a €10 increase in social welfare payments for people with disabilities; €12 million for housing adaptation grants, which is more than four times what the Government has promised; and a €300 increase in the carer’s support grant for each recipient, which is twice what the Government has allocated.

Whatever financial assistance was allocated in the budget for people with disabilities and their families and carers, it will be lost to the increases in home heating and motoring costs brought about by the hike in carbon tax. How can this be described as a just transition? As for the effect the budget will have on rural communities such as my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, the approach seems to be to kick them when they are down. Carbon taxes and VRT changes will come as a blow to people who have no option but to drive and who have no money to change to electric vehicles. While Government leaders might like the morning jaunt into Leinster House on their bikes each day from their nearby bases, that option is not available to the people in my constituency who have to travel 20 or 30 miles to work each day. Are farmers and agricultural contractors expected to change to electric vehicles? That is not a possibility.

The consequences of the carbon tax are also having negative effects on businesses along the Border, in particular coal merchants who can no longer carry smoky and smokeless coal on the same lorry, therefore greatly increasing their costs in fuel, labour and time. At the same time, people are smuggling fuels in from across the Border where there is no carbon tax. We need an

all-island approach to this issue.

Cavan has a very serious housing problem and the budget will do very little to solve it. The Government should have grasped this unique opportunity to begin the largest house-building programme in the State's history. Such an initiative would have stimulated the economy, addressed the social and affordable housing shortage and given people real hope in these difficult times that they can secure a home for their family.

I was contacted today by several angry new mothers who were promised three additional weeks of maternity leave but are now being told the extended cover will not be introduced until April. Is this true? Was it not the whole point of the additional weeks that they would benefit those who endured maternity leave under lockdown, when they had almost no support from any family or other agencies?

In conclusion, the budget has let a lot of people down and has seen a lot of promises and expectations not fulfilled.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Before I begin, I note the Minister of State's concern that the DART should be extended to the counties around Dublin. It is important to point out that the DART does not even go the edge of County Dublin. It stops at Malahide, although the bridges were lifted to facilitate its extension to Balbriggan a long time ago. I hope that particular extension will also form part of the Government's plans for the service.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on budget 2021. Many workers and businesses eagerly awaited yesterday's announcement to see whether it would stand up to the challenges of the day. The litmus test from a jobs and business perspectives was whether the budget would give certainty to workers, SMEs and microbusinesses. Unfortunately, as with the July stimulus only four months ago, budget 2021 represents another missed opportunity for the Government to do more to support businesses and protect jobs.

The reduction in VAT from 13.5% to 9% for the tourism and hospitality sector is welcome. Sinn Féin called for that change to be made in our July stimulus proposals, when it would have been quite useful and beneficial for many businesses, but we were ignored by the Government. The problem for businesses now is not only that the measure is four months too late but it is of no use to them because level 3 restrictions mean they cannot take advantage of the reduction. We know how much the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, likes to claim credit for Teachta Doherty's work on insurance reform but it is an awful pity that it took the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, until yesterday to follow our lead on a VAT reduction for a struggling sector.

Unfortunately, the Government did not heed Sinn Féin's advice on investing in the tourism and hospitality sector by reforming the stay and spend scheme. We proposed at the time that a voucher scheme should replace the tax-back system, with every adult and child to be provided with a voucher worth €200 and €100, respectively, to be spent in hotels and restaurants across the State. It was aimed at people with children who might want to take them out for an ice cream or into town to visit a museum. It would have been of tremendous value and the proposal was welcomed by many businesses and, more important, many workers in the tourism and hospitality sector. When, as we hope, the pubs and restaurants move out of level 3 in a few weeks, they will need all the custom they can get during these chronically difficult times. Changing the stay and spend scheme to a voucher scheme should have been prioritised yesterday.

The Government clearly did not listen to the business community's call for help in reduc-

ing non-payroll expenses for 2021. A key proposal for reducing such expenses next year was a commercial rates waiver. The Government, however, has decided to waive the rates only until the end of this quarter, as if the Covid-19 pandemic will suddenly and miraculously end on 1 January 2021. The rates waiver should have been extended until next June, at the very minimum, to offer greater certainty for businesses as they look ahead to the new year.

I would like to focus on the Covid restrictions support scheme. Is this scheme, as it appears to be laid out in the budget 2021 tax policy changes document, an advance tax credit scheme, which means businesses would be left at a loss for tax credits in the future? Some clarity in this regard would be most welcome for the business sector. According to the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in his speech, the scheme will apply to business premises where the Government restrictions directly prohibit or restrict access by customers. Will it preclude suppliers upstream in the business chain, which may be drastically affected by the impact on their downstream customers of level 3 to level 5 public health measures? If the scheme is in fact an advance tax credit scheme, why was consideration not instead given to a grant aid measure? Grants give certainty because they are not loans or future debt and they allow businesses the certainty to plan and move forward. The reason countries like Germany focused on grant aid for their businesses is that it works and it gives much-needed certainty.

In the run-up to the budget, I warned that the real risk was not that we might do too much but that we would do too little. Unfortunately, the Government has succumbed to that risk and the suite of measures announced for enterprise, trade and employment have fallen far short of what those sectors need. I conclude by pointing out a vote that took place last night but which many people may not have noticed. The opposition of this Government to enhancing workers' rights continued with that vote against a Sinn Féin Bill to make trade union recognition a legal right. The Government is only a little over 100 days old but already the die has been cast in terms of its attitude to workers' rights. Budget 2021 showed a Government that has not listened to or addressed the needs of business and its vote against the Trade Union Representation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2018 showed it has no interest in levelling the playing field between employers and employees by legally guaranteeing trade union recognition and the right of workers to collectively bargain. We know the colour of the Government and, by its budget, we know whose side it is on.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It is very difficult to make a substantial contribution to a budget debate in five minutes. There was a time when Members took hours to analyse the impact of a budget and I regret this is no longer the case. As someone who has some experience of budgets, yesterday's announcement was by any measure an extraordinary one. It included the provision of €17 billion in expenditure and €20 billion in borrowing next year to add to the €20 billion borrowed this year. The consensus on the budget, from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, to the most fiscally conservative commentators, is that this is what is required to be done. Any previous Minister would be extraordinarily envious of the spending capacity of the Ministers standing up today and yesterday but certainly would not be envious of the circumstances in which this money needs to be deployed.

It is interesting that socialism for capitalists seems now to be very much in vogue. It is quite amazing that many people who, for as long as I am in politics, have argued for a smaller state and the supremacy of the market now recognise that, ultimately, it is the state that is the bulwark of the people's security and safety in a time of crisis. I hope this appreciation of public investment in public services and of the labour of those involved in delivering those services is a permanent change. We cannot simply revert back to normal practice when this awful set of

crises passes. The Government and this House will deploy a wall of money to address the twin unprecedented challenges of this awful pandemic and Brexit. It is to be hoped that the money will have the desired effect. The Labour Party would have picked different mechanisms for the deployment of that money, as my colleague, Deputy Nash, set out in detail yesterday, and we will have an opportunity in the coming weeks to do the analysis and set out alternatives.

I have only time in the two and a half minutes remaining to me to raise one issue. There is a consensus in this House that the sector most egregiously affected by the pandemic to date is the hospitality sector. I received an email today from the owner of one of the most important hospitality businesses in my constituency of Wexford. In it, he states:

It is great news for VAT but useless if we have no business. The current level 3 restrictions have more or less closed the hospitality industry. It makes much more sense to support us with the EWSS and to avoid a situation where [in his case] 240 extra employees will be put on the pandemic unemployment payment.

This is a very important issue. The qualification criterion for the EWSS is that one must have a 30% depreciation in one's income, month on month, from July to December.

In a constituency such as Wexford, July and August were actually very good months and they will not qualify although the businesses are collapsed now. Businesses like the one in contact with me are faced with a stark choice of losing their business and putting people on the pandemic unemployment payment or qualifying. I appeal to the Minister not to have a strict mathematical formula for this but to have flexibility. In the case of this particular business of 240 employees, if the PUP is paid it will cost the State €72,000 per week, whereas if the wage subsidy scheme is paid it will cost €48,000 per week. People would still be in work and attached to their businesses, and they would be generating VAT for the State.

I can say very little in the few minutes I have, but that is my one appeal to the Minister of State. I ask that he would go back to Revenue and to the Minister for Finance to ask that businesses such as this will not be forced to make the impossible decision to close their businesses, having survived to date, when it makes no economic or social sense to do so.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** As Deputy Howlin has said, this budget is in the context of twin challenges to our economy, the enormity of which we have not seen before, namely, the pandemic and the challenge of a Brexit that may lead to the UK attempting to trade with the EU on WTO terms.

This budget represents the biggest investment in the history of our State. It is coming at a time when we need it most to protect the livelihoods of our people and to rise to the challenges of Covid-19 and a hard Brexit. Budget 2021 seeks to protect our society by providing counter-cyclical support to our economy and by investing in the key public services needed to support our people as we continue to live with the virus.

While responding to the impact of Covid-19 and Brexit are the immediate priorities, it is important that we make progress on key programme for Government commitments, in particular in the areas of health, housing and climate change. Putting in place the foundations for meaningful progress in these areas will deliver benefits for our people that will endure over the longer term.

The scale of the spending commitments set out in the budget represents an extraordinary

response to the crisis we face. Pre-Covid we planned on spending €70.4 billion this year. Next year we now plan to spend €87.8 billion, an increase of €17 billion when compared with the pre-Covid position. This spending comprises: continued significant funding of €8.5 billion for our public services to address the challenges of Covid-19; a recovery fund of €3.4 billion to be used for measures to support the economy as we respond to the twin challenges of Brexit and Covid; €3.8 billion in core current expenditure for the delivery of improvements in public services and social supports; €1.6 billion for core capital investment with total capital investment funded by the Exchequer of more than €10 billion next year, which is the highest amount ever; and an additional €100 million to prepare for Brexit. This will bring the total spend on Brexit-related supports and preparations to €340 million next year. In addition, with a recovery fund of €3.4 billion, this provides the opportunity to earmark further resources in the most appropriate way to deal with the economic challenges of both Covid-19 and Brexit.

In providing an increase in core current expenditure of €3.8 billion and €1.6 billion in core capital investment, the Government is seeking to deliver meaningful improvements in key priority areas, particularly in health by implementing Sláintecare, in housing by building more houses and in progressing climate measures. The additional funding for health seeks to build permanent capacity and to deliver universal healthcare. With funding provided for an increase in staffing of up to 16,000 across the health service, this will be crucial to delivering the planned increased capacity including an increase in adult critical care beds to 321 by the end of 2021; a further 1,146 acute beds by the end of 2021; a further 135 subacute beds; and a further 1,250 community beds, including rehabilitation beds.

The Government is committed to addressing homelessness and social housing lists by directly building new social and affordable housing in significant numbers. A multi-annual approach in this regard can both increase supply and moderate prices. This helps to deliver long-term affordability. The Department responsible for housing has a capital allocation of €2.8 billion next year. This is an increase of €500 million and is targeted at delivering 12,750 additional build, acquisition and leased units to the social housing stock, of which 9,500 will be built, with 800 targeted acquisitions and 2,450 leased homes.

Addressing the climate emergency is a key programme for Government priority with the recent publication of the climate action Bill. Taking action in this area can positively impact on society, helping to drive investment and create jobs while providing a healthier environment. The additional funding raised by the carbon tax increase is being ring-fenced to protect vulnerable people, with increases in the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance, the qualified child allowance, and the working family payment. This is to secure a just transition and to reduce our carbon footprint. An additional €100 million from the carbon tax increase is to be provided for retrofitting of our homes. This represents an increase of more than 80% compared to this year and will provide for a significant expansion of existing schemes including the warmer homes scheme. In addition to this allocation, €65 million has been allocated to the Department responsible for housing for retrofitting of local authority housing stock as these are the people who will most need their homes retrofitted.

