



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 5 Bealtaine 2021

Wednesday, 5 May 2021

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Private Rental Sector: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the rental crisis continues to spiral out of control;
- rents across the State have increased by 2.5 per cent in the last 12 months;
- rents in the commuter belt counties increased by 5 per cent during the same period;
- rents in Leitrim, Longford, Carlow, Kildare and Limerick have increased by 11 per cent, 9 per cent, 8 per cent, 6 per cent and 6 per cent respectively during the same period;
- the average rent across the State is now €1,256 per month;
- the average rent in Dublin is now €1,745 per month;
- in many parts of Dublin, asking rents are more than €2,000 per month;
- high rents are making it more difficult for first-time buyers, and those who lost their homes, due to recession era repossession or relationship breakdown, to buy their own home;
- high rental yields are incentivising investors to focus on the high-end, Build to Rent market, reducing the output of new homes to rent or buy at affordable prices;
- excessive tax breaks for real estate investment vehicles are having a distorting effect on land values, residential development costs and, in turn, rent levels;
- renters are at an increased risk of eviction and homelessness due to Covid-19 protections being removed by the Government;

— since August 2020, there have been 2,401 rent warnings issued by landlords, 715 Notices to Quit issued, and just 407 written declarations from Covid-19 impacted renters;

— the failure of the Government to regulate rents or invest in affordable Cost Rental is 835 also pushing up rents;

— just €35 million was allocated for affordable Cost Rental homes in 2021;

— a maximum 440 affordable Cost Rental homes will be delivered in 2021;

— the Government has no plan to deliver affordable Cost Rental homes on the scale recommended by the Housing Agency, the National Economic and Social Council or the Economic and Social Research Institute;

— the Rent Pressure Zone legislation expires at the end of 2021; and

— the Government has no plan to reduce rents, protect renters from further rent hikes or end the crisis in the private rental sector; and

calls on the Government to:

— introduce an emergency three-year ban on rent increases in the private rental sector;

— make provision in Budget 2022 for a refundable tax credit for private rental tenants, to put a month's rent back in every renter's pocket;

— make provision in Budget 2022 to commence the delivery of at least 4,000 affordable Cost Rental homes in 2022;

— amend the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, as amended, including section 34, to provide for real tenancies of indefinite duration;

— introduce a NCT-style certification for all rental properties to ensure compliance with minimum standards;

— resource local authorities to ensure an inspection rate of 25 per cent of rental tenancies within their administrative area each year; and

— make Residential Tenancies Board determinations legally enforceable, without the need for court action, by amending the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, as amended.

Our rental system is well and truly broken. Rents across the State are too high and, because of Government inaction, are continuing to rise. Single property landlords and thousands of private rental tenancies have been leaving the market over the last three years and, unfortunately, they are being replaced by a small number of far more expensive institutional build-to-rent-funded projects.

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, since taking up that portfolio, has introduced four pieces of legislation amending the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, each one of which has progressively stripped vital Covid-19 protections from renters, including a ban on rent increases, notices to quit and evictions. Since August of last year, when one of those pieces of legislation was introduced, more than 2,000 rent warnings have been issued by landlords to tenants, but just 407 tenants have secured protections under

the legislation by submitting written declarations to the Residential Tenancies Board. The fear that many of us have is not only that those tenants will face further rent increases, but that as the notices to quit come down the line we will start to see a slow, perhaps, but nonetheless steady, progression of notices to quit and evictions from the private rental sector and potentially and very unfortunately, if it happens, increases in family homeless presentations.

We also have a situation where there is still no real security of tenure. I do not think the Minister has been honest in his commitment to introduce tenancies of indefinite duration because I have yet to hear him commit to amendment of section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, in which the real problem for tenants arises in that it allows landlords to issue notices to quit on grounds of sale or use of property by a family member. This provision is responsible for almost 80% of notices to quit. We know minimum standards are still not being properly enforced because local authorities do not have the staff to undertake the inspections and because we do not have an adequate certification system.

There is also an embarrassingly low level of investment by this Government in affordable cost-rental, at just €35 million this year to purchase from the private market 390 properties, which will be added to the 50 cost-rental already in the pipeline to be delivered by the former Minister, Eoghan Murphy. As we move towards the coming to an end of the failed Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael rent pressure zone legislation, it is clear that this Government, almost a year in office, has no plan to reduce rents, no plan to protect renters and no plan to end the crisis in the private rental sector.

There are solutions. Government is quick to suggest that the Opposition does not have solutions, but for five years we have been tabling legislation and Private Members' motions, some of which the current Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, supported when in opposition and others of which he opposed. We have regularly put forward solutions. What do they look like? We have to stop rents rising. We have to introduce an emergency three-year ban on rent increases and, following that, to link rents to an index such as CPI. We have to put money back in renters pockets. The quickest and easiest way to do that is a refundable tax credit. Sinn Féin's proposal would see a month's rent back in every renters pocket. During its election campaign, Fianna Fáil proposed a weaker proposal in its manifesto, but like so many of its election promises, it was quickly abandoned when it took office.

We also need investment in an affordable cost-rental, not a €35 million investment to produce a few hundred units. We need approximately €1 billion annually if we are to be on target to deliver, on average, 4,000 genuinely affordable cost-rental units each year of the lifetime of a Government. Affordable means rents of €700 to €900 per month, not the excessive rents of €1,200 or €1,300 per month which the current Minister is seeking to impose on working families. We need real tenancies of indefinite duration, by way of amendment of section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. We need 25% of all rental tenancies to be inspected each year and we need an NCT-style certification system to ensure standards.

The purpose of the motion before us today is simple. It is time for this Government and Oireachtas to stand up for renters. We need a radical, but realistic and implementable, plan. Our motion outlines the bones of that plan. Not only do I commend this motion to the House. If we do not see these kinds of measures from this Government, yet again the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of its policies will be ever-growing. Fianna Fáil has never been on the side of renters. I suspect by its opposition to the motion, it will confirm that it will continue to be on the side of big landlords and big developers into the future.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Private Members' motion on a three-year ban on rent increases for citizens, many of whom are barely hanging on, spending a disproportionate amount of their income on what is their home. People who are renting are living in homes, not properties. This motion is especially welcome and needed in this era of the vulture and the cuckoo, two forms of avian life that are avoiding the biodiversity devastation. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party have made sure that these are a protected species to be indulged and guarded. They are allowed to swoop in and scoop up swathes of homes in the Mullen Park development in my home town of Maynooth in north Kildare, which many of my constituents had their hearts set on buying. This is a hostile act; a rage by corporate greed on the public and collective good that is housing.

Housing is not optional. For humans, it is a necessity and an essential need in their lives that should not be exploited. While some constituents cannot buy the homes in Mullen Park at this point in time, most will have the pleasure of renting them. This is not happening in Maynooth alone, but across the State. The Government's view is that it makes no difference to renters that their landlords are global investors, but it does. That view is also the difference between the Government and Sinn Féin. This is 2021. We did not swap one absentee landlord for another. We believe that a home that is rented is just that; a home for hard-working people and hard-working families. The Government believes a house that is rented is a market opportunity.

I welcome the ban on rent increases proposed in this motion by my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, as will renters. Renters in urban parts of north Kildare are doing very well to get a house to rent at below €2,000 per month. Renters will also welcome the proposed refundable tax credit, which will put a month's rent back in their pockets. They will particularly welcome the NCT-style certification of properties for rent to ensure they are up to standard because substandard rental properties are a real problem, exacerbated by the scarcity of houses to rent. Anything that gives renters dignity, security and some peace of mind is to be welcomed, but this security is only a small aspect of our housing conundrum that requires address and change and is most fundamental. I hope the Government will have a rethink and support this motion.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank my constituency colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, for tabling this important motion on giving renters a break. Fine Gael's disastrous housing policy while in government has left many workers and families in dire living situations. They face unaffordable rents, unaffordable house prices, whole estates being devoured by vulture funds, and public lands being sold to private developers. During the charade this country had to endure of the confidence and supply arrangement in the previous Dáil, Fianna Fáil Deputies huffed and puffed on the opposite side of the Chamber to Fine Gael. Instead of the changes Fianna Fáil promised to deliver once in government, it picked up the mantle of failed housing policies and carried on regardless. Since when does an affordable home cost €400,000 or more? To whom is that affordable? It is not affordable for ordinary workers and families. The Minister can huff and puff all he likes but he cannot blow down the reality that the homes are simply not there and, where they are, they are not affordable for ordinary workers and families.

In my constituency, rents in Lucan are in excess of €2,300 a month. There are families in Clondalkin who are in desperate need of a secure roof over their heads. The Government's housing policy has created a system where good tenants will not, for fear of homelessness, report rogue landlords providing substandard accommodation. Sinn Féin in government would ensure that all rental properties are compliant with minimum standards by introducing an NCT-type system. The Government has no plan for the rental sector but Deputy Ó Broin does. Sinn Féin would implement an emergency three-year ban on rent increases, not simply freeze rents,

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which are already expensive enough. We would legislate for tenancies of indefinite duration to enable workers and families to put down roots in their communities. We would also introduce a refundable tax credit for tenants in the private rental sector to put a month's rent back in the pocket of ordinary workers and families. These actions only require political will. The Government has no plan to reduce rents, protect renters from further rent hikes and prioritise affordable rental supply, but Sinn Féin does.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important motion. The Government has failed to grasp the scale of the housing and rental crisis and properly regulate spiralling rents. It has failed to provide affordable rental homes on a scale required across the country and has provided none at all in counties Laois and Offaly. Despite the Covid crisis, rents in Laois are up 3.4% in the past 12 months, with an average cost of €754 per month for a one-bedroom flat and €964 for a three-bedroom home. Offaly has seen an even sharper increase of 6.6%. Rents as steep as €1,200 are being demanded for a three-bedroom home in some parts of the constituency. Families are trapped in rental accommodation with spiralling rents and no security. A family of four cannot get on the council housing waiting list if the household income is more than €528 per week. A couple without children and an income of more than €504 is caught in the same position. At the same time, these people's income is too low to get a mortgage.

This situation is totally unsustainable. Sinn Féin wants to deliver solutions for the workers and families trapped in the middle and with no way out because of the policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government has no plan for the rental sector, but Sinn Féin does. We want to deal with the rental crisis, on the one hand, and, on the other, deliver long-term affordable and secure homes to buy and rent. In government, we would implement an emergency three-year ban on rent increases. In Laois-Offaly, only the Graigue, Portarlinton, Portlaoise and Tullamore municipal districts fit into what are called district rent pressure zones. Even in those areas, there can be rent increases of 4.5% and some landlords have found ways of raising them even higher.

This is totally unsustainable and it needs to be halted. Working families need a solution. Sinn Féin in government would introduce a refundable tax credit of 8.5% per year for tenants in private rented accommodation to put a month's rent back in every renter's pocket. This would give some relief and take some pressure off renters while we build up our supply of affordable housing and cost-rental properties. The opportunities are there to do that. There is land in counties Offaly and Laois suitable for cost-rental housing and affordable-to-purchase homes. Our party would commit to delivering at least 4,000 affordable-to-purchase and cost-rental homes in 2022. There are currently no cost-rental schemes in either county, even though we have pushed for them, and no plans to provide them. That needs to change.

The central point is that solving the housing and rental crisis requires political will. We have produced a plan to reduce rents and deliver cost-rental and affordable-to-purchase homes. Such provision worked in the past. We need to get on track with this and get on with doing it.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Free sale, fixity of tenure and fair rent were the three Fs demanded by the Land League many years ago. Yet here we are today, with many renters in a very similar situation to that of their ancestors. In my constituency of Longford-Westmeath, the average rents may be below the national average but they are rising quickly. As one constituent put it to me, "It is only upwards that they go." I ask the Minister to think about that statement for a minute and about the dismay, hardship and hopelessness that come with it.

The truth is that it does not have to be this way. My colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has outlined how the rental crisis can be fixed. Banning rent increases and legislating for long-term tenancies are part of the solution. I know the positive impact that could have on renters and families in my constituency. I ask the Minister to imagine a situation where, every day, the goal of having security of tenure gets further and further out of one's reach. People's wages barely cover the cost of another rent increase but any increase in their wage will put them over the threshold for social housing support. The dream of saving for one's own home is forever gone. It is consigned to the level of dreams of winning the lotto or driving a Ferrari. It simply is not going to happen. The hard-working families in this situation wrongly believe they are at fault. In fact, the fault and failure lie with the system and the shame lies with the perpetrators who fail to recognise the degree of the problem and take steps to rectify it.

Sinn Féin in government would ensure all rental properties are compliant with an NCT-style certification system. A Government that has not even considered such a system could not possibly be expected to understand how vital it is. At the moment, tenants are fearful of going to the Residential Tenancies Board and rocking the boat. They will put up with no hot water and inadequate central heating simply because they do not want to put their tenancy at risk. That is not right and it must end.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The housing market in this State is dysfunctional and that is not an accident. The outworking of this dysfunction is that the majority of renters do not want to be renters. Most want to purchase their own home and others need the security and fair rent that a council house brings. The motion Deputy Ó Broin has brought before the House calls for a break for those who are renting, a three-year ban on rent increases, the cost of a month's rent to be returned to renters, and for adequate standards for rental properties to be enforced.

Let the record show that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party Deputies intend to vote against these proposals. Their response to the housing crisis is to offer more of the same with new fancy packaging. They have offered a shared equity scheme that everybody who has examined it objectively says will increase the cost of homes. We have an affordable housing scheme that includes properties costing €450,000. There is a continued expenditure of billions of euro on subsidies to private landlords and ongoing scandalous tax avoidance measures for vulture funds and other parasites of the financial services industry. None of that is an accident. It is Government policy, led by an ideology that believes speculators and bankers should not just be allowed, but encouraged, to dominate the housing market.

Meanwhile, young workers can expect a future in which home ownership will never be more than an aspiration. Rents are too high to save a deposit and investment funds are ready to buy up the limited supply that makes it onto the market. Mortgage rates are far too high for those who manage to buy a house and the vulture funds are ready to pounce as soon as they get into difficulty. There is an ongoing faith on the part of the Government that the private sector will resolve the problem that was created by housing policy being handed over to that sector in the first place. It is a system where even public land is handed over to private developers and where, no matter what, the obvious and proven long-term solution of building public homes on public lands is avoided at all costs, other than in the most limited and tokenistic way conceivable.

The housing crisis is not an accident. It is Government policy and only a Government with the correct policies can resolve it. Only a Government with determination, commitment and principles can turn the tide. This motion sets out Sinn Féin's first steps to support renters. It is

not an accident. It is a signal that better policies are coming.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing it forward. We have a rental market in Ireland that is neither normal nor bearable. In County Meath, rent costs are exorbitant. On *daft.ie* this morning it is €1,800 for a two-bedroom apartment in Ashbourne and Ratoath, €1,700 in Dunboyne and €1,600 in Dunshaughlin. It is less expensive in towns like Kells and Duleek but of course, like Ashbourne, Ratoath, Dunboyne and Dunshaughlin, there is little or no availability. It is an incredible statement of fact to say that a person could rent more cheaply in Sydney, Tokyo, Copenhagen, Oslo or Helsinki – places where one would be assured of the very best public services, including public transport, childcare and healthcare – or in almost any capital city in the world. The Irish rental crisis is an indictment of Government thinking, it is an indictment of Government policy and it is an indictment of Government priorities. Rent pressure zones are supposed to limit rent increases to 4% a year. In County Meath, they increased 5.7% last year, year-on-year and by over 6% in the last two quarters. The housing assistance payment, HAP, itself a massive transfer of wealth from the State to private landlords, is not the answer. In County Meath €24.8 million was paid out in HAP last year, up 16%.

The proposals in this motion would serve to stop renters and the prospect of ever increasing rents being used as a bargaining chip in a big money game. It would ban rent increases and put a month's rent back in people's pockets. It would protect renters in a dysfunctional system. It would protect renters while issues of supply were addressed. Covid or no Covid, every day I deal with individuals and families who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness. These are individuals and families, many with school going kids, dealing with council homelessness officers who can do no more and must apologise and tell them they cannot afford to live in this area, that there is nothing more officials can do for them, that there is no other support and that they will need to uproot their whole world and move to some place they have no connection to, know no-one and have no support. That is devastating. It is shameful and is a direct result of decisions made by successive Governments. The rental crisis can be fixed. The Minister should rethink his position on this motion and support it.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“notes that:

— the Government is fully committed to tackling high rents and ensuring an increase in the supply of affordable high quality rental accommodation through continued significant capital investment, including Cost Rental and other means and in a manner that respects the security of tenure for renters by ensuring equity and fairness for landlords and tenants;

— the provisions of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2021 relating to Rent Pressure Zones are due to expire at the end of December, and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will bring forward comprehensive new protections for tenants, balanced with constitutional property rights in the coming months;

— the Government is committed to improving the security of tenure for tenants through legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration, subject to legal advices;

— the new Affordable Housing Bill 2020, sets out the legislative basis for Cost Rental for the first time in the history of the State;

— the first Cost Rental units will be delivered this year and significantly expanded by the Government over the coming years;

— the Government has increased funding and capacity for the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) to help further protect tenants, and the significant ongoing sustained funding provided to local authorities to inspect rental properties and the strong legislative framework under which they currently operate has made a positive contribution to supporting the ongoing improvement of standards and to ensuring the availability of an increasingly high quality stock of rental accommodation in Ireland;

— as per the commitment in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, the new whole-of-Government plan for housing ‘Housing for All’, that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage intends to publish later this year, will ensure that the provision of an adequate supply of high quality affordable rental accommodation remains a cornerstone of the Government’s policy under the plan;

— the Government has provided, and will continue to provide, enhanced income supports and protections for tenants, particularly the most vulnerable tenants, that are necessary during this pandemic; and

— the Government keeps the operation of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2021 under constant review and will make any necessary enhancement to the legal enforceability of RTB determination orders, in consultation with the RTB.”

I welcome the opportunity to discuss and debate important issues in the private rental market. As Deputies may know, the programme for Government sets out that improving standards, security and affordability for renters is an absolute key priority for this Government and for me as Minister with responsibility for housing.

I turn first to the matter of affordability. We are acutely aware that in recent years rents have begun to reach levels that have put very real pressures on individuals, families and households throughout the country but especially in our major cities and urban centres. However, we have a plan to tackle this and I want generation rent to become a generation that owns and the Government measures we published just yesterday through the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 show in real terms how we are going to be able to help people get out of that rental trap and to help generation rent to own their own homes at an affordable rate. Also within the Bill we are, for the first time, putting a cost-rental national scheme on a primary legislative footing and I hope the Members opposite who have tabled this motion will see their way to supporting some real measures that are going to have a real impact in real legislation, backed by real money and which will have a real positive impact for thousands of people across this country. I welcome the support of any Member opposite for the measures the Government is bringing through within the first year of its taking office. We will have State-backed affordable ownership at the national level, a national cost-rental scheme, a shared equity scheme that is going to help first-time buyers bridge that affordability gap and we are going to expand Part V to 20% to protect the 10% social and have an additional 10% for affordable housing. These are real measures for real people that will actually work.