Core capital expenditure in the Department of Transport is to increase by €600 million, more than 32%, next year. This will provide for a significant increase in capital spending on public transport and will fund progress for major Project Ireland 2040 programmes, including BusConnects, MetroLink and the DART expansion programme. We will fund €360 million in the ongoing development of a range of active travel and greenway infrastructure projects, walking and cycling, as well as for the enhancement of bus, rail and Local Link services throughout

the country.

The actions included in the budget and the commitment represented by the climate action Bill are required steps to ensure that we effectively address the climate crisis. We face unprecedented challenges over the coming months. The scale of the expenditure resources for next year of €87.8 billion sets out the Government's firm intention to address the immediate challenges of Covid-19 and Brexit and to make lasting progress with climate change action to benefit society.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I acknowledge that the budget was unprecedented, given that we are in unprecedented times and given there is a lot of uncertainty. One thing the budget brings to a lot of people and businesses is certainty. A few moments ago on the other side of the House it was suggested that there is still uncertainty but there are definite structures and announcements here, including for businesses, which are to be welcomed.

The Covid pandemic has brought enormous challenges and every aspect of our society has been affected. The budget was designed not only to rise to the challenges posed by the pandemic but also to rise to the challenges posed by Brexit.

I was pleased to see significant investment in health, housing and education, which reflect key Fianna Fáil priorities. Many important measures were included and I will mention some of them specifically.

I was delighted to see the Cabinet approve the new tender for the Dunkettle interchange upgrade. The project includes changes to the N8, the N25, and the N40 links to the R623 in Little Island and Bury's Bridge in Dunkettle, while also making provision for pedestrian and cyclist facilities. This is fantastic news for both Cork city and the greater Cork region. Once it proceeds, this project will transform the development potential of the Cork region and provide for many thousands of jobs. Currently, more than 100,000 people pass through the interchange every day. The upgraded interchange will have greater capacity to deal with this traffic and to provide for many more jobs.

The allocation of €10 million funding for Cork and Shannon airports is also to be welcomed. I have spoken about Cork Airport in the House in recent weeks and the ongoing difficulties it faces. As Cork Airport will have lost more than €23 million in revenue by year's end, this funding is crucial.

I acknowledge the allocation of €100 million for disability services. This is a significant investment but it is badly needed. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, on the work she has done in this area. The Minister of State visited a number of facilities in my constituency some time ago, including the Cope Foundation in Montenotte. The Minister of State saw at first hand how stretched these services are. Everyone in this House will agree because from our own constituency work, we have all seen that parents and carers of people with disabilities have really struggled throughout the pandemic. This funding is a vital lifeline for them and will help to alleviate the pressure families are under currently.

Finally as a schoolteacher, I welcome the various initiatives instigated by the Minister for Education and Skills. Over 2,100 new teachers and SNAs will be employed and the budget for special education will reach €2 billion, with an additional 400 special education teachers. The most significant move for me is the reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio to 25:1 at primary level. There is also a significant budget of €740 million for capital investment in school buildings and I hope that projects in my constituency, such as a new school for Carrignavar, can be

progressed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If the Government has sorted out the Dunkettle roundabout then “AA Roadwatch” will never sound the same again.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** People need hope and as much certainty as possible during this global pandemic and this budget was an opportunity to provide just that. While the headline figure of €16.75 billion additional expenditure suggests a progressive budget, in reality the inequality gap continues to widen. Covid-19 has laid bare the mismanagement of public services and the misguided policies of successive Governments. Most importantly, it has shown us the importance of undervalued workers and carers.

The time spent on caring work in Ireland is the third highest in the EU and ESRI research shows that this is because of the low level of State involvement when it comes to supporting carers. When we put this Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party budget to the test, we must ask what is in it for carers, who save the State €4 billion per year. The answer is a miserly 41 cent per day increase to the carer’s support grant. The Government could have removed the means test for the carer’s allowance. A care assistant contacted me last night to ask if there was any increase in the minimum wage or for carers working long term in nursing homes and I had to tell her that apart from the 10 cent per hour increase in the minimum wage, there was nothing there for her. References were made earlier to people digging down and digging deep and she did that but there was still nothing there for her. She responded that the budget was all about the economy, although she did not disagree that businesses need help. She said that having worked so hard through the first wave of Covid-19, in the middle of the second wave, carers now deserved something better than 10 cent and it is very hard to argue with that. At the same time, Government Deputies feel it is appropriate to accept a €2,000 pay increase. This budget has failed our front-line healthcare workers and family carers.

I am glad the Minister of State is here to talk about disabilities and I very much welcome the increase in that budget. However, I plead with the Minister of State to ensure that the budget is spent on upholding the human rights of people with disabilities and on getting rid of the protectionism I witness every day in that sector. I do not want to see any more managers or middle managers appointed. The money must go directly to people with disabilities and to transport services to bring them to disabled facilities, as referred to by my colleague, Deputy Tully. The most important issue is how that money is spent. I welcome the announcement of 1,250 community beds, which are sorely needed, but what will this mean on the ground? I hope we can now look forward to the long-awaited reinstatement of the beds in Belmullet hospital. That will be the litmus test for this budget.

The net impact of Covid-19 on the third level sector is at least €328 million according to the Parliamentary Budget Office. Universities are projected to hit €1 billion of debt in this academic year. As funding per undergraduate student is 50% lower than it was in 2008, we still have very serious problems to address in this area.

We must remember all the people who have been left behind in this budget. There are many of them and that is what concerns me most.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Ireland has just borrowed almost €20 billion. This budget was a unique opportunity and while it brings badly-needed funding for many areas, which is welcome, it is gutting to see the same old approach being taken. We should learn from past mis-

takes. We cannot keep investing in private companies; we need to invest in public services and we all know that.

We are already hearing commentary on how the next few budgets will be the difficult ones, with hints of future austerity looming. This was the opportunity to avoid austerity. I heard the Minister for Finance on Stefanie Preissner's podcast recently referencing a quote attributed to Joe Biden:

Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value.

Token affordable housing does nothing to tackle house prices or rental costs. The housing assistance payment, HAP, and other schemes give money directly to the private sector, when what we need is public housing on public land. This tells us the Government continues to value developers over valuing people having homes.

Another glaring omission in the budget is childcare. No extra funding was given to address chronic underinvestment in this sector, meaning the issues of quality of childcare and low pay in the sector will just continue. It is unbelievable that this budget did not start to address issues in this area, does not properly address housing and does not go far enough for people with disabilities. We all welcome the €100 million increase in funding to assist people with disabilities, including helping with the reopening of day services and moving people from institutional settings to supported community-based living. This is the direction we need to be moving in but it is the bare minimum. Considerably more needs to be done to achieve commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is not just about sums of money but also about the systems that achieve the intended goals, especially in an area where the people affected are often not heard.

While there has been an increase to a range of social welfare allowances, the core payments have not been raised. There have been calls to increase the pandemic unemployment payment because it is simply insufficient but the disability allowance is only €203 a week. People are often in receipt of this payment for all of their lives and in that context, it is no wonder that Ireland has one of the highest rates of poverty and social exclusion in the EU for people with disabilities. Similarly, there is no change to carer's benefit and carer's allowance, which is unbelievable. The Government pays lip service to people who dedicate all their waking hours to caring for loved ones. When it comes to recognising their work, however, this is another budget that fails them. The increase in the disability budget is welcome but payments should not be viewed as handouts. People with disabilities and their families deserve more and are entitled to more. It is their right and one the Government should fulfil.

I welcome the supports for rural Ireland in the budget. West Cork and other rural areas have been severely impacted by the pandemic. Tourism, hospitality and the arts have been seriously affected, while fishing, farming and small-scale food production are all facing incredibly challenging and unpredictable times, particularly with Brexit looming. The reduction in VAT for the hospitality industry, for which I and others have called, is a necessary and welcome boost, as is the tourism business support scheme. However, it is a shame this was brought in at a time when many businesses that could have benefited from it have been obliged to close. More targeted support will be needed because a cut in VAT will not help closed businesses to pay their rates, rent or loan repayments.

While I welcome the extra capital allocation to the national broadband plan, the underly-

ing issues of the overspend and the privatisation of the network remain. I would love to see the Government look at how other jurisdictions have delivered rural broadband through interventions such as grants for communities to get access through local service providers. The development of town and village hubs to enable people to work and study in rural Ireland is an essential investment which I have repeatedly called for and I am delighted to see it feature in the budget. Hubs such as E-Bantry, Mix Coworking in Clonakilty and the Ludgate are examples of how we can adapt to new ways of working and studying in these times.

The extension of schemes like the green, low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, and the sheep welfare scheme will support farmers who depend on them but they and their families should not have had to wait until budget day to find out whether these income sources would continue. While an increase for the organic farming scheme to €16 million is welcome, it is still relatively insignificant compared to funding for other agri-food sectors. Even greyhound racing gets more than that.

Ireland has incredibly low levels of land being farmed without the use of chemicals, with just 2% of land under organic practices compared with an EU average of 8%. For a country with a green brand that we need to live up to, this is nowhere near enough. We need to go much further but at least the scheme will now reopen.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Minister, who is sharing time with the Minister of State.

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo labhairt leis an Dáil faoin gcáináisnéis agus faoin maoiniú de €1.082 milliún atá curtha ar fáil do mo Roinn. Is cinnte go bhfuilimid ag maireachtáil tríd 8 o'clock an bpaindéim is measa le 100 bliain anuas. D'oibrigh mé go dian le mo Roinn ar an mbuiséad seo agus mé ag iarraidh a chinntíú go mbeidh maoiniú ar fáil chun daoine a choinneáil i mbun léirithe, seirbhísí turasóireachta a choinneáil beo, clubanna agus spóirt a chothabháil agus tuilleadh tacaíochta a thabhairt don Ghaeilge.

I welcome the opportunity to address the Chamber in regard to the 2021 Estimates of €1.082 billion for my Department, and to provide details of the substantial measures to support and strengthen the sectors for which I have responsibility, facilitated by this increased funding. The diverse range of sectors served by my Department have been among those most severely impacted upon by the Covid-19 pandemic. Employing many hundreds of thousands across the country, these are the sectors that thrive when people congregate to enjoy their leisure time together. They were the first to close as a result of the pandemic and they are likely to be among the last to return to full operation in the future. Our cultural institutions and theatres, our tourism destinations, pubs and restaurants, our sporting occasions and our Gaeltacht communities have all been severely hit since March. Many are shut or massively curtailed, yet these activities are the very ones which bring us all happiness and which are crucial for our physical and mental well-being.

The 2021 Estimates for my Department have been informed by ongoing engagement with sectoral representatives. The additional funding allocated will provide for a strong suite of significant measures as a robust and targeted response to this crisis. These measures will support resilience and recovery and ensure that Ireland can thrive once more on the global stage in the fields of tourism, culture, sport and linguistic heritage. These sectors, individually and cumulatively, are an integral part of the fabric of our society, most particularly in rural and regional areas, where they support economic activity and physical and societal well-being. Well-being

is a core principle underpinning the Living with Covid plan and it will be fundamental to public confidence and resilience as we emerge from and manage the crisis over the longer term.

Total 2021 funding for the sectors supported by my Department includes €220.9 million for tourism services, with €55 million of this in respect of business continuity support for strategic tourism businesses. In addition, working with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, VAT relating to this sector will be reduced to 9%, which will improve the competitiveness and viability of businesses. In addition, the tourism sector will be able to avail of the cross-Government supports such as the Covid restrictions support scheme and the rates waiver extension.

I recently received the Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023, which points to the need for urgent measures to ensure the survival of tourism businesses while at the same time sowing the seeds of recovery. Budget 2021 delivers on the immediate priorities identified by the plan, and the additional funding will help to address the immediate concern of business survival while also looking to the future, with a focus on training and digitalisation supports. Combined with the reduction in the VAT rate, the Covid restrictions support scheme for businesses that have been severely restricted by public health measures and the continued waiver of commercial rates, the package of supports for tourism is a significant response to the existential impact of Covid-19.

Total funding for the arts and culture sector in 2021 is €331 million. The additional funding includes a 2021 allocation of €130 million for the Arts Council, a significant increase on its initial 2020 allocation of €80 million. This acknowledges the deep challenges facing the sector as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as recognising the critical role that arts and culture play in our society. This additional investment empowers the Arts Council to help artists, arts workers and arts organisations come through this crisis and play their part in the national recovery.

Significant support has also been provided for live entertainment in the amount of €50 million. This will include measures for the commercial entertainment sector and will support live entertainment in venues across the country, building on a pilot scheme introduced as part of the July stimulus package. It will be complemented by the Covid restrictions support scheme being introduced by the Minister for Finance and, indeed, venues and ticket sales will respectively also benefit from the extended rates waiver and the VAT reduction.

Some €8 million is being provided to facilitate the transfer of the National Symphony Orchestra to the National Concert Hall. This will be a significant step towards the objective of enabling the orchestra to be established as a world-class orchestra which will, with the National Concert Hall, provide a creative and imaginative programme strategy that will greatly enhance the offering of the combined organisation to the public.

The audiovisual industry has been one of the success stories of 2020, with on-screen success in the form of “Normal People”, but also its track record in maintaining output in the face of Covid-19. I am, therefore, very pleased to be able to increase Screen Ireland’s funding by €9 million to €30.1 million in 2021.

Funding of €281.7 million will be provided for media and broadcasting in 2021 in recognition of the critical communication role of this sector during the current crisis. An additional €3.5 million is being provided to TG4 and the transfer of the National Symphony Orchestra to the National Concert Hall, outlined already, will also have reciprocal benefits for RTÉ and is

evidence of the synergies that can be brought to bear with the culture, broadcasting and media sectors now part of the same brief.

I am satisfied that the increased allocation for my Department in 2021 of €1.082 billion will allow for the continuation and enhancement of its very diverse but critical work programmes. As Minister, I intend to do everything possible to ensure that as we begin to emerge from the shadow of Covid-19, we will have a vital tourism industry, a vibrant arts and culture sector, a dynamic sports sector and media sector, and a landscape in which our language and our engagement with it can continue to grow and flourish.

Tríd is tríd, is cainaisnéis thar a bheith tairbheach í an cháinainsnéis seo d'earnáil na teanga. Is céim mhór eile chun cinn í an maoiniú de €14.8 milliún sa bhreis atá á sholáthar do phobal na Geltachta agus na Gaeilge. Tá a fhios agam gur chuir eagraíochtaí éagsúla ar nós Foras na Gaeilge, Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Conradh na Gaeilge fáilte roimh an mbuiséad seo inné. Tá an-suim agam agus ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, san earnáil seo. Táimid ag iaraidh bunsraith nua maoinithe a leagan síos don earnáil sa Roinn. Tá tuilleadh le rá ag an Aire Stáit faoin earnáil seo agus faoi earnáil an spóirt.

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Le seachtain anuas, thug an Rialtas seo faoi dhá mhórghníomh ar mhaithleis an nGaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht a chur chun cinn: an chéad tuairisc ar dhul chun cinn phlean ghníomhaíochta 2018-22 don Ghaeilge a fhoilsiú, agus Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019 a thabhairt tríd an Dáil ar an Dara Céim. Inné, fógraíodh mórgníomh eile don teanga nuair a leagadh amach sa cháinainsnéis go bhfuil méadú de 23% le teacht ar bhuiséad na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta sa bhliain 2021. Léiríonn na forbairtí seo go léir go bhfuil an Rialtas seo tiomanta i leith na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn ar bhonn uile-oileánda agus sa Ghaeltacht ach go háirithe. Leis an maoiniú breise seo de €14.8 milliún, beidh an Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge agus Údarás na Gaeltachta in ann níos mó airgid a leithdháileadh ar ghrúpaí pobail ar fud an oileáin a bhfuil obair den scoth ar bun acu ar son na teanga.

Críochnóidh mé le cupla focal faoi chúrsaí spóirt, má tá an Teach sásta deis a thabhairt dom. I am delighted to announce the provision of €170.4 million for sports and recreational services, including an extra €36 million in current and capital funding for Sport Ireland. Within this, the 2020 provision will allow for a new round of the sports capital programme to open for applications shortly, with allocations to be made next year. Current funding for Sport Ireland programmes has been increased by €26.25 million, which will enable the organisation to continue to ensure that athletes are supported to achieve their full potential, despite the postponed Tokyo Olympics and Paralympic Games, to increase core grant funding for Sport Ireland sporting bodies, to sustain them through the challenging months to come and to fund Sport Ireland participation programmes. The capital funding will facilitate a number of developments in the National Sports Campus, including at the National Aquatic Centre.

This is a very considerable investment in sport and builds on the extensive support package provided to address the Covid challenges to national governing bodies and clubs in 2020. I know clubs across the country will be looking forward to a new sports capital programme, which will open in the near future. The increase in the dormant accounts funding will promote and sustain participation in sport and physical activity, particularly in hard to reach communities. Tá pobail spóirt agus Ghaeltachta i measc na n-earnálacha is mó buailte ag Covid-19. Táim muiníneach go gcuirfidh na bearta agus na tionscnaimh ar fógraíodh iad inné ar chumas na n-earnálacha seo teacht ar ais chucu féin ó thionchar na paindéime chomh sciobtha agus is

féidir agus go gcuirfear ar ár gcumas fás agus forbairt a dhéanamh in 2021.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I want to read into the record the experience we have had in Letterkenny University Hospital in Donegal. It is our major acute hospital, the sixth largest in the State. It dealt with more than 24,000 inpatients last year. One would not know it, however. I will talk about that in a moment. I want to use the example of our major acute hospital to demonstrate the utter failure of Governments over the past decade to invest adequately in our health services and how that utter failure has led us to be uniquely exposed to this pandemic. We have the lowest number of ICU beds *per capita* in the European Union and there has been underinvestment in beds generally to the extent that we were at 100% capacity in our hospitals before this crisis.

Letterkenny University Hospital dealt with 24,000 inpatients last year. It is the sixth largest hospital in the State. If one looks at a list of the top 15 hospitals in terms of annual budgets, one will see that Letterkenny comes 13th. On a list of the top 15 hospitals ranked by budget allocated per inpatient, Letterkenny is again 13th in the State. On a list of the top 15 ranked by number of consultants, Letterkenny is 14th. It is 12th in the State with regard to numbers of nurses and midwives.

It is clear that we have been neglected and discriminated against but it goes further than that. If one looks at the most recent waiting lists for outpatient and inpatient treatment available from the National Treatment Purchase Fund, one will see that we now have 21,789 people on these lists. The population of Donegal is 160,000. This means that more than one in eight of our men, women and children is on a hospital waiting list. Some 5,000 of these people have been waiting longer than 18 months for their hospital appointment. It is an absolute scandal.

One might say this is a result of the Covid crisis but let us look at the figures from 27 February, just before this crisis kicked in. The total number waiting for outpatient treatment at that stage was 17,751 and the number waiting for inpatient treatment was more than 2,000. More than 19,000 people were on the waiting lists before this crisis. In the hospital in Letterkenny, an average of 19 people were on trolleys every single day because it was at 100% of its capacity. That is the reality of the health service and the neglect of my county's major acute hospital. That is why we are uniquely exposed to this pandemic and why this budget is such a profound disappointment with regard to the number of ICU beds and other beds to be delivered next year in real terms. The number is nowhere big enough to respond adequately. The lessons that should have been learned from this crisis have not been learned.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I acknowledge the additional €17.3 billion in expenditure that is part of this budget. The Acting Chairman, Deputy Ó Cuív, and I were in this Chamber ten years ago when very serious cuts were being made to expenditure. Unfortunately, those cuts had great consequences but they led us to our current position, allowing us to borrow the kind of money we now need to get through the challenges of Covid, Brexit, climate change and so forth. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been shown that systems can be changed overnight. Rules which we in this House and other public representatives were told could not be changed, were changed and changed very quickly. That spirit needs to continue. We need to see changes in practices and changes in infrastructure. We need to ensure that every cent of this budget delivers increased and better services for people and makes a difference to their lives.

I was struck by Deputy Conway-Walsh's statement to the effect that we need to get rid of the fighting within certain sectors. She is right. We need to put people at the front and centre

of this budget.

In health, it is a question not only of Covid but also of Sláintecare. We need to see the principles of Sláintecare implemented and investment in our district hospitals. I want to see beds at the hospitals in Belmullet, Ballina and Swinford fully opened and those hospitals used as primary care centres to take the pressure off Mayo University Hospital and Sacred Heart Hospital. I want to see our primary care professionals, GPs, pharmacists and community-based services given the power and resources to do their work.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an airgead breise i gcomhair chúrsaí Gaeltachta agus an Ghaeilge. Déanfaidh sé difríocht ach tá i bhfad níos mó le déanamh do cheantair thuaithe. There is a lot more to be done in rural villages and towns. I welcome the increased funding for the town and village renewal scheme. Covid has shown that there is a desire for leisure activities, cycleways, walkways and public spaces. We need to continue to provide these in a way that provides local employment.

On infrastructure, this budget, alongside the national recovery plan and the forthcoming review of the national development plan, is essential. While I note the investment in the State airports which was announced, airports such as Ireland West Airport Knock need further investment. They are busier than some of the State airports and have not seen the same kind of investment as they have. If we are serious about regional development, we must develop and support Ireland West Airport Knock, the western rail corridor, the N26 and the Atlantic economic corridor as key economic bridges not only to get us through the crises of Covid and Brexit, but to create a foundation for a sustainable future.

Other speakers mentioned broadband. The pandemic has demonstrated the demand for working from home and how successful it can be. Let us invest in regional structures to allow people to work from home.

We have learned a lot over the last eight months. There is a long way to go in this pandemic. We think of all those who have lost their lives and all of their families this evening. Let us not just learn the lessons but change our way of doing things.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I dtosach báire, cuirim fáilte roimh an €3.5 milliún atá curtha ar fáil do TG4 ach tá sé thar am athbhreithniú ioamlán a dhéanamh ar mhaoiniú earnáil craoltóireachta na tíre. Creidim go bhfuil luach airgid iontach á thabhairt ag TG4, go mór mór nuair a thugtar san áireamh go bhfuil sé ag craoladh i dteanga mhionlaigh. Déanann sé meascán maith clár. Molaim caighdeán na gelár faisnéise a chuireann sé ar fáil go mór mór. Táim in amhras go mór ar RTÉ ar uairibh. Ceapaim go bhfuil an-mheas aige air féin agus b'fhéidir go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó measa aige air féin ná mar atá ag an bpobal air ó thráth go chéile. Sílim go bhfuil sé in am breathnú ar an reachtaíocht chun a bheith cinnte go bhfuil na haidhmeanna náisiúnta atá leagtha síos i reachtaíocht á gcur i bhfeidhm.

Ar ndóigh, nuair a thagann sé go Raidió na Gaeltachta, tá sé go síoraí seasta fágtha ar an ngannchuid. Tá pá níos lú ag a fhoireann agus oibríonn siad níos déine. Bíonn i bhfad níos lú daoine i mbun cláir faisnéise á ndéanamh agus, mar sin féin, cuireann siad amach cláir den scoth chuile lá. Mura bhfuil RTÉ sásta breathnú i ndiaidh Raidió na Gaeltachta, creidim go gcaithfimid leasú a dhéanamh ar an reachtaíocht le céatadán áirithe de bhuiséad RTÉ a chur i leataobh do Raidió na Gaeltachta. There was a time, and the Acting Chairman has been in the House even longer than I have-----

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** He has been here forever.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That is the two Deputies so.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That is two of us. Caithfear cuimhneamh nach dtagann ciall ro-imh aois.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Convert.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** There was a time when we got 20 minutes in a debate on the budget. Now, we are meant to cover all of the Budget Statement in four minutes. I do not know what has gone wrong with this House. I do not know what has gone wrong with democratic accountability. A Deputy beside me has also been here longer than I have, so we must have all the old timers here tonight. The way this is being done now is worse than it was. We talked about reform in 2016, but it is backwards that we are going. We used to get detailed Estimates, not the four-liner efforts we are getting now, and they used to be published two or three weeks before the budget. There was always debate about that, and then we came in on budget day and adjustments were made.