On a number of occasions we have debated the three-year rent freeze again proposed by Sinn

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Féin and debated here again this afternoon. It has been said before that a blanket ban on any rent increases in all likelihood - I think Deputy Ó Broin knows this - would face a significant legal challenge as has just occurred in Berlin, where rent freezes have recently been overturned by the constitutional court. It could also have another unintended consequence that Members opposite should also know, namely, that it will lead to those individual landlords continuing to leave the market. Whether we like it or not the private rental market is in place in Ireland, there are about 300,000 tenancies and we need to ensure that it supports the tenancies that are there. I want people to move into home ownership and out of renting, into secure public homes. That is why we passed the single biggest housing budget in the history of the State, to deliver 12,750 social homes in a year. We in Fianna Fáil, together with our Fine Gael and Green Party colleagues, brought this forward and the party opposite opposed it at budget time.

The provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act relating to rent pressure zones, RPZs, are due to expire at the end of December. I have advised Deputies, and do so again, that I am currently examining what might be brought forward in terms of comprehensive protections for tenants to tackle high rents, obviously balanced to ensure that there is constitutional provision there as well. I am doing that in the coming months and intend to bring the housing and residential tenancies Bill to the House in the autumn. It provides us with a real opportunity to look at what will replace the RPZs, what may have worked well, what did not work and also how we can see good a commitment that we have in the programme for Government for secure tenancies and tenancies of indefinite duration which we also want to do.

On cost-rental in particular, I note the motion calls for 4,000 cost rental units in one year, next year, and to make financial provision for that. I have started the cost rental scheme this year. There are eight schemes across the country, in Dublin, Cork and the greater Dublin area that will be tenanted this year. It is achievable where the capacity is in place. That is 440 in total, including the 50 on Enniskerry Road. However, Sinn Féin has pulled 4,000 out of the sky and says we can deliver them in 2022 without saying where, who is going to build them or how long it will take. Deputy Ó Broin alluded to some costs – it is about €1.3 billion. Is that on top of the 20,000 public homes that he says he will build in a given year, forgetting about how the capacity may not be built up to do that and about the cost of those 20,000 homes? Would these 4,000 homes be delivered next year on top of that? Is it on top of the affordable housing scheme that Sinn Féin brought forward that would actually exclude the nurse, the garda and the average worker from owning their own home? A person would not own it at the end of the Sinn Féin scheme and the party would actually tell the person who he or she can sell his or her home back to, what he or she can do to the home or whether he or she rents it in future. That is not home ownership.

There are measures contained within this motion that we intend to address. We intend to address them in a realistic and responsible way. That is why I want to get cost-rental up and running this year and I welcome the support of the Deputies who have spoken today and hope they will see fit to support real affordable measures on rent and on purchase that this Government is bringing forward in the coming months and intends to have passed by this summer.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister for agreeing to share his time. I welcome today's debate to discuss the opportunity of examining housing and the rental crisis impacting people right across the country. Like all Deputies, I am fully aware of the difficulties facing people trying to rent or buy a home and obviously the cost of rents is a huge issue. We are all contacted by people who are either falling behind on the rent or struggling to rent or having difficulty even finding a property to rent. In my constituency of Dún Laoghaire average rents on

a two-bedroom apartment are close to some of the highest in the country. However, thankfully, as the Minister has alluded to, we have 600 affordable homes being developed in Shanganagh in my constituency along with cost-rental units and a further 50 cost-rental units being developed as we speak on Enniskerry Road.

However, the rent levels are unacceptable and the Government has acknowledged this by bringing forward a suite of measures to increase the supply of homes which will drive down rents. We have seen that accidental landlords are exiting the market for various reasons and it is not a welcoming place for them. We must increase supply, not only supply for people to buy, not only supply for people to rent but we need people in the private market as well. These should be individuals rather than the large investors. Rent freezes are not a sustainable long-term solution. I saw that in the Sinn Féin Private Members' motion, that it is some sort of panacea. That is not going to be enough. As the Minister said, we have seen that overturned in cities like Berlin. The impact on the supply has unintended consequences and I ask Sinn Féin to reconsider that.

Ireland needs at least 35,000 housing units per year to meet demographic demand. Ultimately supply is at the heart of the solution to the problem. This is why the Government allocated a record amount of funds to develop social and affordable housing. On affordable housing alone, the Government has arranged more than €135 million in direct funding and State-backed borrowing to the approved housing bodies, AHBs, to develop the supply of affordable housing.

This Government is in office ten months and has already brought forward a record number of housing and rent Bills, including the protections referred to by the Minister, and unprecedented legislation protecting renters during this Covid-19 pandemic.

More needs to be done, including further protections and reforms on taxation of institutional investors, and the Minister spoke about that yesterday when speaking about the Bill he brought before the Cabinet.

This must be introduced via legislation, not motions in the House. It is simple rhetoric for Sinn Féin to come in here and say that it has a solution when in fact it voted against the practical measures this Government has attempted to bring in. We ask for its support. All Deputies in this House want to deal with the housing crisis. We are all contacted by people every day who are in difficult situations. It is imperative that all Deputies across the House work with the Minister to solve the housing crisis. There are tangible solutions on the table that are unprecedented, as the Minister said, and I ask all Deputies in this House to support our counter-motion.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. The previous speaker said that Sinn Féin should bring forward legislation. I remind the House that the Fianna Fáil Party has voted down every single piece of legislation that my party colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has brought forward.

The rental situation in this State is going from bad to worse. It is hard to imagine that it could get any worse given the astronomical rents people have been paying for many years now. Five years on from the launch of the Rebuilding Ireland plan, outside of Dublin rents are up 5.4%. There are 4,989 households on the waiting list for social housing in County Louth when the housing system payment, HAP, lists are included. That is almost 5,000 families, which is a record number. The average cost of a three-bedroom rental house in Louth is €1,214. In Meath, it ranges from €1,293 to €1,800 but in reality it is much more expensive in many cases. There

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are fewer properties than ever to rent in Louth and Meath and there is no affordable housing to speak of, as we all know. Government inaction is compounding the problem year-on-year.

A few days ago, it emerged that Round Hill Capital and SFO Capital Partners are to buy 130 of 170 houses in a development in Maynooth, County Kildare. The same investment company was involved in the acquisition of a new 112 housing development in Dublin 15. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said he does not approve of this. It is as though it has nothing to do with him. His party colleagues were engaged in this sort of talk at the weekend, calling for something to be done as though the party did not hold the housing portfolio and had not propped up the previous Government. Fianna Fáil in government and its partners Fine Gael and the Green Party not only approve of this but actively incentivise it. These investment companies do not pay capital gains tax, corporation tax or tax on their rent roll. These tax exemptions have to go. It is criminal that these foreign investment companies get tax breaks and incentives when an entire generation of young people have been locked out of home ownership. We need a three-year ban on rent increases, to introduce Sinn Féin's plan for a refundable tax credit to put a month's rent back in everybody's pocket, we need to give young people a chance to have some security in their lives and to own their own homes and to stop destroying their futures just so the Government can line the pockets of foreign investment companies. For crying out loud, I call on the Minister to stop this madness.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: In the last year alone rents have increased in County Roscommon by 5.3% and in County Galway by 5%. County Galway is now one of eight counties to have an average rent of above €1,000 per month. Average rents in County Galway now stand at €1,105 and in County Roscommon at €670. I was contacted last week by a person living in Ballinasloe whose rent is being increased after a rent review by nearly €400. This is a rent increase of 45% to 50%. This is exactly what is happening all of the time especially outside rent pressure zones where there are limited protections on rent increases.

While we continue to let landlords increase rents as they please, renters are struggling even more and we are putting them at risk of homelessness. The Minister referred to "generation rent" and the move to home ownership. How can that be done? People simply cannot afford to save the deposit and they have no savings at all. If one's rent is going up by €500 or €400 in places like Ballinasloe, in a rural part of County Galway, then alarm bells should be ringing.

The need for an NCT-style certification for all rental properties to ensure compliance at very minimum standards is absolutely critical. Every single week in my office in Ballinasloe we are receiving calls from tenants who have broken showers, no heating or leaking roofs and nothing is being done about it. These are very basic standards for renters who are paying above and far more than they should be paying in rental costs. I have a number of friends who have moved home over the past number of years in order to try to save for a deposit. This should not be the case but they simply cannot afford to rent. They are working but they cannot afford to save a deposit. Many of them want to own or build their own home. I recommend this motion to the House and I hope that it will be supported.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I also want to thank my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, for all of the work he does on housing. I was somewhat astounded over the past number of days to see the surprise expressed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael about the tax avoidance measures enjoyed by the real estate investment trusts, REITs. It is absolutely mind-boggling. For heaven's sake, they designed, sat down and worked them out. They either did not know what they were doing or they were persuaded of the merits by the vested interests that these investment vehicles were

good for the nation. Either which way, they must own it and the consequences of throwing hard-working families under the property bus of the speculators that they have facilitated by their fiscal policies.

I raised this issue with the former Minister, Michael Noonan, in 2016 at, I believe, a social justice conference. He shifted about in the chair and nobody took any notice. My colleague, Deputy Doherty, continues to raise this issue. These investment firms do not pay capital gains tax, corporation tax or tax on their rent roll. Goodness me. We look then at homeowners in Mayo whose houses falling down with pyrite because the Government failed to protect them. They are told that they have to pay property tax. I know REITs pay property tax but we tax everybody else to the hilt.

The consequences of the housing policy which the Government parties must now own, means that there were only 47 properties to rent in Mayo on *daft.ie* today. So many people within the county are excluded from the prospect of ever owning their own home. Others are not eligible. A couple with two children are not eligible to even get on the social housing waiting list if they earn any more than €27,500. We cannot depend on Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to fix housing and to provide people with what is a right. We have to get off this pathway. That is why Sinn Féin's housing policy has to be delivered on and we have to have an opportunity to do that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I went on to *daft.ie* today and the cheapest rental property in Cork is €450 for a one-bed studio. One would need to earn €34,000 a year to afford this property. One is paying €200 a week to live in a box, because that is what it is, and to look at a washing machine and oven. In another property, on the market for €900, the kitchen countertop doubles up as a bedside table.

The Minister referred to court cases in Berlin and how the Government cannot ban rent increases. Would Germans live in these hovels? Not a chance. The German Government would not allow it. Does the Minister know that two out of every three HAP properties that are assessed fail that assessment? These are the properties that people have to live in. The latest figures illustrate how unsafe, unsanitary and inhumane are the conditions in which people have to live because of the price of rent. If you go onto the Daft.ie website, you will see that a half-decent property costs €1,100. The HAP is €550, so you have to pay €550 plus your rent to the council. It is not affordable. The Minister stated that rents are coming under pressure. He must be in cuckoo land. Rents have been under pressure for the past five or six years.

To give an example, two years ago you could rent a three-bedroom property in a particular housing estate in Cork for €1,400. To rent the same property in that estate today will cost €1,800. The Government brought in rent pressure zones, stating rent increases would be limited to 4% per year. We know the rate of increase in Cork is at least 6.5%, if not 7%, so none of the measures brought in by the Minister, the Government or previous Governments supported by Fianna Fáil have worked.

I ask the Minister to stand up for renters for once and for all and to bring in the rent ban that Deputy Ó Broin is proposing. If the matter goes to court and the Government loses, at least it could say it did something. The facts are here. Under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, rents will continue to rise. God forgive the Green Party for supporting them.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion, which the Labour Party

will be supporting. In its amendment to the motion, the Government states it will tackle issues facing renters while “ensuring equity and fairness for landlords and tenants”, before going on to state that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will, at some unidentified point in the future, “bring forward comprehensive new protections for tenants” but that those will be balanced with constitutional property rights.

We have seen how this played out before. We have seen constitutional property rights being used to justify ending the eviction ban and to block almost every Opposition Bill and motion aimed at providing protection for renters. All Members of this House know well that when the Government invokes constitutional property rights, it does so time and time again to justify failing to make the legislative changes that are required to protect renters thoroughly and to give them certainty and much-needed security. The Government will not balance constitutional property rights with protections for tenants. It will continue to privilege constitutional property rights while ignoring the fact the Constitution allows for property rights to be regulated by the principles of social justice and the exigencies of the common good. It is not in the common good to allow renters to live in consistently insecure housing. It is not in the common good to cripple people - young and old - with rents and it is certainly not in the common good to privilege the rights of institutional investors over those of people who need a home.

Last month, the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, released its rent index for the fourth quarter of 2020. The report set out that in that quarter the national standardised average rent stood at €1,256, a year-on-year growth of 2.7%. In the report, the RTB specifically noted that research indicates that households in the private rental sector suffered a greater economic hit relative to other tenures during the March to June lockdown of 2020 due to those households having a higher concentration of employment in the sectors most severely impacted by the pandemic. Longer restrictions would, therefore, likely have a disproportionate impact on households in the rental sector. Not only are they getting hammered by high, crippling rents and insecure tenancies, they are working in the sectors of the economy that have been impacted to the greatest degree by the pandemic.

Mere weeks after that report was released, the eviction ban, as it was, was gutted and the many private renters were left without protections. Only from next week will you be able to travel outside your county, yet you could be evicted nearly a month before that. You cannot visit family inside their home until 7 June, yet you could be evicted and left without a roof over your own head in April. We understand that hospitality will not be reopening until early June, and then only for outdoor service, and the remainder of the industry not for some time thereafter, yet private renters, who are disproportionately represented in that industry, have been vulnerable to eviction since 23 April. Ultimately, the first industry to open as restrictions relaxed was that of residential landlords.

We are still in a pandemic. We are still required to hold firm and are told we are all in this together, but the latter is not the case and it is becoming increasingly clear it never has been. Renters have been treated terribly during the pandemic, and there is no indication from the policies of this Government that will change any time soon.

The motion calls for the delivery of a significant number of cost rental homes. This is much needed. The Government, in response, stated the legislative basis for its version of cost rental has been set out in the new affordable housing Bill. That is really the issue here. What the Government is selling as cost rental is, in reality, another for-profit model which will fail to provide genuinely affordable housing for people. The supposed cost rental scheme will not be tied

to affordability but will be for profit and for investors. Cost rental should not take account of profit for investors. The whole purpose of an affordable rental model is to target lower income renters, protect them and ensure they have a roof over their head in what all Members can agree is a ferocious rental market.

Affordability is the critical issue when it comes to cost rental. If you ask any person outside of this building what he or she understands to be cost rental, the idea that it should not be fundamentally affordable would baffle him or her. The generally agreed definition of affordability equates to one third of a person's net income. The Labour Party put forward an amendment to the affordable housing Bill at the joint committee to define affordability and tie the very concept of affordable rent to income, thereby levelling the playing field somewhat for renters. However, the decision of the Government to vote the amendment down shows it is not interested in real affordability but rather in providing properties at barely less than market cost, with profits remaining the primary goal. Affordable housing as a concept means it is affordable relative to the income of the person or household. Instead, the Minister wants to support a finance-based private sector that cannot adequately meet the housing needs of people in Ireland. That is not legislating in a way that balances rights; it is legislating from the mindset of the developers. It is these very practices and developer-led mindset that led us to the housing bubble more than ten years ago which burst so spectacularly, hurting ordinary, hard-working people to this day.

The Labour Party believes the motion is worthy of our support and we give that support wholeheartedly. We ask the Government to withdraw its amendment and support renters.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Broin and Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. I wish to respond to a couple of comments made by the Minister. He accused the Opposition of plucking from the sky figures of 10,000 direct build affordable homes on top of 10,000 social homes. However, during the general election campaign, the Minister stated he would deliver 10,000 social homes and 10,000 direct build affordable homes. You do not need to pluck those figures from the sky. You just need to look at what the Minister promised during the general election campaign. There has been no mention since then of those 10,000 affordable homes he promised. The House has a right to know where the plans for those affordable homes have gone.

As regards affordability, Deputy Duncan Smith made the very good point it is vital that affordability is linked to income and is not defined as a discount on full market price. It is disappointing the Government members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage recently voted down amendments in that regard.

On the issue of cost rental, I am dismayed by the recent comments of the Minister to the effect that he wants to put profit into the cost rental model. Doing so would push up rents. Effectively, we will not have cost rental if it is delivered on a for-profit basis. Cost rental needs to be done at scale. Schemes such as the direct build at Dun Emer in Lusk under the Ó Cualann model need to be done at scale throughout the country.

If the Government is serious with regard to Part V, it should end long-term leasing, which is exceptionally bad value for money. It effectively means the State pays off the mortgage on a home over 25 or 30 years, at which point the developer still owns the home. The context for this motion is that rents in Ireland have gone up by 61.8% from 2010 to 2020. At the same time, the average increase across the European Union, according to Eurostat, was 14.9%. That is a staggering increase in rents. Rents on apartments in Dublin are now higher than in any other

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European capital city, again according to Eurostat. That has happened on the watch of this Government and the previous Fine Gael-led Governments. Rents are well in excess of what a mortgage would cost. According to the ESRI, before the pandemic hit, one in three households who were renting privately or approximately 70,000 households had insufficient income remaining after housing costs to meet minimum standards or living expenditure. Tenancies in the private rented sector in Ireland are much less secure than in most other northern European countries. Individuals and families are under huge pressure to pay unaffordable rents, all the while not knowing when their tenancy might come to an end.

It is in this context that the Government is turning housing into an investment opportunity for vulture funds. There were reports recently of 112 new homes in Dublin 15 being sold off to a global investment company at Bay Meadows, Hollystown. This comes days after phases 2, 3 and 4 at Mullen Park, Maynooth were sold off to the same global investment fund. A few weeks ago, we had reports of 435 apartments in Ashtown, Dublin 15 being sold off to a foreign investment company based in Germany. According to the Construction Industry Federation, in 2019, 95% of new build apartments were sold to institutions, leaving just 5% for everyone else.

The favourable tax treatment whereby these investment funds pay virtually no tax encourages them to come into Ireland to buy up housing. This means individuals and families who are renting cannot compete with these multimillion euro funds and are trapped into renting for years to come. An entire generation is being locked out of home ownership and forced to pay high rent to these investment funds. It is worth nothing that in Germany these real estate investment trusts have been banned from buying up homes and apartments. We should look at similar measures here. Home ownership should not be for the privileged few.

The price of a house or apartment is now being set at the rate of return for an investor on their rental income over a 40- or 50-year period, instead of the ability to pay a mortgage over 25 to 30 years. Thousands of individuals and families who are renting and pinning their hopes and dreams on being able to buy a home are having that dashed by these global investment funds.

There is a link between rent increases and people going into homelessness. From 2014 onwards, as rents increased dramatically, we saw a sharp increase in the number of people exiting the private sector straight into homelessness. There are more than 8,000 people living in emergency accommodation who have lost their homes. We know from research that most people who have become homeless had their last stable home in the private rented sector. There is a direct link between these rents and people entering emergency accommodation.

We should be tackling the high cost of renting and bringing in protections for renters to bring us in line with most other European countries. It is welcome that the Minister says he will address that. I hope he brings forward that legislation soon and that it brings us in line with other European countries. It is important we do everything we can to prevent people losing their homes and going into emergency accommodation out of the private rented sector because of insufficient protections and because rent levels are so high. We should also look at measures they have in other countries, such as no evictions into homelessness, which they have in Poland. In Germany, for example, statutory services are notified when someone is being evicted from the private rented sector to avoid that.

On improving things for renters generally in the sector, we need to introduce a nationwide ban on rent increases and we need to introduce debt resolution and mediation schemes so when difficulties arise there is support for landlords and tenants in trying to resolve them. Most land-

lords own one home or property and do not necessarily have the skills to manage this. They need support in these situations.

When we look at renting, the conditions renters face and the way renters looking to buy are pushed out of that by global investment funds, we have to ask what sort of Ireland we want to create. When I raised these issues affecting renters about international investment funds with the Tánaiste less than two weeks ago in this Chamber, he said I was being ideological. Is it ideological to think most people should be able to buy their own home, that rents should be set at levels people can afford or that the housing needs of people and families should come ahead of the needs of global investment funds? Is it ideological to think a young child should not be eating her dinner on the side of the street, that there is no justification in this day and age for a housing system which forces more than 8,000 people into emergency accommodation or that renters should not live in the constant fear of eviction and losing their home? If it is ideological to believe people should have access to the housing and shelter they and their families need, to rents that are affordable, to secure tenancies and to homes that are affordable to purchase and within reach, then I wholeheartedly support that ideology.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputies Paul Murphy and Mick Barry. I thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward the motion. Anything that gives us an opportunity to highlight the housing crisis and the plight of renters is very welcome. I support overwhelmingly the thrust of the motion. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and Deputy Devlin's attempts to defend the Government's position and their countermotion are threadbare in the extreme.

A few weeks ago, I described the LDA legislation as a heist where the Government had opened the door, not just so that private developers and speculators would control the private market, but for the entire public land bank to be plundered by private financial interests. I pointed out that the references to setting affordable prices and rents subject to local market conditions meant they would not be affordable. With the affordable housing scheme, my worst fears are confirmed. What planet is the Government living on? For €450,000 in Dublin and Dún Laoghaire to be affordable, one would need an income of about €120,000. Average wages in this country are €39,000. A single person can forget it as he or she has not got a chance.

The legislation refers to market rents - not even average market rents but local market rents. In my area, local market rents are between €2,000 and €3,000 or even €3,500. The Minister suggests the cost rental will be a discount on the local market rents. It is a joke. What will happen and is happening is that the cuckoos come in, buy all the blocks and lease them back to the council, which pays an extortionate fortune. They make a fortune, paid for with taxpayers' money, and in 25 years they feck off. They have made a fortune and people are put out, as is happening with the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme. It is extraordinary. I cannot believe Shanganagh is mentioned as a positive example. Shanganagh was handed over for public housing by a Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Government in 2006. Since then, we have had Fianna Fáil in government, Fine Gael in government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government and not a sod has been turned. Now we discover the affordable, cost-rental housing on it will be subject to a benchmark against local rent and prices, which are the highest anywhere in the country.

It is flipping unbelievable. In Cherrywood, which is also in my constituency, former NAMA land, a Fianna Fáil construct, was handed over to private developers who are now building four blocks of build-to-rent apartments. I met the developers and they told me it was costing them

€400,000 per unit to build and that every single one of them had been sold to a Dutch state pension fund. Even the Dutch understand that its state should invest in public housing, but they are doing it here because our State will not do it. It will not build its own affordable housing and public housing that is genuinely affordable. It is beyond shocking. In Cherrywood originally, when €15 million of public money in local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, funding was given to pay for the infrastructure, we were promised that 40% of all housing built with that money would go for affordable housing and that it would cost no more than €300,000. Within weeks, that had disappeared. There was no 40%, or any other percentage: in fact, we do not know what percentage of affordable housing there will be. Yesterday, the Minister told us that affordable housing has increased from €300,000 a few years ago to €450,000. How is housing affordable based on people's income if it is capped at €450,000 in one area, €400,000 in another area, €350,000 in another area, €300,000 in another area and €225,000 in another area? It has got nothing to do with affordability. Does the Minister think people get different wages depending on whether they live in Leitrim or Dún Laoghaire? It is just disgraceful.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Again, and again and again this Government takes the side of the corporate landlords and the property developers. Today, it is opposing this motion to freeze rents and tackle those landlords who are breaking the rules when it comes to minimum standards. Why would the Government oppose a rent freeze? Why would it oppose inspecting rental properties to ensure they are meeting minimum standards? The only people who benefit from the Government's approach are rack-renting, slum landlords. They are being given the green light by the Government today to increase their rents and to continue to break the minimum housing standards. That is who this Government serves. What we need is a left Government with socialist policies to stand up to the big landlords and to take the side of renters and those who are looking to access housing. Simply freezing rents is not enough. We need to cut rents, ban evictions, build public housing and nationalise the properties of the big corporate landlords.

The Government's countermotion shamefully promotes its so-called affordable housing plans. Yesterday, we heard so-called affordable housing could be as much as €500,000 for an apartment. Half a million euro may be affordable to the Minister, but it is completely out of reach for many ordinary workers in this country. It is an Orwellian approach from Fianna Fáil. War is peace, spin is truth, and half a million euro for an apartment is affordable.

The so-called shared equity part of the proposals is custom built to drive up house prices. It is done at the behest of the lobbying of private developer organisations. The Minister's own Department warned that a similar scheme drove up prices by 6% in London and yet he ignored that, claiming it was only 1%. What we need is genuinely affordable housing, public housing on public land available to all, with rents linked to income. Housing should be a right not an investment opportunity for the vultures and the speculators.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister lifted the blanket ban on rent increases and evictions. He bowed to the landlord lobby when he did so. He was warned on the floor of this Dáil of what the consequences of his actions would be and, unfortunately, we are beginning to see the consequences of those actions already. Last Friday the Inner City Helping Homeless group reported the case of a healthcare worker who was evicted while at work. The healthcare worker had their belongings moved out of their place while they were at work. The notice to quit was for the end of May. It was an illegal eviction, but it was due to take place a few weeks down the road on the basis of the Minister's actions in any case.

We see a case of a vulture fund that wants to evict 12 households, 20 adults and some children, from a number of properties in Dublin. Once again, essential workers are being evicted: construction workers, retail workers and a carer who works in disability services. The vulture fund has a dispute going with an unscrupulous slum landlord who has possession orders against him but has continued to collect the rent. The victims in the dispute are the tenants, one of whom was described in a court document as “persons unknown”. I refer to someone who was a tenant, who paid rent for 17 years. That case is being heard in the High Court this morning, so I will say no more about it in this forum at this stage.

It is clear as day that what needs to be done is to reinstate the ban on rent increases and on evictions. It was quite an effective policy when it was in place. It reduced the number of people forced to live in emergency accommodation from more than 10,000 to fewer than 9,000. Rather than listen to the language of those statistics, the Minister has listened to the pressure and the calls from the landlord lobby. He made his choice in that regard and it is very much the wrong choice.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: As I stated as recently as last week, I welcome each and every opportunity to discuss the rental and housing crisis we now face in this country. The rental situation in Ireland is now at a crisis point. In my constituency of Louth, as far as I am aware, rent has never been higher. In my home town of Dundalk, it is normal for a standard three-bedroom house to have a rent bill of between €1,200 and €1,600 per month. To put this in perspective, that is the equivalent of between €280 and €370 per week. This puts renting a house out of reach for most young couples.

The motion before us today calls on the Government to take a number of immediate actions that will help those caught in the rental trap. I would support an emergency three-year ban on rent increases for private residential houses, but to implement this we must put in place the necessary legislation to protect renters. In mainland Europe it is quite common to see people rent for all their adult lives but this is not what we are used to here in Ireland. However, it is the case that we need to readjust our thinking. In mainland Europe it is commonplace for tenants to have long-term lease agreements with their landlords, in many cases for terms of 20 years or more. Furthermore, there are very strong rules which protect the tenants and, for that matter, the landlords. In Ireland at present it is common for lease agreements to last no longer than a couple of years. This does not give certainty to tenants, which as far as I am concerned is one of the major issues. We must be able to protect tenants and also give certainty to landlords. Why can we not look at implementing proper legislation that will facilitate longer-term tenancies, tenancies that in effect could last an adult lifetime?

Today’s motion also calls for a refundable tax credit for private rental tenants. I support this call but I urge caution on how it is administered and what rate of tax relief would be provided. We must support those tenants who really need the support and not those who do not require such help. Again, there would be challenges on how we implement this, but I believe if we are serious about it then a way can be found.

The motion also calls for provision to be made for the delivery of at least 4,000 affordable cost-rental homes in 2022. I support this concept, but why do we have to stop at 4,000? In Dundalk, there are most likely in excess of 100 homes that are currently lying idle and vacant. While we do not know the full facts, it is suspected that the vast majority of these vacant homes are in the possession of banks and local authorities. I have raised this issue in the House before and I will raise it again. Why are these houses allowed to remain vacant? Surely the Govern-

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ment can make provision to bring these homes back into the housing stock. Many of these homes are in established residential areas where services such as schools, shops and public transport are already in place. Could the Minister explain why the banks are holding onto these properties and why local authorities are not putting tenants in them? This merits further discussion in order to get to the bottom of the issue.

In my constituency office one of the major issues that is constantly raised is that of young couples not being able to get mortgages. One of the most frustrating aspects of this is that in many cases these couples are paying in excess of €1,500 per month in rent, yet when they apply for mortgages where repayments are normally in the region of €1,000 to €1,200 they are being refused by the banks. Why is this the case? If these couples can afford their rent, surely they can afford lower mortgage repayments. I have in the past called on the banks to recognise and give credit to those who are currently paying rent and are applying for mortgages that would mean lower repayments. I get frustrated.

The motion also calls for the provision of an indefinite term for tenancies. As I have said, this is commonplace in Europe and is something we must embrace. Why are landlords so reluctant to enter into long-term lease agreements? Some would argue that it could be greed on the part of landlords. This may well be true, but we must look at both sides. Why would a landlord not commit to, for example, a 20-year tenancy agreement if that agreement had any rent increases or decreases based on inflation? Surely this would lead to a win-win situation. The tenant would have the safe knowledge that his or her rent would only increase in line with inflation, while the landlord would also have the safety net of knowing he or she had a long-term tenancy linked to inflation. We must examine why this is not happening.

I know for a fact that only for mums, dads and family members there would be many more people homeless on the streets. Couples cannot afford to rent. They are on council housing lists because their income is slightly over the threshold. They are locked into the situation.

I would like to once more offer my support for certain measures in the motion, including the introduction of an emergency three-year ban on rent increases, the provision of a rent tax credit and the amendment of the Tenancy Act 2004 to provide for real tenancies of indefinite duration.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Housing is a basic human need. Without housing most aspects of people's lives break down. Physical and mental health starts to deteriorate. A family's ability to provide healthy nutrition for their children falls apart. Education and work life are practically impossible without a home.

Ireland is suffering from a prolonged national housing disaster. Up to 1 million people in this State are affected by the housing crisis, either through mortgage distress, homelessness, spending years on housing waiting list or grossly unfair rents and mortgages. This crisis has been going on for so long that many in society, in particular in the political class as well as some in the media class, have become desensitised to it.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil consider themselves parties of the free market. In truth, both are parties of market distortion. Much of the dysfunction in the housing market is a direct result of actions taken by Fine Gael and supported by Fianna Fáil. At the bottom of the housing slump, Fine Gael rolled out the red carpet to international residential investors and vulture funds in its efforts to put a floor under house prices and improve the balance sheets of the Irish banks. It achieved this through providing generous taxation policies and light-touch regulation.

As a result, international investors piled into the market, made massive profits, pushed prices for rents and mortgages through the roof and put first-time buyers out of the market. We saw what happened with the majority of homes purchased in a Kildare housing estate in the past week. What is happening, which is shocking given Fianna Fáil's history, is that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are now creating a tenant class, something that has not been seen since the likes of the Irish landlord system. There is a form of feudalism recurring in Irish society at this time. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are pitching REITs with massive competitive advantages against young couples and families on a daily basis in David-and-Goliath battles. There can only be one winner in such situations.

The solution is not rocket science. If international investors are hoovering up housing units due to the massive competitive advantage they have, even up the odds. The Government should reduce the advantages they have and increase the buying power of young families. It is very simple. If institutions have enormous power in the market, the Government can pull the economic levers to reduce that power and make sure that young families can purchase homes and pay lower rents.

Builders have said that financing is a major difficulty. If they get financing from an international investor, it gives them the confidence to proceed with a project. However, it can take six months from the time a young family views a house to put finance in place, if such a family can get finance at all. On the supply side, building costs are skyrocketing. I spoke to a builder today who showed me a list of about 25 key items in the building of a house, all of which have increased in price, in some cases by double digit percentages. The supply of land is still being controlled. Speculators, hoping to harvest increased prices in the future, are sitting on vast tracts of land. All of this is adding to the fact that homes and rents are being pushed beyond the reach of families.

On the demand side, REITs get away without paying property taxes. They do not pay proper capital gains tax or stamp duty and are paying a tiny amount of corporation tax. They achieve interest rates on the international market at levels far lower than the interest rates young families have to deal with. They are being turbo-boosted by these factors in their battles with young families.

Aontú would level the playing field between REITs and families. We would strip their advantages from them and ensure they are no longer sheltered from proper taxation. We would build a public banking system to ensure that the other distorted market, namely, the banking market, is reformed so that families can get access to decent mortgages at their interest rates. We would increase the supply of land by taxing vacant land to the level that it costs to hold it. We would fund the return of thousands of empty houses around the country to the market and tax those who refuse to bring those homes back onto the market. We would increase the level of CPOs that happen with regard to empty and derelict houses. We would increase the number of trainee apprentices in order to increase the pool of skilled workers. I ask the Minister to make sure that he implements these reforms so that young families have a chance to purchase their own homes.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome the motion. Unfortunately, I can confirm that the private rental sector in Ireland is totally dysfunctional. Government after Government has tried to stimulate the housing market but that has resulted in driving rents higher and higher. Rents have increased by 100% since 2013.

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The most shocking revelation of this week was the case of Mullen Park in Maynooth, where a global property investment firm purchased most of the 170 first-time buyer homes available. There is no legislation to stop investors doing that. Yesterday, Round Hill Capital purchased 112 houses suitable for single families in Hollystown in Dublin 15. They will also be used as rental properties. Is this the new supply line for the rental market? Our building crisis has been facilitated by Government.

While the recent cost-rental scheme is welcome, it is entirely inadequate in terms of the scale of funding. We are building hundreds, rather than thousands, of cost-rental homes and homes for affordable purchase. There was a national call-out for houses in Ireland. The Minister got 400 houses and rejected 155. Why did that happen? They were never inspected. Why not? Surely this was a quick fix. Do councils not have enough money? There are people in cities, towns, villages and rural areas affected by this. The Government cannot supply houses to all generations. There are no rental properties or houses being built. There are major supply and demand issues with house rentals. On the other hand, in the 2040 plan, backed by the Government, it is proposed to stop houses being built in towns, villages and rural areas because there is no infrastructure. We are 0.1% globally but the Government is stopping us from living in our own areas where we grew up. It is stopping people building anything except cities. The Land Development Agency is only based on supply chains in cities. It has nothing for anyone outside a city. Since I first came to the Dáil, I said I was here to represent County Limerick. I am not here to represent Dublin but am here to get a fair share for the county of Limerick. I want this Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party Government to give equality to the rest of the country and allow investment in our markets and infrastructure. Since my election, I said there was no investment. Askeaton is waiting 33 years for a sewerage upgrade. Oola is also waiting for an upgrade in sewerage infrastructure as is Hospital. There is only 27% capacity left in County Limerick but guess where all the development is going? All the Government funding is going to the areas with existing infrastructure.

The 2040 plan reduces the amount of housing that can be built in towns and villages in County Limerick and country-wide. That does not fix the problem. Fixing the problem is going back to the basics. Give us the infrastructure. Let us build houses in our areas to accommodate the people. Let us build houses in our towns and villages and give us the investment in infrastructure for which we have asked for more than 30 years. Stop giving all the funding to the cities, which are causing much of the emission problems.

Does the Minister of State know about a report done by the OPW? Who are the biggest polluters of our rivers and waterways? It is the local authorities, the Government and the OPW due to a lack of infrastructure and a lack of investment.

Deputy Carol Nolan: We are all aware that the current rates of rent are just not sustainable for most working families and those who rely on HAP and other assistance payments. They can be genuinely exploitative. Analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential sales market for the first quarter of this year showed the biggest year-on-year increases in the country are in my own county of Offaly which increased by almost 18%. The Government points to the programme for Government commitment to develop a new cost-rental housing sector in Ireland in which rents charged will be set to cover the costs of delivering, managing and maintaining the homes. It states a number of work strands are under way to deliver cost-rental housing using local authorities' expertise, the Land Development Agency and approved housing bodies. However, in my constituency, one approved housing body, Respond, has received €245 million since 2016 yet cannot fix basic insulation problems for residents of Chesterfield Close in Birr. I

have brought this to the Minister of State's attention because it warrants urgent intervention. It is not acceptable that people cannot have their windows and doors replaced. Some 26 different houses and apartments are affected. Questions need to be answered about the amount Respond gets while being unwilling to put the money into maintenance, with tenants suffering as a result. I accept there will need to be constitutional advice from the Attorney General around the balancing of rights between landlords and tenants.

Eviction has already been raised during this debate, and I will do so again. We need to tackle the mindset around eviction in this country. I was astounded to receive an email at the weekend on a serious matter of a threatened eviction of an elderly lady who happens to be the mother of a senior journalist with Midlands 103. That family sent an email to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, about this situation but have not received a response. The case is not in the remit of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage but I ask that he intervene. There are questions to be answered. We must also make sure HIQA is doing what it is supposed to do about nursing homes. Evictions are a cultural problem that do not only exist in our housing sector but also other residential areas such as nursing homes where it is now being threatened. I hope the Minister for Health will act on it but I am raising it here because it is so serious.