The Revised Estimates for public services were then published, which showed the outturn of the previous year against the projected money for the year, that had even more detail. For the paper we get now, we are actually getting less detail. To top all this off, of course, sometime around June or July, in a normal year, but this year it is in October, we examined the Estimates in the committees. Talk about closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. It is time we got our act together in this House and had proper democratic budgetary accountability. I refer not to some small committee, but for the whole Dáil.

Tacaím leis an méid a dúirt an Teachta maidir le ceantair tuaithe. Tá méid áirithe déanta ach ní leor an méid sin. I have a massive argument with the way we are treating rural areas. Every time we talk about rural policies, we talk about towns and villages, even though 30% of the people in this State actually live in townlands in parishes all over the countryside. There is nothing wrong with that situation. It is time we had this debate. If people believe that it is wrong to live in the countryside, and that the settlement pattern we traditionally had in Ireland is in some way wrong, I challenge them on two points. I ask them to look at the social outcomes between the rural settlements and the most deprived urban communities, and then to tell me which is the better place for a young person to grow up. I refer to this hang-up that there is something inherently wrong with the rural type of settlement pattern, and do not give me the excuse of carbon emissions. We produce much more energy in Connemara than we consume, and renewable energy as well. I do not want, therefore, to be given that argument about carbon emissions. We are more than willing to drive electric cars as well, if we are given the charging points. That is no problem whatsoever.

To conclude, it is great to see money being given to health. I hope, however, that this is not the greatest black hole that I have ever seen. I hope, when we come to the end of next year, it will not then be necessary to have to wait four years for pain therapy and for attendance at pain clinics. It is an utter disgrace at the moment. We talk about suffering, and then we leave people in excruciating pain for up to four years while waiting for basic services. I am not sure that situation will be changed by the end of 2021. I hope, however, that I will be able to stand here next year and say that I was utterly wrong.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** It is great to have the opportunity to speak on this budget. I have

listened to the debates and the media commentary outside, and there are two contrasting views. One view is that this is the biggest budget in history. The other view, according to the people I have been speaking to in recent days, is that this budget is a big to-do about nothing. What did people get in this budget? They got practically nothing. There was no relief for people who had their PUP cut. There was no relief for renters. What is amazing is that the issue of not having a right to a pension at the age of 65 years has not come up. I refer to the failure to guarantee a pension at the age of 65 years in the middle of one of the greatest pandemics we have ever faced, where older people are probably our most vulnerable. Our youth unemployment has gone so high that mental health problems have gone off the Richter scale and we are not putting the money in the right resources.

Nothing was delivered for families, who are paying for what is probably the costliest child-care in Europe. It is possible to get the picture as I continue. I do welcome the increase in the funding for disability services, but I welcome it with caution. I state that because I listened to the CEO of the Disability Federation of Ireland and he said that the €100 million being provided will, possibly, just fill the gap left in the disability services over the last ten years and address the damage that has resulted from the Covid-19 restrictions. This funding will only fill the existing gap, so let us not give ourselves a pat on the back on that aspect.

What else has been done in this budget? We set no targets for affordable homes for 2021. I heard the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, speaking a short while ago about what is going to be done and what the plan is for our big housing build. Amazingly, with the roughly €208 million going into the housing assistance payment scheme, the local infrastructure housing activation fund and a couple of other schemes, we still have county councils having a great plan to build more than 2,000 houses on a floodplain. We will see how progressive that will be in a few years.

Returning to the subject of disability, I will recount a story I heard from a lady, and that will show how good this budget is and how these big figures sound fabulous. This lady is grateful to receive the fuel allowance, but she gives it to her disabled daughter so she can heat her home. That is a parents' thing, they will do without so that others can have what they need. I ask that that story be taken in by the Government. People have been giving each other pats on the back and stating that this has probably been the best budget ever. This is taxpayers' money that will have to be paid back.

I welcome the inclusion of the Christmas bonus, and many people in the country will also welcome it, because Christmas will probably be the only holiday we will have this year, as Hallowe'en is probably cancelled for many people. There is much stress on families now regarding Christmas, because it is the only celebration we will probably have this year. We might have it as a good remembrance. The reduction in the VAT rate is certainly fabulous, but I heard of nothing being provided for any businesses, such as publicans and other small businesses, that have gone out of business and will no longer be trading. I heard nothing in the budget to address how we will support those businesses. The banks have not been very co-operative, nor have insurance companies. I met many publicans in recent weeks and they are experiencing immense stress.

I heard some of the Ministers state that they have extra money. Where is it? We need it now, and not next year. The best way to sum up this situation is by reference to a film trilogy that many of us in this House are old enough to remember: "Back to the Future". If the characters from those films were around today, I certainly could see Doc Brown advising Marty McFly

that, whatever he did, he should not go back to 2020.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** I was going to share time with Deputy McGuinness, but I presume I am now sharing with Deputy Alan Farrell instead. I welcome that this is an expansive budget, which is the proper way to go. It is not possible to cut our way out of a crisis like this. We must spend our way out of it. I welcome the supports for business, particularly the extension of the tax warehousing scheme and the commercial rates remission.

I have several questions, however, regarding the new Covid restrictions support scheme. The amount payable depends on turnover during a corresponding period in 2019. I know several people, however, who set up businesses in 2020, before the onset of Covid-19, so how will their payments be calculated? I would also like to know if I am correct that this is not a direct grant aid scheme, but more of a liquidity situation. I refer to there being an advance on tax credits, so the more that is received, the higher the tax that will be paid some time in the future.

Speaking of liquidity, I regret that the banks have failed to play their part in releasing liquidity for small businesses. I recall being part of a Government that was forced to pay €60 billion, net, of taxpayers' money to bail out the banks. In return, the banks are now very remiss when it comes to bailing out the people. Most of the representations I have got from small businesses and businesses particularly affected by the pandemic have related to the temporary wage subsidy scheme. Most of those businesses requested that the TWSS be restored in its original form and said that doing so would be the difference between survival and extinction. That has not been done and I regret that. The scheme has been replaced by the employment wage subsidy scheme, which is only half as good and twice as difficult to access. The Minister said in his speech yesterday that when the EWSS runs out in April, he is going to replace it with another scheme. He did not say he was going to continue it as it is. He said he was going to replace it with another scheme. I ask the Minister to give me an assurance that the new scheme will not be less generous than the present EWSS, which is in itself far less generous than the TWSS.

I welcome the increases in social welfare. As regards increasing the fuel allowance and the other measures intended to offset the increase in carbon tax, there is a substantial cohort of people in receipt of social welfare who will not benefit from any of those measures. Time does not permit me to go into the matter in detail but it is a substantial cohort. Are they supposed to suck up the increase in carbon tax?

I also welcome that the Government is honouring its commitment to maintain the old age pension at 66. That is a very costly measure. Nevertheless, I ask the Minister to give me an assurance that the early retirement allowance promised on page 75 of the programme for Government will be introduced in the social welfare Bill because there was no mention of it in the budget.

I regret that there are no general increases in social welfare rates for the second year in a row. Experience has shown that when social welfare rates fall behind increases elsewhere in the economy, the gap widens and inequality and poverty increase. That is the reality. There are 690,000 people living below the poverty line in this country and we have the second highest rate of child poverty in the OECD. I hope that when we stand up to debate next year's budget, those figures will not have increased.

The Minister for Finance referred yesterday to the fact that the large spending was offset to some extent by savings. It is true that there has been a huge build-up in savings since the onset

of Covid. What is lacking in the budget is a scheme to help unlock those savings for the benefit of the Irish economy. Is it proposed to introduce such a scheme?

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** This is a welcome opportunity to address yesterday's budget, as announced by the Ministers for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform in the Convention Centre. It includes a significant level of investment in our economy and our people. This record level of investment is a statement of confidence in our people and our economy that we will be able to weather this storm and return to economic growth in the years ahead.

Our country finds itself in a unique position whereby we are faced with two major threats to our economy and way of life. Both Covid-19 and Brexit have the potential to dramatically change the economic landscape. It is vital, therefore, that we act prudently to ensure a stable economic situation can take root through our domestic policies. The risk of a no-deal Brexit has increased in recent weeks and this uncertainty, combined with the pandemic, justifies the level of spending outlined yesterday. Putting in place the necessary funding and supports now may mean the difference between survival and closure for many businesses in the post-Brexit and post-Covid years. The budget has developed a wide range of supports that will make a major difference to a variety of sectors across the island. While we have borrowed heavily to afford such supports, to not do so would be to disarm the State when we need all the tools in our arsenal. We must ensure we put livelihoods and work to the forefront of economic decisions and of course, prioritise capital expenditure, which was unfortunately not possible nor the case a decade ago.

The budget also sets out and delivers on ambitious targets the Oireachtas has set, which will make tangible changes to the lives of people right across the island. In such a climate, where no sector, business or life is untouched by the changing reality of our time, vast pressure is put on resources by different groups, some with louder voices than others. I am, therefore, particularly pleased with the significant commitment given to education, and I note the presence of the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Madigan, in the Chamber. Almost 1,000 extra SNAs and several hundred special education teachers will not only reduce our pupil-teacher ratio but also develop supports for children for many years to come. I commend both the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, on their work in ensuring that came to fruition.

Likewise, the Government has made an unambiguous commitment to businesses on this island. The budget ensures that where businesses are forced to close or experience financial difficulty, we will limit the number of closures and job losses. The reduction of the VAT rate to 9% for the hospitality and tourism sector is a positive step in the right direction and I believe it will sustain a sufficient number of jobs in the coming year, while also encouraging consumers to step out, stay local and shop local. I am thinking in particular of Christmas shopping, which may not be possible for an awful lot of citizens because they might be restricting their movements. I would encourage that initiative. In my own constituency of Fingal, the VAT change will have a significant impact because there is a significant tourism and hospitality sector there. The chamber of commerce has welcomed this and other steps the Government has taken.

We have overcome major challenges in the past, and I believe we will overcome this and any future challenges that might present in the years to come. The determination of the Government, and indeed, this House, to negate these risks is only surpassed by the ability of our citizens to defeat them.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley):** Yesterday's budget was the first of this new Government and it demonstrates clearly our commitment to and our support for schools, and especially our students. With this significant new investment, we will continue to improve the experience of our children in education and provide improved practical supports in light of Covid-19. I am particularly pleased to announce that I have secured funding in the budget to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio and class sizes. More teachers and special needs assistants will be recruited and additional funding has also been allocated to schools to meet costs relating to Covid. This includes funding for day-to-day running costs, as well as significant capital investment for our school building programme. Through this budget, we will continue to improve the experience of our children in schools and provide improved practical supports, particularly in light of the Covid pandemic. Building on the initiatives set out in the programme for Government, the budget for the Department of Education and Skills will be €8.9 billion in 2021, which is an increase of €410 million, or 5%, on 2020.

The budget provides for a variety of measures. The employment of an additional 1,065 mainstream and special education needs teachers will benefit our primary, post-primary and special schools and will allow for a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio and class sizes in our primary schools. Smaller class sizes are an important support for teaching and learning in our classrooms. I have also secured funding to allow for schools at risk of losing a teacher to retain that teacher by reducing the threshold for the retention of teaching posts. Almost 1,000 additional special needs assistants, who as we all know play a vital role in meeting the care needs of students in classrooms across the country every day, will be hired. The school inclusion model pilot will be rolled out to two further community healthcare organisation, CHO, areas. This will result in additional education psychologists and therapeutic supports including speech and language therapists and occupational therapists being made available to more schools. That project is being advanced by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan.