My constituency of Laois-Offaly has grappled with rising rents. I have been calling for an extension of the rent pressure zones and I previously welcomed the designation of Tullamore as a new rent pressure zone in the last year or so but we must do more to tackle rents. Many young couples cannot afford to buy a house and do not qualify for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan. They are falling between two stools because they do not qualify for social housing. We need affordable housing schemes in the county and to ensure every area of the State is looked after. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that young couples are given a fair chance to buy their first home. We need measures that will bring about housing solutions and affordable housing.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for tabling this Private Members' motion. I absolutely concur that the rental and housing crisis continue to spiral out of control. The new affordable housing Bill mentioned in the Minister's countermotion is a new plan with the same problems as previous plans. It regurgitates earlier plans, is developer led and investment fund led. There is a bit of tinkering around the edges in regard to cost-rental, which I welcome, although it depends on the basis of it in relation to salaries, council housing, shared equity, over which there is a big question mark, Part 5 and affordable housing at €450,000 in Dublin and €400,000 in Cork. How the Minister thinks that workers on an average industrial wage can afford housing on €450,000 is beyond me.

It will not work. In essence, it is the same old policy that is responsible for the crisis because it relies on the private sector. We have the ability to resolve this crisis. We did it before in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s when there was a massive council house building programme, which provided homes, affordable rents and security of tenure, including passing on tenancies to the next generation. People who lived in these council estates regarded their house as their home, a place to live in and raise a family. It makes me squirm when I hear estate agents, auctioneers and politicians talking about people getting a foot on the property ladder. The average working person is not thinking about rising up the property ladder but about an affordable home with security of tenure. The solution is for the State to play the leading role, not the market. Several years ago, as I have said before, the architect Mr. Mel Reynolds estimated there was a sufficient amount of already-zoned public land to build 100,000 units. What is needed is a national State housing agency tasked with building those 100,000 units over a ten-year period. These units could be built using direct labour, with trade union pay and conditions and with the employ-

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ment of apprentices. There is an unemployment rate of 60% among those between 18 and 24, if those currently on the PUP are included. This is another crisis in the making as we move out of the pandemic.

The public housing units could be built as a mix of affordable, cost-rental and traditional council housing to cater for those on the waiting list and those whose income exceeds the limit under which they would qualify for council housing. This would ensure mixed tenure, construction of good quality with an emphasis on carbon dioxide reduction, and good facilities, such as crèches, community facilities and public transport. This would be a truly radical solution and game-changer. If 40,000 units were built in the first five years, it would dramatically affect the housing market and help to lower rents in the private sector.

The Minister talks about supply for couples who wish to rear their families. In Dublin 12, in Drimnagh alone, there are three sites I wish to refer to. On the old Dulux site, Davitt Road, 265 units of one- and two-bedroom build-to-rent apartments are being built. There is an application before An Bord Pleanála concerning a nine-storey development with 200 one- and two-bedroom build-to-rent apartments. The same developer, Durkan, applied just last Friday for permission for another development, of four blocks of ten storeys, on the old Eason site at Brickfield Drive, with 282 one- and two-bedroom apartments. These are not for families to put down roots in. They are for transient, HAP and other forms of renters. Therefore, the Minister is not including in the legislation protections that allow for the building of family homes in which people can put down roots and protections that ensure community gain, including through crèches, necessary community services and infrastructure that is needed to cater for these developments.

Between the Luas stops at Suir Road Bridge and Bluebell, there is the potential to build 1,418 units for 4,500 people. Along with these, greater infrastructure, community facilities and services are needed. That has not been dealt with through legislation or the Minister's housing plan. The units, we are aware, will likely be HAP units, not family homes, as I said.

An international pension investor interested in the Player Wills and Bailey Gibson sites has got planning permission for the Bailey Gibson site. The process for the Player Wills site, involving build-to-rent and co-living units, is ongoing. There are to be over 1,000 one- and two-bedroom apartments. This is not planned housing. This is not building a planned city but building transient living facilities for certain parts of society. These apartments will cost a minimum of €2,000 to rent.

Let me expose another aspect of the bad planning the Minister is standing over. In Dublin 8, 15 student developments have been built. Applications are in and the rent is to be €2,000. Hotels are being built but we are not getting affordable housing within communities. The applications and builds are actually breaking and changing the fabric of the communities in the areas affected.

At Mullen Park, Maynooth, Round Hill Capital bought 135 of the 170 homes that were built. This is absolutely disgraceful. The members of the Government are the very ones who brought in the legislation to allow investment funds to avail of tax breaks without stamp duty, corporation tax or capital gains tax. Overnight that could be changed to stop what is happening or, as another Deputy said, give power back to the people in accessing homes.

The Minister made reference to the challenge of private landlords in regard to a cap on rents

in Berlin, yet when we raise the fact that Germany has barred the investment trusts, it is ignored completely.

I have one last point. I am disappointed that the Minister has left because we are in very difficult circumstances. Consider the case of a young lady who rang me recently after a rent review with her landlord. She has been paying €1,653 for a one-bedroom apartment in the Aberley apartment block in Tallaght. It has been increased to €1,730.22. When the lady originally moved in, it was €1,500. She came from a position of homelessness. She is on a homeless HAP, which is capped at €990. The Government has brought in legislation to allow landlords in the rent zones to increase rents by 4% every couple of years, yet it has made no provision for the homeless HAP payment to be increased by 4% to match them. I am absolutely opposed to lining landlords' pockets but if the Government is to introduce legislation to allow them to increase rents by 4%, it must allow the tenants to avail of supports of the same nature. I raised this at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands this morning. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is now very concerned that we will see more people losing the homeless HAP and having to go back into homelessness. It made the point that there must be a plan for homelessness prevention. That is key. When the young lady who contacted me contacted the HAP section, she was told to renegotiate the top-up with her landlord or else avail of the opportunity to move to the ordinary HAP. It is impossible to get anything with one bedroom for €650 in Dublin at this moment. I want the Minister to say he will do something about this and prevent the tenant in question and others like her from seeing rent increases. The young lady has told me she cannot afford the increase, which is due on 6 June, and that she will be homeless again if it happens. People are facing stark experiences. The Government is responsible and should respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): As the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, stated at the outset, to give this topic the attention it deserves would take more than is available to us today so many actions will speak a lot louder than words. I genuinely welcome the opportunity that has been provided by Deputies to discuss the private rental sector. I look forward to debating this topic further when the Government publishes its Housing for All plan and again when the Minister introduces the housing and residential tenancies Bill.

The Government believes everybody should have access to good quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and located close to essential services offering a high quality of life. The programme for Government, Our Shared Future, sets out the priorities in the area of housing over the coming years that will be given impetus by a clear plan of action under Housing for All. As already discussed, the Minister intends to publish a housing and residential tenancies Bill before the year's end to address, *inter alia*, comprehensive protections for tenants, balanced with constitutional property rights in relation to the current rent predictability measure, as well as tenancies of indefinite duration, subject to the advice of the Attorney General.

In the time I have remaining, I will address some of the other topics raised in today's motion. On housing standards, the motion implies, quite incorrectly, that the Government is not providing appropriate funding to local authorities to monitor and inspect accommodation standards in the sector. The motion contends also that the quality of rental stock is very poor and it quotes poor compliance rates in Dublin city as evidence for this. However, the statistics are taken out of context. The reality is that local authorities, on a risk-assessment basis, target the most problematic properties as part of their inspection programmes. Hence, to extrapolate that

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this non-compliance rate applies to the whole sector is simplistic and wrong.

The Department has made an increased budget of €10 million available to local authorities this year to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with minimum standards. This amounts to a 400% increase in funding in just three years and would in normal times allow councils to inspect up to 25% of all properties in the State each year. I say “in normal times” because, of course, the pandemic has had an impact, but I am happy to say the sector has been innovative in piloting virtual inspections, which the Department has been quick and happy to back with funding. The issue of an NCT-type certification has also been raised by a number of bodies in the past, most notably Threshold. Establishing and rolling out such a certification system for private rented dwellings, however, would have a significant resource implication for local authorities and the Local Government Management Agency.

On Friday last, the latest details on the number of people who are in homelessness were published. The monthly homelessness report for March and the homelessness progress report for the first quarter of 2021 were both published by the Department. The number of individuals presenting to homelessness services and the number of people accessing emergency accommodation have continued to decline. This follows a trend first established in the first quarter of 2019. Despite the positive trends, the number of people experiencing homelessness is still a major concern for me and the Government. Over the past year, substantial progress has continued on prevention work by supporting families and individuals at risk of homelessness and reducing the numbers accessing emergency accommodation. This must continue in earnest. A great deal of work has yet to be done.

While the various protections introduced in the rental market linked to the national Covid-19 response have contributed to the reduction in homelessness, the reduced numbers are also a result of the significant work and investment that has been undertaken, and I thank all our NGO and housing delivery partners in this regard. With the phased easing of the public health restrictions under way, the blanket moratorium on evictions has been replaced by more targeted protections for those most impacted by the pandemic and those who need them most. The Department is working closely with local authorities and tenancy protection services to ensure all resources will be brought to bear in guarding against any potential increase in homelessness. Local authorities and voluntary organisations have contributed greatly to addressing homelessness at a time when they are dealing with other major challenges in society. The Government has taken a lead role in providing investment and support and this will continue in the period ahead.

I want to be cautious as we look towards the future in seeking to maintain the gains we have made. While there has been strong progress, there is much work to be done in increasing the supply of housing and the delivery of social and affordable homes. The investment is in place and we are prioritising this work for the remainder of 2021 and beyond. There appears to be a suggestion from the Opposition that the Government favours institutional investors and bigger landlords in its policies. Our approach to this sector is not ideologically driven. It is driven simply by the desire to increase the supply of housing available to rent in the right places at the right price and as quickly as possible. Large-scale investment in property in appropriate locations has an important role to play in helping to deliver the professional, high-standard rental sector tenants deserve, but institutional investors occupy a small share of the residential housing market, with more than 96% of landlords having five tenancies or fewer. Historically, the private rented sector in Ireland has largely comprised small-scale landlords. They will continue to provide the bulk of private rented accommodation and the Government remains committed

to working with them. Nevertheless, the Irish housing market benefits from a share of larger, institutional landlords investing in high-density developments, boosting supply.

As for recent concerns about institutional investment in housing estates, the Minister is reviewing planning law to protect first-time buyers, ensure a level playing field for purchasers and make sure investment goes where it is most needed. A range of steps has been taken to facilitate the sale of housing for first-time buyers through the serviced sites fund, the local infrastructural housing activation fund, the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, an expanded help-to-buy scheme, the Land Development Agency and, more recently, new affordable purchase measures. Institutional investors have the potential to provide significant investment in the residential housing supply at scale. While it is important to facilitate such investment through appropriate regimes, it is equally important to ensure that where such investment brings a profit, a fair share is paid in tax. Officials from both the Department of Finance and Revenue are continuing to monitor the taxation of IREFs and REITs. Revenue continues to analyse returns by both IREFs and REITs and has measures available to it in the event of any non-compliance. Should any additional measures be identified, further action will be taken as necessary.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sharing time with Deputies O'Reilly and Ó Broin.

Let me make it clear: the housing crisis is not an accident. It did not happen as the result of some mysterious market forces. We need to call a spade a spade in this House. This housing crisis has happened as a result of the deliberate policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We just have to look at the impact it is having on first-time buyers, who have been locked out of the market because Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have designed a taxation system that allows international vulture funds to scoop up these properties at a very high cost, pushing up house prices for everybody. The Minister of State took to his feet and said the Department of Finance is monitoring the taxation of these funds. There is not much monitoring needed, however, because these funds do not pay any tax on the sky-high rents they charge the citizens of this city and throughout the State. They do not pay any capital gains tax when they flip the assets in the future, with the uplift that results from that. They pay very little stamp duty, and not the 7.5% that any other company needs to. That is not a loophole. It was deliberately designed by the Minister of State's party and Fianna Fáil over successive Finance Bills.

The Government did not just wake up today and figure out this was a problem, given that we in Sinn Féin have been raising this issue for the past five years. We have tabled amendment after amendment to close these tax advantages and to allow a level playing field for first-time buyers. As late as last year, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party voted against ensuring these funds would not be provided with that tax advantage. We have heard the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, say these are only small fears and the Government will monitor the situation. He should tell that to the people in Maynooth who desperately hope they will get onto the property ladder but who see the vulture fund come in and swoop 135 houses from right under their noses because the Government facilitated it in doing that. These advantages have to end now. Let us wake up because this will be the story of 2021. Investment fund after investment fund will buy large swathes of new estates, locking out future generations from home ownership, not by chance or an accident but because of the deliberate policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and despite numerous attempts by Sinn Féin to close these loopholes and advantages.

The motion should be supported by the House. We need to reduce rents by freezing them and putting a tax rebate of one month's rent into people's pockets, increase investment in public housing and bring an end to the tax advantages these vulture funds have been given by the

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Minister of State's party and Fianna Fáil over recent years.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, an Teachta Ó Broin, for bringing forward this important motion. The motion nails the issue of the rental crisis, namely, the lack of solutions from successive governments, and outlines the only true solutions that can rectify it. We need to look past the statistics and figures to the fear, depression and hopelessness, particularly of our young people caught in this rental trap. They are distraught by the current circumstances, of course, but they are also exhausted by the failures of successive governments to address this crisis, which has been going on for more than a decade. When Fine Gael and the Labour Party were in government, we were told the crisis could not be fixed overnight. Five years later, Fine Gael, in a confidence and supply agreement with Fianna Fáil, told us the crisis could not be fixed overnight. Now, Fianna Fáil is implementing all the same policies that Fine Gael did, telling us the crisis cannot be fixed overnight. They have had almost 4,000 overnights to get this right. How many more will it take?

It is patently clear to me and the young people caught in the rental crisis that it is not a lack of time that is the problem but the Government's total opposition, for ideological reasons, to implementing solutions that are necessary to fix this crisis. To be honest, it would be a little bit unfair to heap all of this on the shoulders of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. From his time as housing spokesperson during the confidence and supply agreement-supported Government, everyone knew he lacked any ambition or any real or well-thought-out ideas. He was always going to struggle. The few policies he had would, at best, be underwhelming and, at worst, be downright dangerous.

The conversation on housing this week has focused on the REITs that are purchasing properties in bulk to rent them out for excessive prices. That falls at the door of the Minister of State and his party, Fine Gael. It was they who laid out the red carpet for these vultures and scavengers that are going to keep young people trapped in the Minister of State's rental crisis. People have had enough. They are listening to the solutions being put forward by my party and others. They are sick of the Minister of State's rental crisis.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I would be embarrassed to read a statement like the Minister of State's to the Oireachtas because it was filled with so many factual inaccuracies. He has said that his Government is giving local authorities enough funding to allow 25% of private rental properties to be inspected every year. In 2019, the year before Covid, only 10% of rental properties were inspected. In fact, the percentage of properties inspected in most local authority areas was in the single digits. None of us knows whether the majority of properties are compliant because Government is not funding local authorities to inspect them. At the same time as saying that Government is giving local authorities money to inspect 25% of such properties, the Minister of State is saying we cannot have a certification system similar to the national car test, NCT, because of the revenue implications. If 25% of properties were to be inspected every year, compliant properties could be provided with an NCT-style certificate. Why not charge the landlord €40 for that certificate? It would be valid for four years and have to be renewed every fifth year. That would make the system revenue neutral.

The Minister of State announced the homeless figures from last Friday as if they represented some kind of success. Only a few weeks ago, he voted to strip renters of the very protection that drove these numbers down, the ban on evictions. While it may take some months, many front-line homeless service workers are genuinely concerned numbers will continue to rise. The Minister of State has also said large institutional investors are not favoured, but the mom-

and-pop landlords renting out one property whom he says he supports pay tax on rents collected at an effective rate of 40% while those institutional investors pay absolutely nothing. If that is not favouritism for big landlords, I do not know what is.

With respect to the Minister's response earlier in the debate, some of the country's most leading constitutional law experts are on the record as saying they believe a three-year ban on rent increases would be constitutionally sound. If I were the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, I would be willing to go all the way to the courts to fight for the right of renters not to have their rents further increased.

The Minister also repeated his criticism of Sinn Féin for wanting to deliver 20,000 public homes a year, comprising social housing and housing that is affordable both to rent and to purchase. The very same Minister, when campaigning for election, promised the same thing. He said 10,000 affordable homes would be delivered every year for the lifetime of the Government, but he is now saying that is not deliverable. Of course, that is exactly what Fianna Fáil does during elections. How would we deliver those homes? We would dramatically increase capital investment, set targets for local authorities and fast-track developments such as those at Oscar Traynor Road, St. Michael's Estate and Clonburris. We would also make more aggressive use of vacant properties, acquisitions and turnkey properties not only to ensure more social homes but to ensure homes working people can afford to rent or buy.

Unable to provide an adequate defence of his failures both during the term of the confidence and supply arrangement and while Minister, Deputy O'Brien deliberately misrepresented Sinn Féin's affordable housing policy to this House. Under our policy, affordable rents would be affordable at €700 to €900 per month rather than the €1,300 or €1,400 this Government is presenting. Likewise, our homes for affordable purchase would be priced at €230,000 or less. The Minister is wrong; people would actually own those houses. They would be able to do with them what they want and to transfer them to their children or grandchildren. The difference between our party and Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party is we want to create an ever-growing stock of permanently affordable homes to be bought and sold by working people on modest incomes. We do not want those homes to be affordable to the first purchaser but then end up in the private rental sector or in the unaffordable private market.

The motion before us today is very straightforward. It calls for a radical break in policy towards the private rental sector. A three-year ban on rent increases is urgently required and should be supported. A refundable tax credit which would put a month's rent back in every renter's pocket is essential to undo the damage of ten years of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil failure in the private rental sector. Crucially, it calls for a major investment in the direct delivery of affordable cost rental housing on the scale the Economic and Social Research Institute, the National Economic and Social Council and the Housing Agency have called for. We estimate this would equate to 4,000 affordable rental units as part of the 20,000 public homes to be delivered every year. We also need to ensure proper standards and security of tenure for renters. Everything I have heard today shows once again that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party cannot be trusted to stand by renters. Only the proposal Sinn Féin has put forward today to stand up for renters will tackle this rental crisis. The sooner this Government realises that, the better for us all.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): In accordance with Standing Order

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80(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Sitting suspended at 1.57 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At the weekend, we learned that an investment fund is buying up the majority of homes in a development at Mullen Park in Maynooth. The fund, which has a “war chest” of €1 billion, has robbed first-time buyers of the opportunity to buy their own homes. The fund will acquire these homes and then put them up for rent at extortionate rates. Of course, investment funds buying housing in bulk is not a new phenomenon. It has been happening for a number of years. The truth is that it is Government policy to incentivise and support these private funds to buy up housing across the State. Indeed, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have rolled out the red carpet for them with a range of sweetheart tax advantages. These funds pay no corporation tax, no capital gains tax and minimal stamp duty, and they charge some of the highest rents in the State, on which they then pay no tax.

This cushy regime gives massive financial advantage to wealthy investment funds. No person trying to buy a home could possibly compete with them, be it in Maynooth or anywhere else. People scrimp and save every cent to put themselves in a position to buy a home, but just when they think they are getting closer to that goal, another Government with another bad decision pushes their dream further away. In this case, a wealthy investment fund has swooped in and bought homes from underneath the noses of families and workers.