An additional €226 million in financial supports, to be provided to schools in the first half of 2021, will meet costs relating to Covid-19. This allocation is the balance of the €437 million package approved by the Government in July as part of the roadmap to reopening our schools. As with other Covid-19-related spending, funding for the academic year 2021-22 will be reviewed in line with the latest public health advice at a particular time. A central contingency reserve is being allocated by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the 2021 budget, which includes funds earmarked for schools for the remainder of 2021, from late August to December 2021. I assure all Deputies present that my Department will continue to provide funding to allow schools to stay open and meet the ongoing challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. I recognise the wonderful work that school communities have done to ensure the safe reopening of our schools, and to sustain that reopening. The Government will continue to play its role in ensuring that this important work continues.

Further supports are being provided as part of the DEIS programme to those schools catering for the highest concentration of educational disadvantage. This will be supported by additional funding of €2 million in 2021 and €5 million in the full year, and it will include a one point reduction in the senior schools urban band 1 staffing schedule.

Additional funding for significant expansion of the arts and education programme is also included. There is also a capital allocation for new and more energy-efficient school buildings, with a €740 million allocation for 2021 under Project Ireland 2040. This funding will sustain the roll-out of projects, including those currently on-site, and those due to commence construction activity.

I have secured an additional capital allocation of €80 million for the school capital programme in the current year, 2020. The additional €80 million will allow for the ICT grant and the minor works grant at primary school level to be paid out in late 2020 rather than 2021.

I clearly have some key objectives to achieve in my opening budget as Minister for Education and Skills. I wanted to ensure that sufficient funding would be available to the Department to meet existing funding requirements but I also wanted to secure continued funding for schools for Covid-19. Equally, I wanted to secure an adequate capital allocation to support and sustain our ambitious school-building programme. I was also anxious to begin to implement the provisions of the programme for Government, especially relating to class sizes, special needs education and social inclusion. With the budget announced yesterday, we have made some positive progress in achieving some of these objectives.

As my home county, Kerry, has a significant tourism sector, I want to reference some initiatives in the budget relating to tourism development, specifically the €55 million business continuity support for strategic tourism businesses. This, combined with the CRSS, introduced by the Minister for Finance, will help to sustain many businesses through the pandemic. In addition, the reduction of VAT for the sector to 9% will improve competitiveness and viability for businesses. Other welcome supports include the rates waiver extension and the extension of the EWSS.

I am pleased with the €102 million in targeted supports for livestock farming. This includes €85 million to support sustainable beef farming and €17 million for sheep welfare. Some €80 million is being provided for the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme. I welcome the allocation of €341 million for rural and community development.

Budget 2021 has a number of health measures in place. I welcome the addition of 16,000 posts in the health workforce. There is €38 million for mental health services, which is important. There will be an additional 5 million hours of home supports and an additional €100 million for provision of services and supports for those with disabilities, an important sector.

I welcome the €3.3 billion investment in housing, which will facilitate the single biggest social housing build, of 9,500 homes, targeted acquisitions of 800 units, and long-term leasing of 2,450 homes. Measures include €110 million for a new affordable purchase scheme and accelerated delivery of the cost rental scheme via approved housing bodies. There is €50 million for the serviced sites scheme, making thousands of homes more affordable. Overall, 6,200 affordable homes will be delivered with supports from this scheme. I acknowledge the €60 million being made available to fund adaptation grants to support older people and people with a disability to remain at home. This is an important source of funding delivered through our local authorities. Small sums of money can make a substantial difference in the quality of people's lives.

I appreciate that I have limited time and thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to refer to some aspects of the current budget.

**Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Budget 2021 seeks to shield our economy and society through one of the worst crises in living memory. The Government's priorities in guiding the State through the pandemic are protecting the lives of our people and ensuring our economy can weather this storm. The protection of our people is the core of the Department of Justice and Equality's work and the record €3 billion allocation for justice in

this budget, an increase of €200 million, will help the Department, its agencies and others in the sector in that task. The justice sector has been on the front line throughout 2020, supporting our health colleagues in the battle against Covid-19. I am grateful to the women and men in front-line agencies such as An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, the Courts Service, the Office of the State Pathologist, Forensic Science Ireland and many others, as well as to the staff of my Department. As has been said many times, the difficulties caused by Covid have accelerated the need for us to change and reform our lives.

I am pleased that my first budget as Minister for Justice and Equality allows us to protect our people, including the most vulnerable, and at the same time modernise the justice sector. It also allows me to begin work on my priorities as Minister for Justice and Equality. These priorities are to strengthen and reform An Garda Síochána to ensure our communities are safe; to tackle sexual, domestic and gender-based violence, support victims and reform how vulnerable witnesses are treated as sexual offences are investigated and prosecuted; and to modernise the courts and immigration services, policing and other justice services to make them more efficient and easier to access.

We must continue to properly fund our front-line workers as they serve the public throughout Covid-19. We must keep them safe as they work to keep us safe. To this end, I have secured €13 million for personal protective equipment, PPE, for An Garda Síochána, €5.7 million for increased PPE, cleaning and healthcare costs for the Irish Prison Service, €5.7 million for the Courts Service, including for additional premises to enable socially distanced and safe court sittings, and €400,000 in additional funding for organisations responding to increased service demands from people impacted by domestic abuse during this period.

Modernisation, reform and investment in ICT are among my key priorities as Minister, driving the modernisation and digital agenda across the justice sector to ensure that our services are efficient and, most important, accessible. Building on previous investment, new funding of €42 million will lead to a significant payback of improved public services right across the sector. Additional ICT spending in key areas includes an extra €22 million for Garda ICT, bringing the total to €71.2 million in 2021. There is a separate specific provision of €7 million for additional mobile devices and related costs under the Garda mobility project. This unprecedented level of investment will enable continued investment in existing and new ICT systems which are critical to the implementation of the measures in the reform plan, A Policing Service for the Future. Some €8 million will be spent in the first year of the courts modernisation programme, almost €4 million of which is for ICT investment, with €5 million for the justice ICT strategy. This significant development will, among other things, enable me to reform the immigration area, where too many operations are still paper-based, and help speed up services to the public.

The total gross allocation for the Garda Vote in 2021 is a record €1.952 billion. In addition to the increased funding for Covid and ICT measures mentioned already, the allocation provides for recruitment of up to 620 new Garda recruits and 500 Garda staff. On that basis, there should be 14,700 gardaí, with a further 300 recruits in training in Templemore by December next year, a total of 15,000. This allocation also provides for an increase in supervisory ranks at sergeant and inspector level; maintaining the overtime budget of €95 million; €8 million for continued investment in the Garda fleet in addition to the highest ever investment of approximately €15 million in 2020; and €34 million for the capital building and refurbishment programme, including the project to relocate from Harcourt Square to a new purpose-built building on Military Road. Overall, more Garda recruits and Garda staff means extra members of the service on the front line and in specialist units battling organised crime groups and keeping people safe.

An increase of €56.1 million, or 13.4%, brings the Department of Justice and Equality Vote to €474 million. This will be used to improve access to justice, provide vital supports for those who need them and provide better service for our customers. With increased funding of over €2 million, bringing its total funding to €44.6 million, the Legal Aid Board will recruit additional staff and enhance delivery of its services across the country. Additional funding of €4.4 million in current expenditure and €10 million in capital funding will be provided to Forensic Science Ireland for 2021. This brings the capital budget to almost €51 million, supporting the construction of Forensic Science Ireland's new state-of-the-art laboratory in Backweston, County Kildare.

I am particularly pleased to have secured additional funding to support the important work of the Criminal Assets Bureau, the Inspector of Prisons and the Probation Service, among others. The Criminal Assets Bureau's budget has been increased to a record €9.96 million. I know it is busier than ever and I am glad to have been able to provide it with additional funding to further increase its staffing levels.

The prisons Vote will have a current expenditure budget of €358.5 million in 2021 and a capital budget of €36 million, mainly to complete the redevelopment of Limerick Prison. This represents an increase of €15 million in the capital allocation for 2021, providing for the complete modernisation of Limerick Prison, as well as eliminating the practice of slopping out.

The gross allocation of €158.8 million for the courts Vote includes €8 million for the courts modernisation programme, which I mentioned. The Courts Service has already shown very impressive innovation and adaptability from the start of the pandemic and in maintaining vital front-line services for those who need them, particularly the most vulnerable victims of domestic violence. This will enable the service to further advance the digital agenda to the benefit of the wider justice sector.

I recognise the Data Protection Commission's increased responsibilities as the lead supervisory authority to the various multinational organisations that have their European headquarters in the State and I am pleased to announce an increased allocation of €2 million for additional staff resources. Following increases totalling €15.3 million over the past six years, this brings the allocation for the commission to over €19 million in 2021.

I am prioritising the addressing of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which is a scourge on our society. Organisations providing support for victims have, unfortunately, seen demand for their services increase during the pandemic. This budget will allow the Government to continue the funding provided for such organisations during Covid-19 and increase our support. The extra support will provide more remote counselling services and help keep helplines open, as well as providing welfare packs and other practical supports for those who are most vulnerable.

Next week, I will outline how I intend to reform how vulnerable witnesses are treated as sexual offences are investigated and prosecuted. This plan follows the work done by Mr. Tom O'Malley in reviewing protections for such witnesses. I am glad €2.7 million has been allocated in budget 2021 for this work and to support groups doing invaluable work in the area of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Finally, I thank my colleagues, the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, for their support in the budget. Budget 2021 will both protect our country and set a course for how we can emerge from this crisis stronger and with an acknowledgement of how we can change for the better.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I will primarily speak about the education elements of this budget. The pandemic demonstrates that Irish schools are underfunded, understaffed and overcrowded. This has slowed the reopening of schools and it means that keeping schools open safely and sustainably is extremely challenging. It is a challenge that teachers, school staff and principals face every day. We have much more to do on that front.

Budget 2021 provided the Government with an opportunity to finally address some of these long-standing matters facing our education sector to ensure education is never again as vulnerable as Covid-19 showed it to be. I fear the Minister and the Department have not done entirely what is required to deliver this. The sector remains vulnerable and underfunded in several areas.

I sent the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, a document recently outlining what I felt was necessary to ensure schools remained open safely and sustainably. The key priorities are to reduce class sizes significantly, and space is required for that, urgent testing and rapid tracing for students and staff. There are certainly still issues in this, particularly with tracing. We must ensure no child is left behind and no parent has to worry about their job or income because a child must be kept home. We must address the shortage of teachers in certain areas and increase capacity in school transport.

There are areas where welcome progress has been made. I welcome the significant increase in special education teaching posts. We spoke about this earlier and there will be concerns about these allocations. I hope there will be some consultation but I acknowledge that this is a welcome boost.

A commitment has been made to reduce pupil-teacher ratios, which is welcome, but a reduction of one point is not the shift we hoped for. A shift of at least two points would have been required to radically change the experience and facilitate social distancing. There are educational issues, to which I will return, but there is also the matter of space in schools, which are overcrowded.

The capital allocation for buildings is basically what was provided in the national development plan. How are we going to support schools struggling with social distancing? We proposed a specific significant fund for the schools struggling most with social distancing but there is nothing of that nature in the budget.