This is not happening by accident. It is the outworking of a policy designed and defended by Fianna Fáil and its partners in government, Fine Gael. Year after year, we in Sinn Féin have submitted amendments to finance Bills to close down the tax advantages that allow these funds to squeeze workers and families out of the housing market. Year after year, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have clubbed together to stop that from happening. As recently as last November, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party voted against every single one of Sinn Féin’s amendments. Time and again, the Government has favoured investment funds over ordinary people.

Now, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, says that Fianna Fáil’s big plan to tackle this scandal is to limit investment funds to purchasing only 70% of a housing estate. Well, woo-hoo. That gives nobody any comfort. That is outrageous. While investment funds continue to enjoy the Government’s tax advantages, they will still be able to gazump ordinary people for the majority of homes for sale in any estate on any day of the week. They will be able to do that because the Government allows and encourages it.

This approach is just another plank of a housing policy that is failing. The Government has produced an unambitious and anemic plan that has no understanding even of affordability. Some €450,000 for a home in Dublin is not affordable. People deserve better. We can and must make housing affordable again. We can deliver homes that working people can actually afford and we can tackle extortionate rents, but, first, the Government needs to stop lining the pockets of wealthy investors and developers. Maintaining sweetheart tax advantages for investment funds must come to an end. When will the Government take immediate action to close these tax advantages and stand with workers and families as opposed to the funds? When will it introduce legislation to stop them from buying homes in bulk?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I will state unequivocally that the purchasing by institutional investors of completed housing estates is unacceptable and not consistent with Government policy. We do not want institutional investors competing with first-time buyers. Our priority is first-time buyers. Our priority is additional supply of housing. The cornerstone of our housing policy is to build 50,000 social homes over the next five years. It is the largest and most ambitious social housing programme in the history of the State, with 9,500 direct builds targeted this year and 12,750 social homes in total out of 25,000 houses overall this year. That is the bottom line insofar as this Government is concerned.

Institutional investment was brought into the country more than eight years ago through various measures to add supply, not to displace supply. That is the critical differential point. The Government will now examine what transpired over the weekend in respect of a suburban housing estate being purchased *en bloc* by an institutional investor. That is not acceptable to the Government. I have spoken to the Ministers for Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This issue will be examined across the board in terms of ensuring that the purpose and objective of inward investment in the residential market is to add supply, not displace supply and compete with first-time buyers out in the suburban market. Originally, the intention was to facilitate high-density build-to-rent housing a number of years ago in the cities. We were not in government at the time, but nonetheless capital is important in getting supply into this country. One has to distinguish between good capital and bad capital, between additionality and displacement.

In the past, banks drove construction activity in this country. That is no longer the case. Instead, this Government will drive new construction by providing unprecedented levels of funding to local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, to build social and affordable homes in what I have described as the biggest social housing programme in the history of the State. That is what we are about in relation to housing. On the affordable front, a suite of policies have been developed by the Minister in addition to ones already in place, every single one of which Sinn Féin has opposed, including the 22,000 purchasers who availed of the help-to-buy scheme, which has been in place now for a number of years.

The affordable housing Bill provides mechanisms and more opportunities to support affordable homes for couples and young people who want to buy housing. That is extremely important, including in the delivery of housing programmes and the construction situation from social homes to affordable homes, the development of brownfield sites, infrastructural development and the whole raft of urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, funding to, for example, enable infrastructure to facilitate the construction of housing. These are all important initiatives that will yield additional supply in the private sector over time. The development of the first national cost rental scheme should be acknowledged. It is a very significant development that opens up significant potential, not just this year, but into the future, with rents that are 25% below the market price. These are important developments. In addition to them, the Land Development Agency, LDA, legislation will provide a further mechanism to get additional supply into the market.

The fundamental point that I want to make this afternoon is that the purchase by institutional investors of completed housing estates is unacceptable and will now be examined by the Government in terms of dealing with that aspect of the events.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government is not driving construction. It has left renters in the lurch, it will not cut rents and it will not ensure that there will be no rent increases

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for the next three years. It has no clue about affordability. In the cloud cuckoo land that the Government inhabits, €450,000 for a house in Dublin is affordable apparently. That is not the case. Above all else, the Government's policy has consistently favoured and facilitated big developers, landlords and private investment funds. What happened in Maynooth was not an accident; it is a direct consequence of the Government's policies, which it has designed and defended. It has cut a sweetheart deal arrangement for these investment funds with no corporation tax, no capital gains tax, and only minimal stamp duty. The result is that these big wealthy funds can swoop in and gobble up those houses that workers and families should expect to be able to afford.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not looking for a long-winded examination of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, but the time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The evidence of the Government's policies can be seen on the ground. I want the Taoiseach to tell us today-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----that the Government will end these sweetheart arrangements for these funds and get them to pay their corporation tax-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please, the time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----capital gains tax-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and stamp duty on those properties.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to desist. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should listen to what I said. I was very clear that this is not Government policy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes, it is.

The Taoiseach: I have said it very clearly. We do not in any shape or form deem it acceptable that institutional investment of this kind would buy up estates that are already built. We have said that now. By the way, just to put things in perspective-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: -----institutional ownership of residential units is less than 1% of total housing stock and 5% of all rental tenancies. Just to give some perspective to the rather long-winded introduction that the Deputy gave-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I will make a further point. The Deputy also needs to analyse-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is a disgrace.

The Taoiseach: -----her own party's affordability policies and the assertion that it would deliver 20,000 homes each year. She cannot say where, how or by whom.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Get up the yard.

The Taoiseach: Let us take Clondalkin, for example, where Sinn Féin and parties of the left voted against the building of 975 homes, which included 30% social housing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: In Tallaght, for example, Sinn Féin opposed 500 homes, of which 80% would be social or affordable houses. Sinn Féin continues to oppose house developments in this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, the time is up.

The Taoiseach: That gives the lie to its so-called commitment to social and affordable housing.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go away out of that.

The Taoiseach: It has voted against every affordable scheme-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Taoiseach does not even know what affordable is.

The Taoiseach: -----that is brought before the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is €500,000 affordable?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the leaders to comply with the time limits that have been set down, please.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I also raise the role of the international investment funds in displacing individuals and families from purchasing a home. Last week, the example occurred in Maynooth, in Mullen Park housing estate, which is well under construction at this stage. I started getting calls and emails late last week from constituents on this. Each one of them had signed up with an estate agent expressing an interest in purchasing a home. They would have been watching the development as it was progressing. They would have been looking forward to the day when they would have been contacted and asked to pay a deposit on a house. Those hopes were dashed last week when the auctioneers sent them an email to say that Round Hill Capital would be buying the rest of the estate.

The developer had no shortage of buyers. Individuals wished to purchase, as did Kildare County Council and Tuath Housing association. However, they were all dumped in favour of Round Hill Capital. The same company also purchased 112 family homes in Bay Meadows, Hollystown and 297 apartments in Northwood, Dublin. They will now come on the market at

extortionate rents.

Round Hill Capital claims to have €1 billion to spend on residential property in Ireland. It is just one of dozens of investors competing for this limited supply of housing. Since 2018, nearly €4 billion has been invested by global funds in the Irish residential market. In 2019, international funds bought a staggering 95% of the apartments that were constructed that year. How are ordinary buyers, who scrimp and save for a mortgage, supposed to compete with this?

There is no mystery as to why these funds are outbidding ordinary buyers because they are being advantaged by the State. As has been said, they pay no stamp duty, no capital gains tax and no corporation tax. I listened to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage yesterday talk about not doing anything radical. He was concerned about unintended consequences. It begs the question: is what happened in Maynooth an unintended consequence? It is not just that estate in Maynooth; another estate in Maynooth went the same way some months ago.

There is a skewed ideology at play here. The Taoiseach must tell us when there will be a change in this. It cannot be put off until the budget. If we need to, every one of us can sit over a weekend or overnight to pass legislation to stop this. It is not just that they are buying these estates, but we will find that the State will be on the other side with long leases over 25 years where they will be leased, refurbished and returned to the developer at the end of it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Taoiseach needs to tell us when this will change. There is an urgency about this now.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We are getting to a point of no return. We need a timeframe on this.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the genuine points the Deputy has articulated. No local authority should be on the other side of this. Let that message go out loud and clear from Government. No local authority should be on the other side of this, engaging in a long lease with these institutional investors in that estate. A limited degree of leasing has some importance, but leasing over the long term does not represent great value for money. That is why we are building 9,500 social houses this year out of 12,750 social houses overall. That is why we want to build 50,000 social houses by way of direct build over the next five years. That is the overall commitment of the Government. That is where the main focus of Government construction will be in the coming period.

We will deal with the swoop-in by that institutional investor, which is not acceptable. Previous Governments facilitated the arrival here of investors with the good intention of trying to get some investment into the high-density rental market, particularly in Dublin, when capital was scarce. It was never intended that that would facilitate competing with first-time buyers on a suburban housing estate. That was never the intention and it will be dealt with. Government will ensure that is disincentivised and not facilitated.

Obviously, the Minister for Finance will meet his team this afternoon to discuss this matter. He will also engage with colleagues across government on this development. Government

wants to give people the chance to be able to afford to buy their own homes through a number of schemes. We also want to make sure that we build the largest social housing programme in the history of the State to ensure that people who cannot afford to buy houses get houses at rents they can afford. The cost rental scheme is another mechanism that will also enable people to get access to homes.

Last year, just over 20,000 houses were provided in the entire country, of which approximately 8,000 were social houses. We do not have a thriving private market in this economy. Sinn Féin keeps going on about it and keeps on inventing the same old slogans and the same rhetoric. However, it is simply rhetoric at this stage because the bulk of housing construction at the moment is being driven by the State in a variety of shapes and forms. That will continue to be the case for quite some time to come.

The key point is this. I accept the basic principle of what the Deputy is saying that what happened in Maynooth is not acceptable. It is not something we want to see happening in this country. We want those housing estates reserved for people who wish to buy houses and for AHBs.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Taoiseach did not tell us when that will be addressed. It is important for us to hear that today. I do not know if I am living on a different planet or in a different country, but all I see in the area that I represent are turnkey developments that are being long-leased by the local authority. I do not see any builds. I do not see where all this social housing is coming from. I can give the Taoiseach the names of the estates that are long-leased. I live 100 yd from an estate which is under construction and in which 61 Part V houses are to be long-leased for 25 years. Tomorrow night, in our Private Members' time, my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, will bring a Bill before the House to deal with this issue. As I said, I live only 100 yd from the estate. Everybody expected that the 61 houses would be local authority housing and would be peppered throughout what would be a nice estate. It was expected that the State would buy these houses such that they would be an asset at the end of the process. Nobody expected that these houses would be long-leased for 25 years, after which they would be refurbished and returned to the developer. I have raised this issue previously with the Taoiseach. This is madness. The Taoiseach needs to tell us when this is going to change.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy will know, the Government will not oppose the Bill tomorrow. The Government wants to work with the Deputy's party in respect of the legislation it is bringing forward tomorrow to deal with the leasing issue. The leasing issue is not the dominant form of house provision. As I mentioned earlier, in terms of institutional investment and to give a sense of perspective, 5% of all rental tenancies and 1% of the existing housing stock is owned by institutional investment. There is need for balance in this area. In terms of affordability, as referenced, last February Fingal County Council announced its first affordable housing scheme in 11 years, the Dun Emer scheme, which will provide 51 homes, of which 39 will be affordable housing and 12 will be social housing. The scheme is a mix of two-bedroom apartments at €166,000 and not €450,000; three-bedroom duplexes at €206,000; three-bedroom terraced houses from €250,000; and three-bedroom semi-detached houses from €258,000. A range of affordable schemes will emerge from the initiatives taken in this area by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

On Part V housing, the preference of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is not that leasing would be the dominant form of that provision. That is the policy position.

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Deputy Catherine Murphy: That is what is happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: That is our policy position. We do not want to see, in any shape or form, an over-use of the Part V mechanism via the leasing option.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: We, Donegal people, often call our home county the forgotten county. It has no rail service, poor public transport, poor or non-existent broadband infrastructure and it has experienced years of under-investment and neglect from this and previous Governments.

Last week, finally, there was a good news story with the launch of the Donegal Place initiative. Donegal was to be positioned as a great place to live, work, invest, explore and study. Those of us from Donegal and those who have travelled there already know this. Instead of this positive news story being shared over the weekend, Donegal was highlighted as the worst county in class for its continuing high rates of Covid-19. Figures from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, showed that Donegal had the highest incidence rate of Covid-19 in the country, at 293.4, compared to a national 14-day incidence rate of 127.3. The highest rates of infections were in Milford and Letterkenny, whereas infections in the south of the county were very low, around three times lower than the national average.

On Saturday, 1 May, there was much media fanfare around the online meeting between the Minister of Health, Stephen Donnelly, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, and public representatives from Donegal. Having attended the hour and a half meeting, I can say that it was little but a public relations exercise. The Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, was supposed to be on Highland Radio yesterday morning on the “Nine til Noon Show” with Greg Hughes to outline what was being done in regard to the Covid-19 outbreaks. I listened to the show and was not surprised to hear that it was just local representatives again.

During the meeting on Saturday there were discussions about the possibility of increasing the number of walk-in test centres and the need to put testing centres in Milford or Glenties, for example, so that people could access them. I welcome the eventual announcement that as part of the enhanced response a self-referral testing centre will be opening in Milford Mart today, but it will only be open for three days. Additional facilities are to be announced, but we do not know where they will be located or for how long they will be open.

Since the start of the pandemic, I have been asking about access to test centres and vaccines for people in Donegal. I have been calling for an all-island zero-Covid approach, something which I raised with the Taoiseach in January of this year because of the issues around having differing regulations and regimes on both sides of the Border.

One of the initiatives announced yesterday, which did not come out of the PR-stunt last Saturday, was that the Garda had set up a hotline - a tout line or a rat line - through which neighbours are asked to tout on neighbours. On what planet is this Government if that is its response and that of officialdom in regard to the Covid outbreak in Donegal? We need walk-in test centres and vaccination clinics in Donegal and an extension of them for more than one week to ensure people can get tested and not a hotline through which people are being encouraged to inform on their friends and neighbours in respect of breaches of the Covid-19 restrictions. That is crazy. It will do nothing but set back the response in the county. What does the Government propose to do to ensure there is a proper roll-out of services?

The Taoiseach: Nationally, we are making progress in the battle against Covid-19. In terms of hospitalisations and ICU numbers, the situation is extremely positive. For example, as of this morning, there were 132 people in hospital and 39 in intensive care. The vaccination programme is making great progress, with close to 32% of the eligible population having received a first dose and 12% having received a second dose, which amounts to 1.65 million doses administered. This gives us great cause for hope and continued momentum, both on the vaccination front and in terms of keeping pressure on the virus.

In regard to Donegal, I do not accept the Deputy's analysis that the online meeting was a PR stunt. I think that is an unfortunate representation. It is important that where the numbers are high, there is awareness around that issue. We know from previous experiences during the pandemic that when people see numbers rising in any particular location, that affects behaviour. It can lead to a change of behaviour. For example, if numbers go up in hospitals or if the numbers of cases rise more generally, it leads to greater caution. That in itself is not a negative.

The opening of the walk-in test centre in Milford is an important outcome of what transpired at the weekend. If additional walk-in centres are required, they should be provided. That system works and it has been proven to work in other locations where numbers are high. It was by such mechanisms numbers in other areas were brought down, more recently in the midlands. I believe the same can happen in Donegal. Everything must be done to make sure that Donegal, along with the country, continues with the reopening of key sectors of society and the economy. It would be an awful pity if that was not to transpire. I have every confidence that we can improve on the figures in terms of the number of cases in Donegal, which, unfortunately, are much higher than in the rest of the country.

My understanding is that some Oireachtas Members sought the meeting and that they felt it would be useful if the public representatives met with the Chief Medical Officer to discuss the numbers. The Chief Medical Officer and deputy chief medical officer articulated their concerns in respect of Donegal. They certainly were not doing that as part of a public relations exercise. They are concerned about the numbers and they are anxious to get them down. We will be supportive of the people of Donegal in getting the numbers down.

I have no knowledge of a tout line. I do not like that language, the use of the word "tout". It has wider connotations.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: It would be useful if what was agreed at the meeting on Saturday was carried out. It was agreed that Dr. Holohan would take part in an interview on local radio yesterday to discuss the situation. That did not happen. It was agreed that walk-in centres would be announced yesterday. They were announced after the Garda announced its confidential telephone line through which people could inform the Garda where incidents and breaches of Covid-19 restrictions are taking place. As far as I am aware, Donegal is the only place in Ireland where that is happening. That has been the response of officialdom to the high incidence of Covid-19 infection in Donegal. It is a serious situation and this high incidence of infection needs to be tackled. There is no doubt about that. However, it needs to be tackled in a holistic way and not in a way that isolates people or puts them on the back foot, which is what the response thus far is doing. This matter needs to be tackled properly.

The Taoiseach is probably correct that local representatives called for the meeting on Saturday because it appeared to be a PR stunt. That resulted in a dedicated response, but when representatives commit to doing something, they should do it. It is vital that happens.

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The Taoiseach: First, I think it is a good thing that public representatives would be proactive and would meet with the Chief Medical Officer and responsibly work out what measures would be helpful in terms of reducing the numbers in Donegal. From what I could glean, that was the genuine motivation behind that meeting during a bank holiday weekend. From my perspective, it was a positive thing to do. I believe there should be follow through. I will check whether representatives of the Chief Medical Officer can make themselves available to local radio. There may have been reasons beyond their control that they could not participate in the Monday show. I will follow that up.

We should support the Garda. I have had quite a number of discussions with the Garda and one would be taken aback by what they say, for example, about the sophistication of quite a number of súbíns that were found around the country, in blatant violation of the regulations and undermining legitimate traders in the hospitality sector who had closed in accordance with the regulations. They were quite sophisticated operations and it is important that there is a clamp-down on gross violations of that kind. There should be zero toleration of that kind of blatant disregard for the regulations that are passed under the aegis of this House.

An Ceann Comhairle: We go now to Deputy O'Donoghue of the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am raising issues on which I need answers. Why is there a disconnect between what was printed in the 150 commitments in the Government's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, Our Rural Future, published on 29 March, and what is happening on the ground? The rural development policy states that it is 100% focused on supporting people and enterprise to remain in rural Ireland. The main ambition of the policy is to have more people working in rural Ireland. My understanding of this is that people would be enabled to work from their own local communities in order to revitalise town centres, reduce commuting times, lower transport emissions and, most importantly, improve their quality of life.

How is this going to happen? There is no development in towns and villages to support it.

Sorry, there are other people talking.

A developer cannot commence building when there is no basic infrastructure in place. I can now reveal that each town and village in Ireland is to be capped such that they cannot develop under the Government's 2040 plan. What is the purpose of bringing development to a standstill? Is it just a token gesture of updating existing services in some towns and villages? It does not increase the capacity of our water and sewerage infrastructure. The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, has said about rural Ireland:

For decades we have seen...young people leave their local communities to live and work in larger cities. As we emerge from Covid-19 we will never have a better opportunity to reverse that long-standing trend.