On the pupil-teacher ratio, I am astonished and angry that, among the hundreds of thousands of children who attend primary school, those who need a reduction most will not benefit from a reduction. Shamefully, the majority of some of the most disadvantaged schools in the country, DEIS band 1 schools, will not see a single point reduction in the ratio. That is shameful and wrong. There are 229 DEIS band 1 schools, including the ordinary vertical schools from infants to sixth class, as well as junior and senior schools. Only the senior schools, which total 60 or 70, will see that reduction and the other 200-odd will not see any benefit. We are talking about some children with some of the worst or challenging starts to life and they face the greatest disadvantage. For them, education can make the greatest difference but for some bizarre reason - perhaps it is an oversight but I do not know - they have been excluded. This decision must be reversed.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, is interested in educational disadvantage and the Minister of State who is here has displayed an interest in tackling issues around special educational needs. I

appeal to the Government to fix this. There is no excuse and it would be a very small cost in the grand scheme. I welcome that hundreds of thousands of children will rightfully benefit from a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio but there are a few thousand in those most disadvantaged schemes, which is wrong. It must be fixed.

The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, should bring the message to the Department that this should be fixed in the coming days. It can be done and money has been found for all sorts of things in this budget. Most of them are good, although I would like to see some go further, and others I do not agree with, but we can surely find the money to ensure all DEIS band 1 schools benefit from the reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio. It must be done.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I absolutely understand and appreciate, as all of us do, that this budget comes at a time of crisis in the country. It comes at a time when governments, not just in Ireland but in most countries in Europe and around the world, must become an income provider of last resort. That is absolutely appropriate and it needs to happen. The European Central Bank is providing the funds for this to happen at a negative interest rate. In that context, everything done with the budget is to sustain our community and the economy in order to get over the crisis.

It strikes me that we are absolutely all in it together, and not just because of this crisis and pandemic but in every other context as well. The pandemic will be over some day but if only we could continue to have a sense of all being in this together, working to create a better society for everybody. It would be a good lesson to learn from the crisis.

One of the key matters for small businesses and people who are struggling to survive is that the Government is providing emergency funds to pay wages and keep people in employment so they can continue to survive. We also have the pandemic unemployment payment which, unfortunately, was reduced in a retrograde step. It should have been maintained at €350. I know the people who receive that money will spend in their local communities both while there is a pandemic and after the pandemic. It will not disappear into a black hole and the money must be put back in communities the length and breadth of the country. We have a market economy in this country, like most of the world, and in such economies, the money funnels from the top. Every effort must be made to put in the money at the bottom.

The budget has done some good but it could have done much more because the money was available from the European Central Bank at such low interest rates. Deputy Ó Laoghaire has spoken about the education sector. I live in a rural community and in those communities around the country with small schools, we are losing teachers and the pupil-teacher ratio is a major concern. Reducing it by only one point is ridiculous in the context of our current position. We should have reduced it by at least two and possibly three points to make a difference, particularly with the pandemic going on around us. The school bus service is an ongoing problem in rural Ireland and it has had a major impact.

There are other matters, such as housing and funding for local authorities.

Local authorities throughout the country will not raise any funding from rates this year or probably for most of next year. They will not be able to provide the vital services they usually do. We all know that when any crisis hits any community, the first thing people do is call the council to come and sort it out. That applies to incidents from a tree blocking a road to an accident requiring an ambulance or the fire brigade. All of those services will be stripped of cash.

They will need more money and I do not see that money in this budget.

Turning to the justice portfolio, I would like to commend An Garda Síochána and the Irish Prison Service which have done a tremendous job of keeping the virus out of prisons. We understand that the Garda Training College at Templemore had to be closed down, so it has not been possible to deploy more gardaí. However, 600 additional gardaí is not enough. That number needs to be maximised if we are to approach the force numbers we need.

The Minister mentioned access to justice in her speech, but the civil legal aid scheme is not being funded. Someone told me today that there is a 38-week waiting list for free legal aid in Dublin. Somebody who does not have the money cannot go to court. That must be addressed as a matter of absolute urgency. I spoke to representatives of the community law and mediation service in Coolock about many of these issues. That service really needed to see something in this budget. Since the pandemic it has been inundated with people who have huge problems and do not have the resources to take the necessary legal route and assert their rights as citizens of the State. That problem needed to be dealt with before the pandemic, but it is particularly urgent now. The Minister mentioned issues concerning domestic and sexual violence. There must be a huge emphasis on addressing that issue. When Covid-19 came along, people were cocooned into their homes and pressures were created. Difficulties that already existed in some households were exacerbated to the detriment of many people.

This budget has done some good things, but it could have done much more. It represents a wasted opportunity. So much more needed to be done and could have been done. That is something that this Government will regret.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** As the Minister for Justice and Equality is in the Chamber, I would like to start by welcoming the €3 billion increase in funding for the justice portfolio. The Minister has said she looks forward to dedicating some of those resources to tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I look forward to getting more information in the coming days and weeks on how the Minister intends to apply those resources to that need. The allocation of new gardaí is most welcome.

There is no denying that there are many good things in this budget. I have been contacted by people involved in youth services who very much welcome the increase in funding in that area. That sector ran a very positive campaign through the National Youth Council of Ireland, which the Labour Party supported. Youth services have received an increase in funding. There is an expectation that it will go to front-line youth services. I have no doubt that this will be the case.

Turning to transport, which is my own portfolio, commitments have been made with regard to MetroLink, the DART extension programme and BusConnects. These are all welcome. I will not say much about the money because an awful lot of it had already been allocated. However, there have been commitments to apply for railway orders for the major projects within the calendar year of 2021. We have to hold the Government to account in that regard. Those are political rather than financial commitments, but they are important. They are part of this package. This budget will not affect people's household finances. Its effect will be through these big projects, which will require investment. We will need to see progress on them.

There is a gap here where the promotion of active travel is concerned. This budget should have enabled people with disabilities to get around their own villages, towns and communities. I hope that in the coming days and weeks the Minister for Transport will revisit this. Perhaps

we can allocate resources to that area. We all know that we need to connect our major cities and allow people to get from one end of the country to the other. However, people throughout our State are unable to get from their front door to their local shop, which may only be 400 yd away. Addressing that is just as important as investing in major projects like MetroLink.

There are gaps in this budget which we in the Labour Party would like to see filled. The aviation sector has been spoken about many times in this Chamber and in hearings of the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. The sector directly and indirectly supports 140,000 jobs and drives the country's economy. There are massive opportunities for the State to rescue the aviation industry, set it on the path to becoming more carbon-friendly and protect its workers. Sadly those measures are absent from this budget.

There is also nothing for early years educators. I know the general election seems like a very long time ago, but it was only in February. The largest demonstration we saw in that period was the march of 30,000 childcare workers and early years educators through Dublin. That was a powerful and positive campaign. Those workers have been left out of this budget. That is something this Government will need to address.

Regarding climate action, I note that the national home retrofitting scheme could have been more ambitious. This could have been a really ambitious scheme that put the idea of a just transition into practice. An allocation has been made, but it is not ambitious enough. In our alternative budget the Labour Party costed the retrofitting of 100,000 homes. Our previous alternative budgets outlined a plan for street-by-street home retrofitting. This would involve retraining workers in fossil fuel industries for high-skilled and well-paid jobs that would reduce our carbon footprint. If there is any low-hanging fruit in climate action it is in the retrofitting of our homes. They emit 60% more carbon than the EU average. We need a strong plan to tackle that, and this budget does not quite achieve that. I am not saying this just to pick holes. The measures in the budget could have been better. They could have been worker-focused and properly green, and made real progress on carbon emissions and climate action.

I would like to say a final word on the arts. Money has been allocated to the arts. The arts community has run an incredible campaign for its very survival throughout this pandemic. It has been positive and engaged. It has brought home the extent to which the arts enrich us. They are so integral to our life in Ireland. Many people in the arts are welcoming that funding. They will see it in their pockets and it will help them to survive.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I welcome the budget and the additional €4 billion in funding for health services. We are talking about an additional 1,146 acute beds. The number of critical care beds is to increase from 255 to 321. However, this is not just about beds. It is also about ensuring access to theatre space and facilities like X-ray and MRI. It is important that there is a co-ordinated approach to the development of services within hospitals. We must also provide care in the community. That need is provided for by the additional 5 million home care hours. It is extremely important that there is co-ordination in the delivery of home care. I welcome the additional 5 million hours.

Long-term planning is crucial. That is particularly true for our elective hospitals. It is now time to decide where they should be situated, go through the planning process and deliver. We need to fast-track that process. We cannot afford for this to be delayed any further. Sláintecare representatives were before the Joint Committee on Health today. Its members said they would present a report to the Government by the end of the year. We should be putting pressure on the

responsible officials to deliver that report earlier so that we can make decisions and deliver the healthcare services we need.

Careful management of the 16,000 posts will be important. The number of people employed by the HSE has increased from 103,000 to 123,000 in the last five years. Careful management is therefore important. The money should be spent wisely in the whole area of healthcare such that we get an efficient service. I again thank the Minister and the Government for making sure that adequate and additional funding has been allocated to the health budget.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** This is a difficult time, especially with there being so many unknowns and variables. It is not just about health and the economy or health versus the economy; it is also about society. We must be very sensitive to the needs of society, including people living on their own who are not able to see their grandchildren or meet other people, third level students who are going to college but staying at home, people who are working on the front line and as part of their downtime watch television programmes about life on the front line, sixth year students and their daily challenges, people who love to dance but dance no more and children who just want to play.

There is an understanding that this is the way things will be for an undefined period. People also understand that whatever it takes to protect lives must be done. However, we also have a duty to give people hope. It should not be false hope. The opposite of hope is despair. The budget was an important step in giving hope to business owners who are worried about the future of their businesses and livelihoods, and workers who are worried about their jobs. It was a statement of intent in building a bridge to help navigate our way through these stormy seas. Cuirim fáilte roimh an infheistíocht agus na hacmhainní a cuireadh isteach sa Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta, fá choinne na comharchumainn, caipitil agus ritheadh Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Foras na Gaeilge. Fáiltím freisin roimh an tacaíocht agus na hacmhainní atá i gceist do m'iar-Roinn, an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna.

We must be very careful in terms of our consistency as we work and navigate our way through this situation. It may have been officially announced since I began speaking that counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan will be going to level 4 in response to what has happened in Northern Ireland. We must look at what is happening in level 3. What we are achieving in level 3 will be looked at very closely. We had been making progress in Dublin and Donegal. If it is decided tonight to move Donegal to level 4, that will be difficult territory because retail will stay open in Northern Ireland. I hope that even at this late stage there will be some consideration given to ensuring retail is protected because we are on the eve of Christmas. People have started their Christmas shopping. I return to my original point about hope versus despair. The businesses that were given hope yesterday are now looking at a different trajectory this evening.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Budget 2021 has been published as our nation faces two unprecedented challenges, namely, the Covid-19 pandemic and a hard Brexit. The Government will spend an additional €17.3 billion in 2021, of which €8.5 billion will be allocated to Covid measures, while €3.4 billion will be spent supporting jobs and the economy as we deal with Brexit. A significant extra spend of €1.6 billion has been allocated to capital spending, which will provide 12,750 much-needed social homes and fund public transport improvements on bus, Luas and DART services. This is all done with no increases in income tax, PRSI or the USC and that is very welcome.

The Government is following the right macroeconomic strategy: to borrow and invest in

people and the economy. Members of the Opposition have called for what amounts to €28 billion in tax hikes to fund all sorts of populist policies. At a time when many businesses are on their knees, bringing in such tax hikes would simply destroy jobs and the economy. All Deputies would like to see more spending in particular areas, but there must be recognition of the unprecedented challenges facing Ireland at this time.

I welcome measures to support the pandemic unemployment payment which has been extended into 2021, while allowing the self-employed who are on the PUP the flexibility to take up casual work. The increased tax relief for people working from home will assist thousands of workers. Young people have been particularly hard hit during the pandemic. The new €250 grant for full-time students will be of significant benefit to many. The addition of 5,000 new college places and the €1,500 increase in grants for postgraduate students will be of assistance. I welcome the investment in primary education, especially the reduction in the student-teacher ratio to 25:1. Funding is provided for 990 additional SNAs and 403 additional teaching posts which will support children with special educational needs. The State pension age will remain at 66, as per the programme for Government, while there will be increases in the living alone, qualified child and fuel allowance payments. The annual carer's support grant is to be increased by €150 to €1,850 per annum. I welcome the retention of the Christmas bonus for nearly all those in receipt of social protection payments, including those on the PUP.