An ambition of the rural development policy is to ensure that people living in rural areas have access to good quality public services that enable them to continue to live sustainably in rural communities. This will help them to maintain a good quality of life. Investing in improvements in public transport services, healthcare within communities, housing provision, early learning and childcare facilities and community safety is all a means to an end. It is written in the Government's manifesto but only achievable if basic infrastructure is provided.

I listened to the Taoiseach rattle off numbers, pointing to X number of houses being built

here and X number being built there. Will he stand up now and tell me how many houses are being built in the small towns, villages and rural areas in County Limerick and around Ireland? I want to see if he has those statistics. He has capped that development under the 2040 plan. If he comes out with the truth, he will tell the people of Ireland that the 2040 plan is limiting the number of houses being built in towns and villages in rural areas because his Government has failed on infrastructure.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. To cut straight to the point, there has been strong delivery of new homes in rural areas over recent years. Approximately 26,000 rural house planning permissions were granted in the past five years. In the same period, nearly 93% of that number of rural homes were actually built. There is ongoing work. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is currently updating rural housing planning guidelines that will continue to allow for the development of homes in rural areas while also highlighting the need to manage certain areas around cities and towns in order to avoid overdevelopment of those areas.

As the Deputy knows, in the programme for Government and the rural development policy that was launched, the whole idea of developing town centres is a critical part. Funding will be provided to facilitate the reconstruction of run-down units or buildings and to refurbish and renovate them for residential purposes. The new rural regeneration policy will be part of that as well. The URDF, with well over €1 billion more in funding announced in recent times by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will dramatically increase infrastructure in towns across the country. Massive amounts of money are now allocated to get vital water infrastructure and enabling works done and facilitate development of enterprise, industry and housing right across the length and breadth of the country. This is critical to ensuring big investment in the regional cities to create a counterpole to the development of Dublin in the east, so that we have a more balanced development of the country into the future.

I do not think we have seen as large an investment programme across the regions as has been announced by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in recent times through the URDF. It will be transformative in terms of its impact on the cities and towns across the various regions, from the north-west to the west, south and midlands. That is the continued objective of Government in respect of both the URDF and other funding. Last weekend, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, announced €38 million for 79 projects from Castletownbere right across the length and breadth of coastal communities, right up to Donegal and out to Balbriggan. There will be very significant investment in harbours and estuaries, which will underpin economic activity in those areas. It is unprecedented what the Government is doing in terms of transforming active transport across the length and breadth of rural Ireland through the provision of greenways, walking routes and public transport.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I draw the Taoiseach's attention to County Limerick, which I represent. Askeaton is 33 years waiting for a sewerage system and Dromcolliher is waiting ten years. Glin is waiting more than 20 years, Hospital more than ten years and Oola more than ten years for infrastructure. There is 27% of the infrastructure left in County Limerick and that is the only place where the investment is going. It is not going into the areas we are talking about. The Government's 2040 plan is going to close down areas completely. Where the Government could not provide houses for people, they are building their own and putting in up-to-date sewerage systems. Now the Government is trying to stop that as well.

I will finish on this point. In my parish of Granagh in County Limerick next week, we will

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commemorate Lieutenant Mick O'Shea and the Granagh volunteers of 1921 who died for the freedom of Ireland. I challenge the Taoiseach today that they did not die in vain. We were given our freedom to live where we want and neither this Government nor any other Government is going to take that away from the people of County Limerick.

The Taoiseach: First, I commend the Deputy on organising that commemoration. The people of west Limerick more than did their bit in terms of helping the struggle for Irish independence. Indeed, my late grandfather was close in the Mitchelstown area with those in west Limerick in a number of endeavours. I wish the Deputy well in that regard. They did not die in vain because we have a country, overall and globally, that is a good country to live and work in and a good country in which to have a reasonable quality of life. Part of the programme for Government is to provide good well-being metrics to ensure that we judge ourselves not just by GDP growth but, rather, that we judge ourselves by those qualities that make the difference in terms of human development and facilitating the growth and development of children in a reasonable and high quality way. That is the objective of Government during this term.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, the rapporteur's report of the Business Committee will be taken as read. Arising from it, there are just two proposals to be considered. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am sorry to have to raise this today. I am looking for a debate on the whole situation around driving licences, theory tests and driving tests. We hope to have our economy recovering. There are legions of people, young and old, trying to get theory tests, lessons and driving tests. Something must be done. I raised it with the Tánaiste here last week and he promised action but no actions have been taken. We must have a debate on this issue because it is so important for people in education and people in the health services who want to be trainee nurses and go for placement. It is especially a problem in rural Ireland that people cannot go anywhere without the gluaisteán. They just cannot so we need a debate on this issue. I have tried a couple of times to get this raised as a Topical Issue matter on behalf of our group. We need urgent action on this and a debate in the House.

The Taoiseach: It is a matter suitable for Topical Issue matters but the Government has moved on this. We have decided on the safe, gradual and phased reopening of some driver services through the Road Safety Authority, RSA, from 10 May. The RSA has recruited 40 more testers who are currently being trained and will be deployed from June to deal with the backlog of tests. Plans are also advancing to recruit a further 40 testers and to add up to 20 driving test centres. Obviously, the gradual reopening of services will not immediately solve the backlog but I assure the Deputy that every possible measure is being put in place to ensure the maximum number of customers can be served while adhering strictly to public health guidance. Driving tests for essential workers will continue. The Government is therefore alive to that. It is not a matter for me. It is a matter more suitable to Topical Issue matters.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next week we are moving from one session of Topical Issue matters to two, so if the Deputies want to table it, we will try to take it next week. Is today's busi-

ness agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with tomorrow, Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed. I thank Members. We move now to Questions on Promised Legislation. I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The past year has been extremely stressful for expectant parents. As the Taoiseach knows, public health restrictions have meant women have had to attend the majority of their maternity appointments without their partner. In some cases this has led to situations where women were getting very difficult and indeed traumatic news on their own. Ahead of the Taoiseach's announcement on the easing of public health restrictions, pregnant women and their partners were led to believe full access for partners would be granted for all prenatal care, all scans and all appointments. However, his announcement fell well short of that and he has left pregnant women and their partners very concerned and disappointed. Consequently, I ask that he correct that situation to ensure women can have their partner with them for all prenatal care, all scans and all appointments.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the Taoiseach announced last week around the 20-week scan and attendance where established labour was under way existed already in hospitals so we are asking the Government to take the next step. It is the right thing to do.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I am very supportive of the need for women to be accompanied by their partners at all prenatal scans. Clinical directors have determined this from the outset of the pandemic on public health grounds and on no other grounds. We have sought in our engagement with the HSE to ensure there would be national uniformity in the application of these guidelines, and given that case numbers and the spread of the virus has been very substantially suppressed within hospital environments, it seems to me expectant mothers should be facilitated in this regard. I will continue my engagement with the HSE on that front.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It was with much disappointment that on the Monday of the workers' bank holiday, we awoke to reports the National Transport Authority, NTA, plans a further tendering of four Bus Éireann routes, namely the 101, the 101X - the Drogheda to Dublin service, the 133 and the 131 between Dublin and Wicklow. Is this a policy the Government supports? Is it commensurate with its commitment in the programme for Government? Almost more pertinently, is it complementary to a strong climate action plan that this slice-by-slice approach to the privatisation of our public transport system will deliver what is needed in terms of carbon emissions in our public transport network if we are to meet the 7% year-on-year carbon reductions? I believe it would not but I am interested to hear what the Taoiseach's stance is.

The Taoiseach: I do not support slice-by-slice privatisation of the national transport system. There is a balance to be struck and it has been struck for quite some time. I believe in a strong Bus Éireann and strong investment in it, particularly in the context of climate change. It is very important for fleet renewal and the upgrading of the fleet generally that it would be consistent with the country's climate change agenda. That is the broad basis that underpins Government policy. Public transport is going to grow and expand in the country, commensurate with the needs of the country in respect of meeting its climate goals and targets.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach has told us that he and the Government are against global investment funds buying up suburban housing estates. There is nothing new in what is happening. In 2009, the Construction Industry Federation, CIF, stated that 95% of new

build apartments were being bought up by these funds, leaving only 5% for everyone else. Is the Government going to act not just on suburban housing estates but also on apartments, new-build housing in cities - or perhaps the Government is concerned only with suburbs - and will it introduce a ban on real estate investment trusts, REITs, buying up apartments and houses, as has been done in Germany, to stop this practice?

The Taoiseach: First of all, there is something new in what happened over the weekend. There is no point in saying there is not because there is. The Government will act on that in terms of the move by REITs into suburban housing estates. Supply is key in the market. We need a greater supply of houses and apartments. We do not have a sufficiency of supply right now. We certainly did not have six or eight years ago but the institutional investors buying up completed housing estates is not acceptable at all. It runs counter to Government policy which gives a strong priority to first-time buyers. We want first-time buyers to be able to afford to buy homes. It is the kernel of our affordability strategy. Likewise, we want to build thousands and thousands of new social homes which will, when they are built, take pressure off the housing assistance payment, HAP, system and off the private rental sector, creating more space for the private rental sector. The cornerstone of Government policy this year is therefore to provide 12,750 social homes, 9,500 of which will be direct builds under the aegis of approved housing bodies or local authorities. That is the key point to remember.

Deputy Paul Murphy: More than 500 ESB Networks technicians are today on their fourth day of strike action. They are striking against the outsourcing of their work without consultation or consent and against the creeping privatisation and running down of ESB Networks at a time when we should be investing in these green jobs which are vital to electrify the economy further as part of a rapid just transition to a zero-carbon economy. However, ESB Networks refuses to even consult the Independent Workers Union, IWU, the union of these workers' choice. In fact, ESB Networks refuses even to acknowledge there is an official trade dispute taking place. Instead it is using public money to take a civil action against the union. Will the Taoiseach intervene and insist the company sits down with the IWU and discusses how to resolve the dispute?

The Taoiseach: It is regrettable we have a dispute of this kind under way. That is a matter in the first instance for the ESB to address and to resolve. That is where the matter has to be dealt with at this stage.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Every year 4,500 people leave behind an empty home when they enter long-term nursing home care. Just 300 of these homes are rented out. Unlike the social welfare means assessment, where a capital asset when rented out is included in the calculation just once, under the fair deal nursing homes scheme, the same property is included three times in the means assessment. It takes an average of six years for these homes to go through probate, to be sold and to be refurbished. This means that 25,000 homes, mainly family homes in established communities with broadband and close to schools, are being locked out of the housing system because we place a treble tax on an older person who rents out his or her home. It makes no sense at the height of a housing crisis not to treat rental income in the same way across all Departments to ensure that it does not lock families out of accessible housing.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his question. It is anticipated that a memo for Government will be brought to the Cabinet in the next week or two. It is a Government priority that this important legislation, which brings long-awaited rights and protections to farmers and small business owners, is brought forward and passed without delay. It was agreed that the

Departments of Health and Housing, Local Government and Heritage would work together to bring forward a Committee Stage amendment on the treatment of the proceeds of the sale of a house while a resident is in long-term care. These Departments are working together on developing the policy on the treatment of rental income and have agreed a process which is currently in train to move this forward. The importance of addressing the programme for Government's commitment aimed at bringing relevant vacant homes into use is a priority.

As the Deputy will be aware, the nursing home support scheme is a complex €1.4 billion scheme that affects the lives of more than 22,000 residents. It is, therefore, important to ensure that the cost-benefits and unintended consequences of any policy changes are fully understood before they are put in place. We will revert to the Deputy to report progress on this matter.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: As we talk about the reopening of our hospitality sector, I would like to ask the Taoiseach what he has against the small or even the big family-run pub business. The illogical description of a pub as a "wet pub" was horrible. Fáilte Ireland said it did not come up with it. I do not know who did but it has been banished. Are we now going to further discriminate against publicans where they cannot apply for grants for outdoor seating? Surely every pub, whether it serves food or not, should be able to apply for funding from the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin's Department to be able to cater for the customers, which they love to do. The customers want hope as well. These pubs should be able to apply for these grants in the same way as a pub that serves food. Why is the Government segregating and demonising the family-run pub businesses that do not, cannot and never did serve food but run a very good business and give a *fíor-fháilte* to locals, strangers and everybody else and support the community in whatever it is doing? Give them a fair crack of the whip to try to re-emerge from the past 14 months and allow them to at least apply for the grant.

The Taoiseach: First, the Government and I are very supportive of rural pubs and those which do not sell food. In our view, they have provided a very important social network across the length and breadth of the country. The virus has wreaked havoc on the hospitality sector, including on pubs.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach has.

The Taoiseach: The virus has done this. The Deputy wishes to create a political polemic and rhetoric which is untrue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach has.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: It is unfortunate that he has gone down that particular road-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach has gone off on a tangent here.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach again without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: -----and used language that was inappropriate and wrong.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach is the one who is using language that is inappropriate.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy said correctly, the Government has already provided sup-

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ports for establishments that provide outdoor dining and we are looking at examining, in a positive way, what we can do for those who do not provide outdoor dining but might need support to facilitate outdoor drinking, for example, as such services recommence on 7 June.

The important point is to keep the pressure on the virus. I am aware that the Deputy has been in semi-denial at times about-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Taoiseach to stop as his time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----the Covid-19 pandemic-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach is in denial.

The Taoiseach: -----but it is important that we treat it as it is.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: One cannot have one's cake and eat it.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy certainly can.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Harkin.

Deputy Marian Harkin: This is my third time to raise the issue of payment of moneys to Sligo Airport for completed, essential safety works required by the Irish Aviation Authority. Since 2011, Sligo Airport has not received €1 of public money and yet it operates the busiest coastguard service in the country. At a meeting last December, which I and a number of public representatives attended, a mechanism was proposed whereby funding could be channelled to the airport for the cost of these essential safety works and subsequently Sligo Airport paid €280,000 for completion of these works. The money urgently needs to be recouped and I am hoping for a timely and positive response from the Taoiseach on this issue.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Both she and Deputy MacSharry have raised this issue consistently and robustly for quite a while. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, in respect of this. I understand the importance of the Irish Coast Guard Service, the base in Sligo and the expenditure that the airport had to undertake and I will continue to engage with the Department in respect of this issue.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Can the Government consider the creation of a new bank holiday at the end of September as a boost to the tourism and hospitality sector? I welcome the announcements that were made recently on reopening and I hope, as the momentum around the vaccine roll-out grows, that we will see further easing of restrictions in the sector. Once children go back to school next September, we will see a major fall-off in the domestic market. I, therefore, believe a bank holiday at the end of September would be very helpful.

In Kerry, of course, we have had a bank holiday at the end of September when we have won the all-Ireland but we have not had one for a few years. This year such a bank holiday would be very welcome and would be a big boost to the industry. If it works well this year, perhaps we could look at one next year as well. Of all years, it is very much needed this year.

The Taoiseach: When I heard the Deputy say the end of September, something came to mind in terms of Kerry people sometimes, although not at all times. I had better not say anything as I am Taoiseach. We have looked at a variety of mechanisms in terms of how we would reflect the State's appreciation of not only front-line healthcare workers but all front line

workers who have enabled people to get through what has been a very difficult journey of the pandemic itself. The hospitality sector, in particular, has suffered enormously as a result of the virus and the pandemic. We will look at a variety of mechanisms that we could deploy to assist the hospitality sector and the Deputy has suggested one. There will be others and we will keep the matter under review.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, has been a crutch of immense value for thousands of workers in our society. We are now emerging from the pandemic and employment opportunities are starting to re-emerge. I ask that there be a clear signpost and roadmap for both employers and people on the PUP on when this payment will cease as the job opportunities increase in the hospitality and other sectors. We want a clear roadmap as to when payments to people will cease when their old jobs or new opportunities become available. People are looking for a clear roadmap as to when their individual circumstances will change.

The Taoiseach: First, the pandemic unemployment payment has represented an unprecedented intervention and support by the State in the personal incomes of those who have suffered and have borne the brunt of the pandemic in losing their jobs. Those payments will continue, at a very minimum, until the end of June. In between, various sectors will return in accordance with the Government's roadmap. For example, on 10 May, click and collect services will return for retail which will be fully restored on 17 May. All of the construction sector returned on 4 May and the personal services sector will be returning this month. That should naturally reduce the number on the pandemic unemployment payment. Prior to the end of June, we will bring forward any clarifications that will be required for those people who may not get their jobs back as quickly as others.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last year, 109 beds were lost in rehabilitation treatment facilities nationally. Waiting times for beds in some facilities have doubled. Some 1,229 people have been waiting more than 12 months for treatment in one facility in particular. When I asked the Minister about this, he said there was nothing he or the HSE could do about it. That is not good enough. There is plenty that could have been done and that can still be done to reopen and replace the beds that have been closed. Will the Taoiseach commit to instructing the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to stop burying his head in the sand, reopen these beds and address the scandalous waiting times for rehabilitation treatment beds?

The Taoiseach: Is the Deputy referring to rehabilitation more generally or is it specific rehabilitation?

Deputy Thomas Gould: These beds were lost due to the Covid restrictions but no attempt was made to replace them.

The Taoiseach: Is this in the area of addiction, physical rehabilitation or-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a general chat about it, I am afraid.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is addiction services.

The Taoiseach: Addiction services. I certainly was not aware of 109 beds being lost in the wider service. I will have to examine the figure presented by the Deputy. I do not believe any Minister stated there was nothing he or she could do about it because there is a general policy in relation to addiction services. As the Deputy is aware, the HSE historically has been negative

towards institutionalisation of addiction more generally. I will follow this up and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I acknowledge and welcome the statement by the Taoiseach that the activities of the investment fund in Maynooth are not in accordance with Government policy. Has he been made aware of the fact that Kildare County Council, which is the relevant local authority, and two approved housing bodies were outbid in the competition for the estate in question? Can he indicate the action he proposes to take, it is to be hoped by way of emergency legislation, to ensure that a race does not take place whereby large tracts of land and houses under development can be acquired by finance companies in this fashion?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his comments. The fact that the Kildare County Council and two approved housing bodies were outbid is certainly very damaging or bad news as well. I have spoken to the Ministers for Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Collectively, we will examine this issue because it is unacceptable and runs counter to Government policy which is to give priority to first-time buyers. The framework around the utilisation of these funds is to add supply, not to displace supply.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: There has been a large and worrying number of high-profile assaults on members of the public, particularly on public transport and in public spaces. Unfortunately, some have been posted on social media. Recently, a lady was effectively pushed under a DART train in Howth. Sadly, many of these incidents go unreported and they are devastating for the victims. I was recently told of an incident in a local park when an Asian family was surrounded by a group of youths and subjected to racial abuse. None of these crimes should be happening. They are devastating for the victims. When will Garda recruitment resume? Can the Taoiseach provide an update for the House on the programme for Government commitments to tackle such anti-social behaviour and crime in cities?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. I was very taken aback by the illustration on social media of the incident to which he referred involving a woman being pushed onto the tracks in a shocking manner which endangered her life. In addition, we learn of continuing assaults on individuals going about their routine daily lives and also an increased degree of attacks with racism as an underlying feature. The Deputy instanced one such case. There have been others. In consultation with An Garda Síochána and community groupings and interests, Government will be giving these issues serious attention. The Garda recruitment process continues and will continue in terms of getting the numbers to the levels prioritised and identified in the programme for Government.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I wish to use this opportunity to focus attention on the specific case of Ava Barry. People the length and breadth of the State know the extremes to which her mother, Vera, had to go to get Ava much-needed access to the medication that would improve her quality of life. However, the family is now locked into a financial burden. They must ensure they have €9,500 upfront every three months, even during a pandemic, and wait for reimbursement. This cannot continue. It is truly unfair and it is not good enough. I can tell the Taoiseach that I know from experience that Vera is in distress and despair. Will he ensure equal treatment for those prescribed Bedrocan? Will he allow for Bedrocan medicinal cannabis products to be funded at source? Will he at least #talktoVera?