The investment in the health service will see the delivery of 1,146 new acute hospital beds, 1,250 community support beds and 66 new ICU beds. Home help is to be increased by an additional 5 million hours, which will support our most vulnerable, particularly in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, where there is a high percentage of older people.

For businesses, the new Covid restrictions support scheme will provide a grant of up to €5,000 per week if they have to close due to the pandemic. The commercial rates waiver will continue until the end of this year, while the VAT rate for the hospitality and tourism sector will be reduced from 13.5% to 9%.

This budget invests more in public services and infrastructure than any other budget in the history of the State. It will protect lives and protect jobs. I welcome its announcement.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** It is appreciated that budget 2021 is the largest spending package announced to date, but it has been noted that it did not go far enough. As far as I can see, it did not go anywhere in some areas. Some of the measures in the budget are welcome, such as the reduction in the VAT rate for the hospitality and tourism sector to 9%. That reduction was needed and Sinn Féin had called for it to be introduced. Additional community beds in the health sector, for example, are also welcome. That measure was also proposed by Sinn Féin. It is interesting that Government Deputies are willing to attack Sinn Féin's fully costed budget and at the same time take measures we proposed and sell them as their own.

To focus on specific sectors, people with disabilities have long been forgotten and left behind by the State. Covid-19 has brought that to the fore as an issue on which the Government had to work. The allocation in the budget of a mere €100 million to the sector falls well short of what was needed. We in Sinn Féin proposed a package of €300 million for the sector, which would have brought about a full reopening of services. It would have put in place additional personal assistant hours to allow our most vulnerable to live independently in the manner and place they wish to live. That is what they deserve. Is that not the most important point? The Government's increase to the carer's support grant should be welcomed. However, Sinn Féin

proposed raising the grant to €2,000. Let us be straight. These proposals did not come from a change of heart by the Government but, rather, from hard work, lobbying and application of pressure by the people, workers and families in the sector. I commend them on their extensive work prior to the budget. They had to take to the streets and more besides, which is a difficult task when one is in despair.

On Shannon Airport, the funding allocation of €10 million for it and Cork Airport is welcome. It is estimated that approximately €5 million will be granted to Shannon Airport. I have been calling for funding for the airport for some time and have welcomed and will continue to welcome any investment made in it. However, I continue to have an issue with Government supports for the airport because there is a risk that good money is being thrown at a problem without a full awareness of what the problem is. Only yesterday, the Minister made reference to the fact that Ireland will be signing up to the EU traffic light protocol on foreign travel, another proposal mooted by Sinn Féin back in June. However, this is the second announcement of capital funding for Shannon Airport since the onset of the pandemic but we still do not know where the future of the airport lies. There is an overhanging threat that Aer Lingus and Ryanair may pull their bases out of Shannon. The review announced by the Minister back in July is still ongoing. There are unanswered questions around the future of the airport and planned staff redundancies.

As I and many other Deputies have stated, the budget does not go far enough. Sinn Féin proposes €2.4 billion in additional spending and a progressive taxation system. We would have introduced a 3% solidarity tax on personal incomes over €140,000. Surely that is not too much to ask for. We proposed a mere 1% tax on wealth over €1 million. That is not too much to ask for. We also proposed a cut in the pay of Deputies, Senators and Ministers. That is not too much to ask for.

This budget was an opportunity to do things differently. Instead, even being the largest of its kind, we have left the most vulnerable in our society well and truly behind. A message has been heard loud and clear. We are all in this together, but not on budget day.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, and thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh for letting me go first in this slot.

First and foremost, I commend the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, on bringing this budget to the House. It covers so many aspects. They listened and they mirrored what most industries, sectors and parts of society were looking for, and I commend them on that.

There is so much to cover that I will need more than the eight minutes' speaking time but I will focus on a few important issues that were funded in this budget. First, the €100 million for disability supports is an unbelievable boost for that sector. Disability services were running at 40%. I am thinking, in my constituency of Cork South-West, of CoAction. It is an incredible service where the service users get this unbelievable experience, but it was only running at 40% capacity and the service users were really losing out. This funding will be an incredible boost for the service users and for voluntary groups such as CoAction.

I must touch on the supports for the live entertainment industry, the fact that there is €50 million going to the Arts Council to be fed back into arts and entertainment, but also the fact that there was a change in the PUP, that they could retain PUP and also work intermittently.

That is a significant boost and something that the sector had been calling for.

The hospitality sector, which is a big employer in my constituency of Cork South-West, has broadly welcomed the reduction in VAT from 13.5% to 9%, but also the Covid restrictions support scheme. The €5,000 per week in the latter is a considerable boost.

In terms of the commitment to rural areas and the €341 million funding for rural affairs and broadband, I would guess now we need to roll out broadband and ensure that funding is well spent.

Finally, since the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is here, I welcome the extra funding for heritage and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS. Let us use that wisely. Let us reform the National Parks and Wildlife Service so that we can protect wildlife and biodiversity.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** It is fair to say that this budget has been framed at a pivotal point in our country's history; a perfect storm of pandemic, Brexit, climate and biodiversity breakdown, all of which interconnect and impact on our people and our environment. While the current challenges may seem too great for any one budget to overcome, I am proud of what was presented yesterday and of the role the Green Party played in forming a budget that has a strong focus on both social and environmental justice.

The social protection measures in this budget are specifically and deliberately targeted to benefit the most vulnerable in society. As a former primary school teacher, I have seen the impact of child poverty at first hand. The extension of the hot school meals to an additional 35,000 children, the increases in qualified child payments, the removal of the earnings threshold for one-parent family payments and the increase in the working family payment thresholds all are key measures which target some of the most vulnerable families in our communities.

In March, we asked many of the people of Ireland who live alone, many of whom are elderly, to weather the worst of the pandemic on their own. It is our turn to give a little back to them. Through increasing the living alone allowance, the fuel allowance, and the widow or surviving partner grant, I sincerely hope that people living alone will be better equipped as our society continues to adapt to living with Covid-19.

This morning I listened to numerous analyses of the budget, among them that of Social Justice Ireland. All pointed to positives in the budget, but many highlighted negatives as well. We must acknowledge there is still work to be done. This is not the perfect budget.

While I appreciate that there are disappointments, I also want to highlight that there are new initiatives in the budget that have long been Green Party policy. For the first time, we are seeing well-being indicators included in an Irish national budget, setting out our stall for what is to come further down the line. This is the beginning of a longer process to enhance well-being in a much broader sense and I sincerely hope that it will lead to a well-being budget next year.

Finally, I wish to point out that there are still people in our society whose voices get lost in the crowd and whose concerns and fears fall through the cracks in between countless priorities and plans. There are people in rural areas, living in isolated situations, dependent on sporadic trips to local towns and villages to meet and connect with peers. These are people who are living in rural poverty and they are a group that must be addressed. We need to do more to look after such people. They are also weathering the storm of Covid-19, potentially more quietly but with no less resilience than the rest of us.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** This budget was delivered yesterday in the context of two of the greatest challenges our economy ever faced, that is, a hard-deal Brexit and a Covid pandemic. The Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, have managed to come up with a seriously progressive budget. This budget will save lives and save livelihoods and, most important of all, will give our people confidence to face the future.

This budget invests in every Department - health, housing, education, justice, mental health, jobs, businesses, students, workers, and farmers. Many of their issues have been addressed in this budget. Never before have we seen any Government invest in our people to this magnitude.

There is an unprecedented increase in the budget for health of €4 billion. It includes extra acute beds, extra intensive care unit, ICU, beds and extra respite care, and also an extra €5 million of home help hours.

In housing, there is the most ambitious programme ever embarked upon. Prior to the election, Fianna Fáil committed to building houses. This budget is the first serious building block in ensuring that is delivered on. There is a €5.2 billion investment in the Department which will deliver on much of what we set out prior to the last election.

With education under a Fianna Fáil Minister, this Government is reducing class sizes, hiring new teachers, more SNAs, more special needs teachers, and investing in our country's future.

In my own constituency of Tipperary, I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in the Department of Health for working so closely with me. We will now have funding for the crisis centre in Clonmel which has been sought for a number of years and which is part of building mental health services up again in my county. There is €50 million for mental health in this budget. It, too, is most welcome.

I heard a number of Opposition Deputies today criticising the carbon tax, stating that it is an attack on rural areas. I am a Deputy representing a rural constituency and I strongly dispute that. The money that is collected from this carbon tax will be redistributed in our economy. It will protect the most vulnerable in our economy. It will be spent on retrofitting homes. It will fund a rural environmental protection scheme, REPS-type scheme for farmers that they have sought for many years. Even with the crisis we face with Covid and Brexit, we cannot ignore climate change. This is a progressive tax and the fact that the money will be redistributed makes it a fair tax. It will help us to meet the challenges of climate change going forward.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I welcome the announcement of funding to complete the Dunkettle interchange. This is much needed but it is disappointing that there is still no real commitment to Cork's northern ring road.

Overall, this has not been a good budget for Cork. In the face of Brexit and Covid-19, with a Cork Taoiseach and a Cork Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, this was a serious opportunity to deliver Cork as a counterbalance to Dublin, which is policy. Also, the legislation on increasing the carbon tax every year for the next ten years was sneaky and underhanded. Some people will not be able to pay this tax and there are no protections for those people. It will leave some people going cold this winter and every winter for the next ten years. That is just not fair. There were other ways to do it but the Government decided to pick ordinary people to suffer the burden as usual.

People might laugh when I say this, but I think Cork is the greatest place in the world.

However, it cannot reach its full potential unless it gets support from the Government. We need the new hospital that was promised for the past 20 years, the northern ring road and real housing developments in Cork, as well as investment in our young people. We have a Corkman as Taoiseach, captaining the country, but unfortunately he dropped the ball for Cork in this budget.

At a first glance it seemed as though the budget would make the difference in investing in and supporting people in addiction services but it has transpired in the past 24 hours that not even the Minister knows what the actual investment is. He has not provided a clear breakdown. A sum of €10 million was committed to the national drugs strategy yesterday but is that entirely for the strategy or is it additional funds? This is a simple question that the Minister has not answered. He has confused a strategy with the task forces, and he put out a tweet yesterday about €10 million in funding for the task forces. That was incorrect because yesterday's budget provided €1 million. We are looking for funding for the task forces because it is badly needed. As far as I am aware, that €1 million had been committed by previous Ministers as part of the three-year strategic health initiatives. The €11 million for Covid-19 measures among the homeless is part of the HSE winter plan, not part of the budget.

This evening *The Examiner* reported that 13 hospitals, including University Hospital Cork and Mercy University Hospital, had no ICU beds available yesterday. There has been a lot of talk about health in this budget. Our spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane, has highlighted the matter and this is something we are still looking for.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy James Browne):**  
My colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, addressed the House earlier about the unprecedented budgetary allocation for the justice sector. I am pleased to have opportunity to mention the significant impact this will have on communities across the country.

Communities are at the heart of all that we do across the justice sector and community safety is central to the vision of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. Fundamentally, all members and staff of An Garda Síochána work to keep our communities safe, and the additional funding that will see more gardaí on our streets, better equipped than ever before, will ultimately benefit every community in Ireland.