The Taoiseach: I have been in regular contact with Ava's mother, Vera, for quite a long time now and have been very supportive in the various stages of the campaign, including, in the first

instance, securing Bedrocan for Ava via the Dutch authorities. I have gone the hard miles on this one and I do not really need any hashtag sort of momentum to push me in any direction on this. I have been supportive from the get-go and I have worked with the Department of Health and successive Ministers for Health in respect of this issue, securing the drug and reimbursement from the get-go, as well in terms of the application of this important medication in the context of Ava and her specific condition. As the Deputy is aware, the expert group recommended that those with certain conditions would be in a position to avail of medicinal cannabis in this case. I will continue to pursue this final stage in terms of the new mechanisms that are now available to others who are availing of the compassionate access programme.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: What is a primary medical certificate? It allows a person with a disability to claim back the VAT on their vehicle. It also allows for tax relief on the purchase and adaptation of a vehicle. I have raised this issue on many occasions. This week, HSE community primary care sent me figures on this issue for around the country. Since January 2021, 403 people have been approved, 62 of whom are in north Dublin, while between Limerick, Clare and Tipperary only three have been approved. This is completely unacceptable. Disability cannot be parked. These people need their primary medical certificates. Without them, how can persons with a disability travel to medical appointments, schools, colleges or to get their basic family needs?

The Taoiseach: First of all, there are two issues here. The primary medical certificate, PMC, assessments fell behind as a result of Covid but the assessment process resumed on 1 January 2021. There are still some delays in the processing of assessments due to the involvement of medical officers in the national Covid-19 response as well as the ongoing public restrictions and those delays are causing undue strain on applicants. However, the HSE has confirmed that the assessment process for PMCs has resumed and data from the HSE show that 401 assessments were carried out between January and March of this year. It will keep the matter of assessments under review in the context of the HSE service recovery restoration plan. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, met the HSE on 10 March and 13 April to discuss the issues around delays and will keep the matter under review. I know the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is reviewing the overall scheme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Higgins. We are running out of time, so I ask her to be brief.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Right now, pregnant women in maternity hospitals across the country are going through appointments, scans and the early stages of labour on their own. If one walks past any maternity hospital, one will witness tearful goodbyes as pregnant women, in one of the most nerve-racking experiences of their life, leave their partner and enter the hospital without the security or the comfort of having a loved one by their side. It is truly heart-wrenching.

Last week, the HSE informed me in reply to a parliamentary question that antigen testing is not being considered as a means of safely easing maternity restrictions. However, a women's health clinic in Kerry is offering antigen testing to the partners of pregnant women. We know it can be done. We are not in the same situation we were when hospital restrictions first came in. Developments mean women can be treated with more compassion. I ask the Taoiseach please to work with the HSE to ensure that is done.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, I agree with the Deputy. I will continue to engage with the

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HSE on this. These are clinical decisions that have been taken from the outset of the pandemic but, given the success to date within the hospital environment in suppressing the virus and the success of the vaccination programme, greater facility should now exist for expectant mothers to be accompanied by their partners to scans and throughout the journey. Even if PCR testing needs to be used, the capacity exists for that.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The programme for Government commits to developing end-of-life services. Can the Taoiseach then explain the shameful treatment of the South Westmeath Hospice Committee? It is a voluntary committee that has been treated with utter disdain by the HSE and that is now resorting to legal advice. A written undertaking was given to this committee by the HSE that, should St. Vincent's Care Centre, the site of the current hospice, be sold, the services and facilities would be transferred and mirrored in a new premises. Four beds at the end of a ward will not now or ever mirror the current service, which is four bedrooms, a family space, a sitting room and a private entrance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have gone over time. Will the Deputy put her question?

Deputy Sorca Clarke: As leader of the Government, will the Taoiseach please act in this regard? It is the most urgent of issues.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am dealing with several constituents in north Kildare whose children are living with chronic pain. There are hundreds across the State left without a full-time pain management consultant or the chance of a necessary first appointment. I cannot imagine what it is like to have a child suffering constant chronic pain. These parents would take this pain in a heartbeat. These parents and I have so far only received holding letters back from the State referring to care that is being provided. The parents are categoric that it is not being offered. Will the Taoiseach make it his business to ensure these children receive the full-time pain management consultant appointments they need? Parents are worried about their mental health with the level of pain.

The Taoiseach: Government has been supportive of the hospice movement, particularly in recent months, and has provided substantial funding to underpin the hospices, given the huge challenges they have faced in terms of various fundraising projects being undermined by Covid-19. I am not aware of the specifics of this case but we will engage with the HSE. I have no doubt we will do everything we can to enhance the service, notwithstanding the challenges it is going through.

In respect of children with chronic pain, I will engage with the Minister and the HSE to make sure children in difficult and traumatic situations such as this are provided with the supports they require.

Dog Breeding Establishments (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to enhance the welfare of dogs by strengthening the regulation of dog breeding establishments; and to provide for related matters.

I am proud to introduce Aontú's Dog Breeding Establishments (Amendment) Bill 2021, or the puppy farm Bill, on First Stage. This is the second animal welfare Bill Aontú has introduced in the Dáil in the past six months. The criminal justice (theft and fraud offences) (amendment) (pets) Bill 2021 was introduced by me at the end of January to create a minimum 10-month prison sentence for those caught stealing family pets. That Bill has passed First Stage and awaits an opportunity to be presented on Second Stage.

Animal welfare and the protection of animals is a subject that has been paid much lip service by politicians of all parties. It is an issue that is hugely important to many people in our communities who want to see action, not just words. Aontú has sought to deliver that action by putting forward pragmatic and reasonable legislative proposals, which I urge all political parties in this House to support. The purpose of Aontú's Bill is to enhance the welfare of dogs by strengthening the regulation of dog breeding establishments and ensuring enforcement of relevant statutory provisions.

According to Rescue Animals Ireland, Ireland is considered the puppy farm capital of Europe. Due to the poor conditions on some puppy farms, many animals suffer greatly. Dogs can develop serious illnesses and ailments, which have long-term health consequences. As of 2016, there were 73 registered puppy farms in Ireland. In 2018, there were as many as 258 registered dog breeding establishments. Figures show these farms are capable of producing 30,000 puppies a year. Animal welfare organisations have warned that some puppy farms have up to 500 breeding animals at any time. What we see here is not what families normally see when they purchase a puppy from another family down the road who has a litter of pups. These are industrial-scale breeding facilities. It is quite shocking. That is without even looking at the illegal puppy farm operations across the country, which the State is struggling to tackle.

In February, the ISPCA took into care 60 dogs found on an illegal puppy farm in the midlands. In November 2020, 32 dogs were rescued from an illegal puppy farm in north Dublin with an estimated value of €150,000. That is what is happening. The value of pets has skyrocketed over the past while for a number of reasons. I have a 14-year-old dog who is a cross between a red setter and a golden retriever. Rua is his name. I bought him for €50, 14 years ago. The same dog can be bought online for €1,500 today. A phenomenal level of profit is being made on the breeding and sale of these animals.

We have received many reports of significantly uneven enforcement of existing legislation by local authorities. This has to change. We seek that each local authority commission a specific individual or team to ensure protections are enforced. Our Bill introduces a minimum standard for animals. We strengthen the five freedoms contained in the 2010 Act, to which each dog breeder must adhere in the raising of these animals. Under our Bill, the dog must be kept in such a manner as to avoid unnecessary suffering. Dogs must receive treatment when necessary from a veterinary practitioner. Dogs must be permitted to exhibit their natural and normal behaviour and to have the company of other dogs. Our Bill amends the definition of "authorised person" in the 2010 Act to ensure the person who acts under that term should be appointed specifically to fulfil this duty. The problem exists that some local authorities are doing this job very well, while others have appointed an individual who might wear three, four or five hats and is unable to attend to the job at hand.

Our Bill significantly increases the penalty for breaking the law for puppy farms. As I mentioned earlier, profits have gone sky high and existing fines are not really relevant to puppy farm owners, especially illegal puppy farms owners. The current fines are not a sufficient deterrent.

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The previous maximum fine of €5,000 becomes the minimum fine for summary conviction in our Bill and we introduce a €10,000 fine for convictions on indictment. There are people breeding dogs who do it to the best of their ability in a humane way, but we need to enforce the law against the others.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Trade Union Recognition Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide a legal mechanism for trade union recognition for workers who comprise at least 20 per cent of the employees in an employment (or any category within that employment).

I thank my fellow People Before Profit Deputies and the staff who worked on this Bill, particularly Owen McCormack. I thank the union activists and organisers who were involved in union recognition struggles and have supported the Bill so far, including the Irish Air Line Pilots' Association, the Psychiatric Nurses Association ambulance branch, Game Workers Unite and more. I thank the workers in Amazon, Facebook and other major companies, who have blown the whistle on conditions there and begun to organise, many of whom remain anonymous for fear of retribution by their boss.

We launched the Bill on Saturday, May Day, which was International Workers' Day, to highlight the ongoing fight for union recognition and workers' rights. The truth is that in this country the laws are stacked in favour of the bosses against the workers. One particular way this happens is the model of so-called voluntarist industrial relations the Government lauds. The bottom line of that is workers may have the right to join a trade union but companies have no obligation whatsoever to deal with any union of workers no matter how many workers are in a union. This People Before Profit Bill would end that once and for all by giving workers a right to unionise and requiring the bosses to recognise and engage with the union. It would force anti-union companies to finally recognise unions and remove their veto.

We need strong and fighting trade unions in this country to take on the bosses and the billionaires, and this Bill would be an important step in assisting workers to get organised. We need strong militant unions to fight for workers' rights. In recent decades we have seen the undermining of many rights that have been won by workers. Unions have been weakened by regressive industrial relations law, attacks by employers, a neoliberal offensive and the shift

among many union leaders from the class struggle approach which built the unions to a so-called partnership model. One consequence is the decline of the share of income going to workers, which reduced from 55% in 1970 to less than 40% today.

The gig economy has seen the reintroduction of the same sorts of casualisation and job insecurity unions were formed to resist. The hours of almost one in ten workers in Ireland vary significantly from week to week or month to month and almost half of all young workers are on temporary contracts. Low pay is rife, with one in five workers earning less than two thirds of median earnings, one of the worst in the EU. Another one in ten workers experiences bullying or harassment in the workplace. In general, workers here work longer hours, have fewer holidays and have less protection against dismissal than their European counterparts. We need to build a strong and fighting trade union movement to improve wages and conditions for workers and to push back against this race to the bottom.

I want to make a particular reference to Amazon, an anti-union employer this Bill would tackle. Amazon workers are beginning to organise in Ireland and across the globe. This Bill would give them a leg up in their efforts. Amazon is one of the world's biggest companies. It is one of the big winners from the pandemic, with CEO Jeff Bezos's worth going from an incredible \$100 billion dollars before the pandemic to now being worth more than \$200 billion. That is wealth that has been created and taken from the 1.3 million people who work for Amazon. Warehouse workers in the US have such poor entitlements to bathroom breaks that they have been reduced to peeing in bottles. This company spends millions on union busting to stop the workers getting organised for their rights because they know a strong union would challenge Amazon's anti-worker policies. We have been supporting Amazon workers here, who are organising, and they have backed this Bill, as it gives them a leg up in their campaign. They are urging all parties in the Dáil to support it and to support them in their fight.

Finally, I want to touch on the ESB strike, as union recognition is an important part of it. ESB Networks workers are on strike throughout this country, fighting against outsourcing and creeping privatisation of the electricity network, and against the company's refusal to engage at all with or to consult their union of choice, the Independent Workers Union, IWU. This is a publicly owned company refusing point blank to talk to the workers' union. The Psychiatric Nurses Association's, PNA's, ambulance workers in the National Ambulance Service Representative Association, NASRA, faced a similar pig-headed response from the HSE. Bosses should not have a veto on what union workers join. This Bill would scrap that veto once and for all and force the bosses to recognise and engage with unions which represent 20% or more of the workforce.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the extension of the powers of the Liable Relatives Unit of the Department of Social Protection, to make a Determination Order in respect of Jobseekers Transitional Payment to one parent families, to include any necessary application to the District Court for a Payment Order, thus enabling the State to recoup, from a “liable relative”, a contribution towards the cost of providing said payment and related matters.

I am delighted to introduce this Bill in the House this afternoon. Before being elected to this House I worked as the party’s adviser on social protection and I learned a lot about the issues facing lone-parent families in the State, as well as working alongside the organisations that represent them, SPARK and One Family.

For far too long in this State lone-parent families have not been listened to by the Government. In fact, decisions taken by successive governments have actively made life harder for lone parents and their children. A prime example of that is the 2012 changes to the one-parent family payment. These decisions have led to increased deprivation, and that has meant children who live in lone-parent families are three times more likely to live in consistent poverty than children in two-parent households. Central Statistics Office, CSO, data have also shown that deprivation in lone-parent households increased in 2019, and that was pre-Covid. These are the very consequences of the Government’s choices. We have many steps to take to lift lone-parent families out of poverty, to support them and to break down the barriers that exist when it comes to education and employment. The Bill is just one small step we can take to support lone parents.

The Bill will remove the cliff edge currently faced by lone parents in respect of their social welfare supports when their youngest child turns seven. Figures show that nearly half of one-parent family payment recipients receive maintenance. This drops to 11% when a lone parent moves on to the jobseeker’s transition payment. Lone parents applying for the one-parent family payment are required to prove they have sought maintenance from the non-custodial parent. On providing a name and address where they can, the Department of Social Protection liable relatives unit steps in to determine the amount to be contributed by the non-custodial parent and a letter is written to him or her providing two options. The first is to start paying the lone-parent maintenance directly, while the second is to start paying the Department directly. In the latter case, the Department keeps the entire amount to recoup some of the costs of paying the one-parent family payment. Once the youngest child turns seven, lone parents move on to the jobseeker’s transition payment. At the same time, the Department of Social Protection writes to the non-custodial parent to tell him or her he or she is no longer obliged to make a contribution. If this Bill is passed it will put a stop to this and it will see non-custodial parents making a contribution beyond the child turning seven.

I acknowledge that this Bill is a sticking plaster, but it is a very necessary one to a much bigger problem, that is, how we treat child maintenance in the State currently, which sees a lone parent having to go to court to get maintenance, and even when maintenance is court ordered,

if it is not paid in some cases, the lone parent has to go back to court. Regardless of whether the maintenance is paid, once the court order is given, it is counted by the Department of Social Protection as household means and it is taken into account against other social welfare payments which are then reduced.

I hope the child maintenance review group that is currently looking at child maintenance and how it works in this State will recommend at the end of this year that we need a statutory child maintenance service. On several occasions we have put forward proposals to mirror the service available in the North. Currently, the way we deal with lone parents when it comes to child maintenance by making them go to court to secure it is no way to treat lone parents and their children in this State and that must change. We need to support and assist lone parents when it comes to child maintenance because it has been proven time and again that where child maintenance is paid, it impacts on poverty. We need to see urgent action regarding poverty, especially in lone-parent families. Three years ago, a Fianna Fáil Deputy introduced such a Bill. I hope the Deputy will still feel the same way and Members will support the Bill when it moves to Second Stage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Presentation of Further Revised Estimates 2021: Motion

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 215 of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business or the Resolution of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, the following Further Revised Estimates for the Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2021, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members on 5th May, 2021, being a date later than that prescribed for the presentation of Estimates and that the Further Revised Estimates be referred to Select Committees, as appropriate, pursuant to Standing Orders 95(1)(a) and 215(3):

Vote 32 — Enterprise, Trade and Employment (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 37 — Social Protection (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Question put and agreed to.

Eighth Report of the Committee of Selection: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Eighth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 4th May, 2021, and discharges and appoints members to Select Committees accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change last met; and when it will next meet. [17169/21]

2. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [19935/21]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change last met; and when it will next meet. [20475/21]

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change last met; and when it will next meet. [21774/21]

5. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will meet next. [21822/21]

6. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change last met; and when it will next meet. [21880/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change last met on 1 April 2021 and is scheduled to meet again on 10 May 2021. It is chaired by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan. The committee oversees the implementation of the ambitious programme for Government commitments on the environment and climate change. These commitments are reflected in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 which is progressing through the legislative process.

The committee also oversees the implementation of the current climate action plan and the interim climate actions for 2021, as well as the work which is now underway to develop an updated climate action plan. The committee also considers other aspects environmental policy

such as, for example, investment in water services and water quality.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are a number of speakers. We will begin with Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the just transition. There has been strong, understandable and righteous criticism of the weakness of references to a just transition in the draft climate Bill. We hope we can amend and strengthen that on Committee and subsequent Stages.

There is little faith that it will be strengthened. I want to highlight what happened in Lough Boora last week. A local man, Pat Barrett, built up a bike rental business over the past decade. A contract has now been awarded to a Dublin company by Bord na Móna. A just transition, if it is to work and to be believed, needs to ensure local people have decent, fair and sustainable jobs. In the midlands, Bord na Móna, which has been the focal point of discussion regarding the just transition for the past couple of years, has awarded a contract to a Dublin-based company when a local company had been built from the ground up and was doing the work. How can the Taoiseach expect people in the midlands or anywhere else in the country to believe the Government is committed to a just transition when we see such things happening in places like Lough Boora?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The programme for Government contains 19 separate references and commitments to a just transition, yet when the climate Bill was published last October there was not a single reference to this critical provision in it. During pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill, the Joint Committee on Climate Action recommended that the Bill include a definition of a just transition. Members went so far as to propose wording.

Legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2019 included a section dedicated to just transition principles. It committed to reducing emissions in a manner that supports environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, supporting low-carbon investment in infrastructure, developing social consensus through engagement, and creating decent, fair and high-value work. Instead of listening to the committee or learning from other jurisdictions, the Government's revised legislation includes a single and very underwhelming reference to a just transition underpinned by caveats and with no definition or, indeed, guiding principles.