The future of our communities rests with our young people and we owe it to them to give them every opportunity to make the most of their potential and move away from poor choices or youthful mistakes. Everyone deserves the chance to change a badly-chosen path or move away from a situation they no longer want for themselves. To this end, we have increased the funding for youth justice programmes by €0.5 million, bringing the total allocation for this to almost €18 million for 2021. This funding principally supports the work of Garda youth diversion projects, which are delivered by community-based organisations working closely with An Garda Síochána. The objective of these programmes is to promote positive life choices by young people so that they can steer clear of involvement with the criminal justice system. Of course, our preference would be to take steps to ensure that young people do not become involved in anti-social or criminal activity in the first place. However, if they do come to Garda attention, we must make every effort to divert them away from any further offending behaviour.

It is important to remember that a very small proportion of our young people actually become involved in criminal activity. Instead of just reacting to criminal behaviour by young people, we must look more intently at the reasons that happens to those few so that we can take more effective measures to reduce the impact of youth crime and anti-social behaviour. That

sort of preventative approach will be a key principle underpinning a new youth justice strategy which I hope to finalise before the end of this year. I firmly believe that investing in diversion and prevention will pay great dividends in the long term, not least for the young people themselves, but for their families, communities and wider society. It is our duty to provide the supports that will enable children and young people to develop in a positive manner and contribute to their own communities. In this way, the Government's continuing investment in youth justice programmes promotes enhanced community safety for everyone by tackling the often complex issues which underlie youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

I also welcome the additional funding provided in the budget for the establishment of the office of the gambling regulator in 2021. This is a commitment in the programme for Government and is a priority for me over the coming years. This will form part of the Department's ongoing reform of gambling licensing and regulation of gambling in Ireland.

It is also worth highlighting a few of the areas in the Department's Vote where the extra funding provided for 2021 will contribute to greater access to justice overall. An additional €3.7 million for criminal legal aid brings the total allocation to €69 million and additional funding for FLAC, the Free Legal Advice Centres, has been trebled to a total allocation of €294,000 to support legal services to the most vulnerable in our society. Funding for victims of crime has risen by €300,000, bringing the total allocation to €2.2 million.

The record allocation this year for the justice group of Votes gives us the resources we need to do our work in fulfilling our programme for Government commitments and I look forward to updating the House on progress over the coming months.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** Today's announcement of almost €96 million, an overall increase of 51%, recognises the vital role played by our natural and built heritage in supporting the physical and mental well-being of the nation and in realising many of the commitments set out in the programme for Government. The €95.95 million announced today will support an accelerated programme of conservation health and safety visitor and infrastructure projects across the 87,000 ha national parks and reserves network and leverage support for rural employment. Our parks and reserves which are, and will remain, free to access are on track to receive more than 4 million visitors in 2020. This is only likely to increase in 2021. This funding will allow my Department to invest in our tracks and trails, visitor facilities and interpretation to meet that demand in a Covid-safe way.

We are in the midst of a biodiversity and climate crisis and this funding reflects the programme for Government response to both these areas. Combined current capital funding of almost €29 million for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, represents a significant increase ,112% or €15.3 million on 2020. This increase will allow my Department to be even more ambitious in its implementation of the national biodiversity plan and related commitments in the programme for Government.

I am delighted that an additional 250 farms will have the opportunity to join the NPWS farm plan scheme and that, as a crucial step, the farmers, as custodians of nature, are brought on board this scheme.

Peatlands are among our oldest natural habitats, and we all know it is the time of great transition in this area. Increased funding to €14 million will enable the restoration of 2,500 ha of

protected raised bogs across the midlands and will contribute to long-term carbon emissions reductions. My Department's built and archaeological capital grant scheme will reach into communities right across the country, providing over 35,000 days employment annually for the many small businesses, skilled conservation specialists and tradespeople involved in heritage-related construction activity, and the tourism hospitality sector. It also plays a key role in our town centres first policy, unlocking the potential of historic town centres and traditional skills.

The figure of almost €9.6 million announced for the Heritage Council is the largest allocation of core funding to the council since 2009. Funding of €1.15 million to the Irish Heritage Trust will allow it to continue essential conservation works across its properties.

Finally, the budget will enable Waterways Ireland to continue to invest in the essential maintenance of its networks north and south of the Border and to enhance the blueways and greenways that have become even more essential to the health and well-being of the nation over the past months.

The increased funding allocated to my Department today demonstrates that this Government is committed to playing its part. If the Ireland we all inhabit today is to remain viable for those who follow us, we must do something. This budget and the programme for Government that framed it demonstrate that we are acting. The heritage sector, which encompasses our built and natural heritage, our land and its history, is who we are and who we were; it is vital to our identity, our story, and our spirit of well-being. It contributes to our national health, enjoyment, the environment and sustainable development. It has faced many challenges in crisis before and I have every confidence in the staff in my Department and the wider heritage sector that supported it, that we will overcome it, and face today what is to come.

The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, and I have secured a budget allocation reflective of the need for urgent action to reverse biodiversity loss, restore nature, protect our rivers, coasts and marine areas as well as our lands, and help transform our relationship with the natural world.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** In the past couple of weeks, I have had a number of conversations with people in my constituency. On Tuesday, I spoke to one of the school secretaries who have a problem with their two-tier system. She has been working in a school for more than 29 years, but she will have no pension. She is laid off at the end of June every year. When the pandemic struck, however, who was expected to roll up her sleeves and help out as a front-line worker? There is nothing in this budget for her.

Last Friday, I spoke to a fisherman in Dingle who had a small, family-run business and whose income was being squeezed. He is dependent on crab, lobster and crayfish, but the prices for those have dropped. Following a recent High Court ruling, larger boats are now free to sweep up inside the six-mile limit. Herring and mackerel are no longer available to them. There is nothing for that fisherman in this budget except an increase in the price of diesel. The absence of a stand-alone Minister in this Government has failed the small fisherman once again.

I spoke to a woman in Killorglin whose son used to attend a day care centre for five days per week. His time has been reduced to three hours three days per week. His mother, who is a nurse in a nursing home, is now thinking about quitting her job. There are some good elements in this budget. Perhaps there will be something for her. We will wait and see.

With a budget of €70.75 billion, I thought to myself that the Government could surely not

fail to deliver for everyone. In a time of crisis, this was a chance for transformative change so that we could build a real republic of equals. However, I am afraid to say that the Government has not delivered. There was a chance to make nurses' pay equal. The Government failed in that. There was a chance to make young teachers' pay equal to that of their colleagues. The Government failed in that. There was a chance to reduce class sizes to a revolutionary level. The Government failed in that. The greatest issue in the run-up to the election last February was the two-tier health system. That will not change. The electorate also looked for pension certainty in that election, but it has not been provided. Low-paid workers will get an increase of 10 cent in the minimum wage. Although the local authority rates waiver will continue to the end of this year, there is no certainty going into next year.

Regarding climate action, anyone who canvasses around Ireland knows that poverty in certain areas is evidenced by the amount of solid fuel or oil fuel in households. They cannot afford solar panels. There is nothing in this budget except increased costs and energy poverty for people who are already poor. Where is the action against the big polluters? There is none.

There will still be a 30-month waiting list for the wind energy plan. Where is the State-run wind energy policy similar to the ones being promoted in other countries? There is none. I fear that changes will not arise out of this budget.

A couple of weeks ago, the home of one of the 1916 leaders, who promoted and advocated for a real republic and real equality, was demolished.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are moving more quickly now. Since several groups are not present, we will go to the Government side.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** It is a pleasure and honour to contribute on any budget. As someone mentioned, I have spoken on a few. We used to speak for much longer on budgets, but that is how things go over time. We now spend more time doing work in the committees, including pre-legislative scrutiny, to the detriment of what used to be the Second Stage speech, which addresses the general principles contained in any proposed legislation or budget.

Something that never ceases to amaze me is the degree to which the Opposition can be negatively descriptive in its response to a budget. There was nothing new this time either - "lost opportunities", "missed opportunities", "failure to recognise" and "too little, too late". It has never changed down all the years, so it would be great if we could have a change.

Having a Government point of view, I look at this somewhat differently. The budget does not solve all of the country's problems, and never could it intend to, but it is a robust response by the Government to the twin challenges of Brexit and Covid. Even as we speak, Covid rages throughout the country and measures continue to be taken to try to curtail it. It is within the ambit of everyone to make a contribution to that effort. We all must reflect on how we live our lives and ask ourselves whether we can do more, restrict our movements, restrict the degree to which we interact with others, reduce our meetings in groups and so forth. Obviously, we are not doing enough.

Although it is something of a contradiction, the restrictions must continue because the economy must recover. If it does not, then we cannot drive what must be done in future, we cannot repay what we borrow and we cannot fund what we have already put in place. In such circumstances, we must try to find a happy medium where we observe the regulations that are most effective in curtailing the virus while our economy is activated to the extent that is necessary

and desirable.

Time and again over the past six months, we have all had to look at the way we live and where we are heading and ask ourselves the pertinent question of whether we are making progress. We have held the line for quite a while, but the Government must now respond again with new regulations and curtailments. It is sad, but that is the way it is. If we panic and run away from Brexit, it will overcome us. So will Covid. These twin issues are the greatest threats to our well-being and livelihoods that our country has seen since its foundation. The Government should continue, though. It will have to respond to other issues as they arise, issues that will be an equal threat to the stability of the country and the economy.

This budget has considered needs in many areas, albeit not to the extent that one would like in all regards. We cannot do everything in the face of the magnitude of the threats before us, though. Maintaining the capital expenditure programme, which is something that was dropped to one side whenever a threat appeared in the past, is wise. It must continue. The investment in health and housing must continue. No matter what we do in terms of housing, we will not be able to make the progress necessary to resolve the problem as quickly as we would like. That is how it has been for the past number of years. Be it the building of local authority housing or the building of private housing, it all has an effect on the market value of housing. A major leap forward in the delivery of houses is necessary. That will in turn influence the market and reduce house prices. House prices in Ireland have been way too high for several years. I do not know why it has to be that way. There is no need to keep it so.

Health has been a vulnerable area for many years. It is ironic that it has to be addressed now, given the threat of the virus. The budget is a good, solid response to the issues. Eventually, it will pay off. As other Deputies have mentioned, we are also involved in delivering Sláintecare. That is an integral part of delivering the health services we require in this country in the future.

We also need to do more in the area of special needs provision. We have taken action to a certain extent in this regard but we need to continue on that path. Children with special needs will continue to have those needs regardless of any ups and downs in the economy. Sadly, over the period of the pandemic, there has been a serious impact on the assessment of special needs. I hope that in the course of the budget debate, it will be possible to address those particular issues.

We have spoken about mental health issues many times in this House and we all know that addressing that area of need does not get any easier as time goes on. The requirement is still there and we must continue to invest in that particular area to a greater extent than was ever the case in the past. Mental health provision has always been regarded as the Cinderella of the health services and that is indeed what it has been. Child mental health provision is an issue that is becoming more urgent as time goes by. It is something on which there must and will be a focus in the coming years, notwithstanding the pressures of Covid and Brexit. I recall a response I received some years ago to a parliamentary question regarding children who had self-harmed on numerous occasions, which informed me that there were often attendant issues for the children in question in terms of their household or their community. Those issues can, must and, I hope, will be addressed in the not too distant future.

One should always make reference to one's constituency and I take this opportunity to refer to the DART+ project which is coming towards us at a good rate. I have asked the Minister to consider whether it can be extended further into areas such as Kilcock and Enfield, which would

be of huge benefit in providing alternative transport in the future for people living in the commuter belt. Local infrastructure is an issue that must be taken into consideration in this regard. Where more houses are being built to accommodate a growing housing need, there must be road networks to facilitate connectivity between road and rail services to provide the necessary wherewithal to enable people to get to where they need to go.

My last point concerns education, which has been challenged like every other sector of society over the past 12 months and particularly in the past six months. The budget offers a fairly shrewd and good assessment of what is required in this area. I believe it will produce the results that are needed as long as we remain constant in what we are trying to do in terms of both Covid and Brexit.

Debate adjourned.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands has completed its consideration of Vote 42 for the year ending 31 December 2020.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.55 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 15 October 2020.