There is still time for party leaders to correct this significant shortfall. Will the Taoiseach work with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Tánaiste to strengthen the just transition provision so that, at a minimum, it reflects the commitments contained within the programme for Government and the recommendations of the joint committee?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Irish Wildlife Trust, IWT, recently issued a very stark warning about the biodiversity crisis, which is often forgotten in the context of the equally urgent crisis of climate change. It is very important for us to remember that biodiversity collapse could spell the end of our ability to live on this planet.

One of the areas the IWT pointed to was the critical importance of the marine environment. It, like many other organisations, is deeply concerned about the ramming through of the marine planning framework and the rubber-stamping of what is essentially the grabbing of very sensitive marine sites, such as the Kish Bank and the Codling Bank off the east coast and other parts of the country, by private companies. It is concerned these decisions would be rubber-stamped despite the potential implications for biodiversity, marine life and, of course, fishermen when

we talk about a just transition.

I want appeal once again to the Taoiseach to allow for proper scrutiny of the marine planning framework to take place before the vote next week. There should also be no question of there being a rubber-stamping of licences for private companies for sensitive areas off the east coast and other areas before there is a framework and law to govern the proper planning and development of the marine environment.

Deputy Paul Murphy: According to the EU emissions trading system, data-related emissions from large companies that fall under the scheme have increased 50-fold in the past seven years. This is at a time when the Government's climate Bill is supposed to reduce our emissions by 51% by 2030.

Despite this, it was reported at the weekend that two State agencies, the ESB and Coillte, are proposing to partner with tech companies to build even more new data centres, alongside wind farms, on Coillte land. It is intended to finance the billion euro investment needed by the wind farms which will clearly absorb a large proportion of the extra electricity provided, negating any emissions reduction.

According to a July 2020 EirGrid report, the number and scale of large data centres seeking to connect means Ireland's electricity demand is currently expected to grow by circa 38% between 2017 and 2025, equivalent to the growth of 50 years. As a result, data centres will account for 30% of Ireland's entire electricity use by 2028. This will obviously require a major expansion of electricity generation. It is also questionable whether Coillte should proceed with building large commercial infrastructure like data centres on land that is supposed to be reserved for forests.

Does the Taoiseach agree the focus of Coillte should be on regrowing Irish Amazons and not lining the pockets of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos? Will he act to halt the unsustainable growth of power hungry data centres?

Deputy Mick Barry: Massive investment in new ways of generating electricity from renewable sources will be necessary for the transition to a zero-carbon society. Essential to this drive will be investment in the electricity network. ESB network technicians will be key workers, helping to shape the nation's green energy future.

When preparing for battle, a good general will pay particularly close attention to the morale of the troops. Yet, the Government and ESB have consistently pursued policies which almost look like they are designed to undermine the morale of these troops. I am referring to a policy of creeping privatisation, outsourcing work and refusing to consult or deal seriously with the grievances voiced by so many technicians. The result of these policies is yet another ESB strike today.

Will the Taoiseach draw back from his policy of support for privatisation and outsourcing? Will he ensure that the ESB consults in a serious fashion with all of its network technicians?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín wanted to come in on this. He has one minute.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Strategic lawsuits against public participation, or slap lawsuits, are used against citizens who are trying to ensure that companies do not destroy the environment

or break environmental laws. They tie up citizens in terms of money, time and energy. They may not be successful but their job is to silence or chill efforts by citizens to protect their environment. The Aarhus convention states that citizens should not be punished for ensuring that companies respect the law in respect of the environment. Article 3.8 has not been transposed into Irish law which would give protection to Irish citizens. Will the Taoiseach see this is implemented and meet some of the citizens who are being tied up in this manner?

The Taoiseach: On the midlands, I understand the Deputy's point on the just transition being designed to provide alternative employment for people in localities that have suffered as a result of the country endeavouring to reach its climate change targets and the closure of certain generating facilities and other activity as a consequence. There is a need to reinvest, particularly in the midlands. I do not have the specifics of the case - Deputy Barry Cowen has raised it also - of a person losing a contract for a good enterprise. Bord na Móna will have to bear in mind the overall objective of the just transition model which is designed to create new enterprises and support existing enterprises that can create new jobs. That is the core objective of the just transition agenda, particularly in the midlands.

Deputy McDonald asked why it is not stronger in the Bill. The transition to a low-carbon future will bring huge changes to society. It will create opportunities as well as challenges. Just transition is a core part of the programme for Government and our climate strategy agenda to provide alternative job opportunities to sectors and regions most effected, particularly protecting vulnerable groups. The Government will invest up to €108 million in the peatlands climate action scheme which will create over 300 jobs and will be delivered by Bord na Móna to rehabilitate 33,000 ha over 80 Bord na Móna bogs. The budget committed funding of just transition measures including €5 million for the rehabilitation and a further €6 million for the transition fund. Under the Bill, the requirement to have a just transition is one of the measures that will guide the Minister and the Government in preparation of the plans and the policies provided for in the Bill. It is in the annual climate action plans provided for that will set out the details. The Deputy should be under no doubt that the just transition is a key aspect in the preparation of the forthcoming climate action plan 2021. There is a range of other projects in the midlands for which funding has been provided particularly in economic, social and environmental sustainability of the wider midlands regions. Some 16 projects with total funding commitments of €1.2 million were approved last autumn and are up and running. Provisional approval for a further 47 projects with an indicative funding commitment of €27.8 million was announced in November. These are more complex, high value projects. The majority are expected to have grant agreements in place in coming weeks. The just transition commissioner continues with his current mandate and will produce a further report this year. The midlands retrofitting programme is on course to finish this year, meaning a minimum of 750 homes will have benefitted. Additional measures will follow on that. That midlands retrofitting pilot project was funded by carbon tax revenues. Under the midlands programme, work will continue under the newly revised energy efficiency programme and €45 million has been allocated to local authorities this year. Under that programme approximately 1,650 additional homes will be upgraded in 2021. We are desirous of accelerating the work in the midlands in particular as a demonstrative model of how we can allocate additional funding to replace employment lost and create new opportunities themselves.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett's point on the marine, biodiversity is critical. It is inextricably linked to the climate crisis. There is no rubber stamping involved in the marine spatial plan, quite the contrary, it provides a proper sustainable framework that will enhance the opportuni-

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ties for biodiversity at sea. There is no one grabbing any licences under that plan. There will be legislation to come before the House -----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about the relevant project?

The Taoiseach: -----which will give a more coherent planning legislative process and mechanisms that will both protect biodiversity and the environment but also enable-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about the legacy project?

The Taoiseach: -----opportunities such as the development based on offshore wind, for example, which is an important part of our renewable strategies.

On the wider issue, Coilte and Bord na Móna are two important State agencies along with the ESB in meeting our climate change agenda.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: They will stay as State enterprises. They are not being privatised. Their privatisation is not on the agenda at all. That equally applies to Deputy Barry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

The Taoiseach: To Deputy Tóibín, looking at the planning framework in Ireland, there is no evidence that citizens lack any capacity to take on big projects. Individuals object to a whole range of projects. There is a balance here. I will engage with the Deputy further on the points he has raised.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach might come back.

Deputy Mick Barry: For information -----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no information. This is one thing that is strictly timed. The Taoiseach might return in the next question to answer what he did not answer.

Deputy Mick Barry: There are hundreds of ESB network technicians who are waiting for an answer from the Taoiseach and they have heard nothing from him. It is very disappointing.

Cabinet Committees

7. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination will next meet.. [19936/21]

8. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Government co-ordination last met and will next meet. [20486/21]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Government co-ordination will next meet. [21775/21]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Government co-ordination will next meet.. [21777/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 to 10, inclusive, together. The Government co-ordination committee generally meets in advance of Government meetings to: 1. review the activity of Cabinet committees; 2. review the agenda for that week's Government meeting; 3. discuss political priorities; and 4. review implementation of a specified element of the programme for Government.

I am a member of the committee with the Tánaiste and leader of the Green Party and the Secretary General to the Government, my chief of staff and the chiefs of staff for the Tánaiste and the leader of the Green Party also sit in on the meetings. The committee last met on Monday, 26 April, and its next meeting is scheduled for Monday, 10 May.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A few weeks ago the Dáil unanimously supported the legislation of my colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, to preserve and revitalise Moore Street through the legal recognition of an ceathrú chultúr, a Moore Street cultural quarter. Throughout the debate Teachtaí Dála from every party and political group articulated a shared vision for the most important historic site in modern Irish history, as described by the National Museum of Ireland. The proposed Hammerson plan relies heavily on a huge office development and will not retain the full terrace or preserve the historical building, and as we know, people do not visit Dublin to see more office blocks. Dublin City Council has voted unanimously to make Moore Street an architectural conservation area, a decision which now imposes strict planning controls on the demolition of buildings in the area so it is incomprehensible that the Government would hand over this historic site to a developer which is a busted flush. Hammerson has recorded a pre-tax loss of £1.7 billion last year. It has publicly confirmed that it is its intention to make further disposals to strengthen its balance sheet, and yet the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has repeatedly refused to meet with the 1916 relatives to discuss their architectural master plan, a detailed plan developed by a team of leading Irish architects, planners and conservationists that meets all of the agreed recommendations of the securing history report of the Minister's advisory group, the objectives of the Dublin development plan and so on.

Future generations will be scathing of the Taoiseach's Government if the Hammerson plan is allowed to proceed. I urge him to intervene urgently on this matter and ensure his Minister will meet Deputy Ó Snodaigh to secure and protect Moore Street as a cultural quarter.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Young people with families who are looking to buy a home are absolutely furious over the increasing number of homes being snapped up by outside investment funds and REITs, or so-called cuckoo funds. Fianna Fáil campaigned very strongly in 2019, in advance of the general election, to clamp down on cuckoo funds. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, committed to changing the law to block them from snapping up new developments. Round Hill Capital bought 135 homes in Mullen Park, Maynooth. First-time buyers were on the list to buy these. Local councillor, Ms Angela Feeney, has been dealing with many of them. They are absolutely devastated to see their dreams dashed. The same REIT has bought 112 homes in Bay Meadows, Dublin 15, and 297 apartments in Northwood, Dublin. These are the developments we know about. While first-time buyers are losing out on new homes, I can tell the Taoiseach for a fact that they are also losing out on second-hand homes. Investment funds are highly active in the market, seeking any second-hand homes that are in any way affordable or deemed to be affordable or within the reach of some first-time buyers. These are houses that will never come to the market. What is happening is insidious. The companies are asking for more than the asking price and the houses are not hitting the market. Young first-time buyers are missing out. They do not even know they are missing out because sometimes the houses are not even listed on www.daft.ie

and www.myhome.ie. This problem needs to be tackled. It is unseen and causing considerable damage. There needs to be legislation to prevent it from continuing to happen.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The programme for Government makes a commitment to developing inclusive and age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education, RSE, and social, personal and health education, SPHE, curricula at primary and post-primary levels, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships and making appropriate legislative changes, if necessary. That is not happening, however. Instead, the Catholic Primary School Management Association, effectively the Catholic bishops, has published a new programme, Flourish, outlining how RSE should be taught in its schools. Not only is Flourish not LGBTI+ inclusive, it is positively homophobic. Let me quote a number of lines from Flourish to the Taoiseach in case he is not aware of it. It states, “The Church’s teaching in relation to marriage between a man and a woman cannot be omitted”. It describes puberty as “a gift from God” and states “we are perfectly designed by God to procreate with him”. It states a Catholic school must consider these topics within “a moral framework that reflects the teachings of the Church”. This is very far from what is promised in the programme for Government. What is the Government going to do about it? Does it recognise that the Education Act 1998 needs to be amended along the lines we proposed in legislation still on Committee Stage, the Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018, to prevent the religious ethos of a school from standing in the way of children receiving what they are entitled to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach should answer the question raised by Deputy Barry, and earlier by Deputy Paul Murphy, on chosen representatives of ESB technicians being recognised by the ESB, a semi-State body, and on respecting the right of people to choose their own representatives in a legitimate dispute about outsourcing. The Taoiseach should intervene in this regard as a matter of urgency.

I want to raise the co-ordination by Departments in key areas, such as providing schools for our children. I raise this because the lack of co-ordination that was highlighted to me by the community of the new multi-denominational Gaelscoil in the Blackrock area, Gaelscoil Laighean, is really quite shocking. Four years ago, it won the competition or vote on patronage of the new school that was to be established in the Blackrock–Booterstown area. At the time, it was told that, for two years, it would be in a temporary location and that it would then be given a permanent location. Since then, there has been broken promise after broken promise from the Department of Education. The school is still in a temporary location. It is now moving to another temporary location. A few weeks ago, it received a letter from the Department stating it had agreed a permanent location for it with the local authority. We contacted the local authority and it stated there is no such agreement on a permanent location. I realise the Taoiseach will not know the answer to this off the top of his head but I ask him to look into the matter and get the Department to plan properly for permanent locations for schools.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Before the house of The O’Rahilly was demolished, I raised the impending danger with the Minister of State responsible for heritage, Deputy Noonan. I also raised it with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien. Unfortunately, they did nothing and the house was demolished. The day after it was demolished, I raised it with the Taoiseach in the Dáil and he admitted the demolition was wrong and should not have happened. I submitted a question for the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, asking whether he had investigated this. I got a letter back stating it was not his responsibility. I am aware that departmental responsibility for heritage has changed only in the past couple of days. What is going to happen? The building has national monument status, yet nobody is being held to account. Moore Street was

the birthplace of the Republic. It was the place of the last stand of the volunteers of 1916. It was, in part, the reason Deputy Micheál Martin holds the position of Taoiseach today, yet the Moore Street lands lie in dereliction today. It is actually a place of defecation rather a cultural hub of the north inner city where locals and tourists alike can engage with our history in a real manner. Right now, the one company involved, Hammerson, is running out of money. It will not have the money to meet its responsibilities in this matter. Will the Taoiseach ensure that it is brought back to life properly?

The Taoiseach: On the key question on Moore Street, raised by Deputies McDonald and Tóibín, there has been a lot of discussion between political parties in this House and various groupings over the past five or six years. My understanding was that a consensus had been arrived at between the various parties and members of parties. Prior to that, the State had intervened and purchased the key properties and declared them to be a national monument. That was proactive intervention by the State, which has not been acknowledged by Deputies McDonald or Tóibín in respect of Moore Street. That is an important point. That said, my sense is that there has been too much dereliction in that area for far too long. Quite frankly, I get the sense from the current Sinn Féin position that the party will not mind too much if there is dereliction for another ten years, if nothing happens again and we witness the continuing decline of the whole area, not just Moore Street but also the whole of O'Connell Street-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is on your watch.

The Taoiseach: It is not. I am only ten months in office now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A defective Government-----

The Taoiseach: I am ten months in office. I do not keep on-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----has neglected the inner city of Dublin.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And that is on you.

The Taoiseach: I do not serially object for political purposes and to create political platforms. That seems to be-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I object to poverty and dereliction and bad government, and I will continue to do that.

The Taoiseach: -----underpinning your latest development on this front. That is all I have to say.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we do this through the Chair?

The Taoiseach: The State owns the key buildings on Moore Street because it intervened. The Government intervened at the time. It is important to bring the area back to life and to ensure the development will share the history and create an historic trail that future generations can see in a far better way than in the past 50 years. I have been there-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On your watch-----

The Taoiseach: And on your watch, too.

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Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On your watch.

The Taoiseach: I know exactly what you are about and I know what your movement is about. I am not sure it exists for benign reasons. I have to put that on the record because there is one series after another. There was good, constructive engagement on this, yet, as ever, the Deputy's party seeks to gain partisan political advantage over everybody else on the issue and to name-call everybody else who does not go along with its agenda.

I largely agree with Deputy Duncan Smith's point. In our view, institutional investors buying existing supply and buying up entire estates is not acceptable. It runs counter to Government policy, which is to give priority to first-time buyers and make houses affordable for them. We will examine this. I spoke to the Ministers for Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Housing, Local Government and Heritage about the very specific development over the weekend.

At the moment, institutional investors and REITs account for approximately 5% of residential tenancies and approximately 1% of the housing stock in its entirety. The original intention of previous Governments was to bring in investment to facilitate high-density build-to-rent developments in Dublin in particular and some of the larger cities, and not in any shape or form the residential developments of the type that was the focus of the purchase at the weekend.

Deputy Smith might remind me of his latter point.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Second-hand homes are being snapped up as well.

The Taoiseach: Clearly, that has to be examined as well.

To respond to Deputy Murphy, the Government is developing a national relationships and sexuality education programme and all children attending all schools will have to have the State RSE programme provided to them. A review into RSE and its provision is on the way. The 1998 legislation, through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, provides for the development or modernisation of curricula in all subjects and that still prevails.

As for the ESB situation, I answered that earlier. The issue should be resolved within the framework of the ESB. It has had a positive industrial relations framework for years. It is a State body and will remain so. There is no intent to privatise the ESB.

I will raise with the Minister for Education the issue of the Gaelscoil that Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned. There were, and continue to be, issues with schools getting early recognition but not being given permanent accommodation. There can be reasons for that, such as when there is activism on the ground and a school is created, but the time lag between a school being sanctioned and granted permanent accommodation is too long in many instances.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach get on to the Minister about it?

The Taoiseach: I think I dealt with the issue of Moore Street raised by Deputy Tóibín. I will revert to him with a response from the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in respect of the home of The O'Rahilly and accountability for what was a terrible deed, namely, the demolition of that very important building

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

11. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent phone conversation with the UK Prime Minister following recent events in Northern Ireland. [19969/21]

The Taoiseach: I spoke to the United Kingdom Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on the evening of Tuesday, 27 April, and we updated each other on the Covid-19 situation and progress on the vaccine roll-out. We discussed Northern Ireland and the importance of the British-Irish relationship and had an exchange of views on the EU-UK discussions on the implementation of the Ireland-Northern Ireland protocol. We agreed it would be useful to meet in person as soon as possible.

I previously spoke to the Prime Minister on 8 April about the recent concerning developments in Northern Ireland. We agreed that violence is unacceptable and called for calm, dialogue and the need to work with the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. We discussed the importance of the two Governments remaining in close contact to demonstrate a unity of purpose and support for the peace process. Prior to this, I spoke to the Prime Minister on Tuesday, 2 March. We discussed plans for a joint bid for World Cup 2030, bringing together the five football associations of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. We also discussed the situation of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Taoiseach for his thoughtful response, as ever, on a range of issues that require deep attention from both him and the UK Prime Minister, the Head of Government of our closest neighbour. I wish to take the Taoiseach up on a couple of issues that are important in the context of their recent conversations. I welcome the fact they agreed on the need to meet in person as soon as possible. On that note, it is very welcome that the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is in Dublin meeting the Tánaiste and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, as we speak. I reiterate that it is of pressing need that the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference meet as soon as possible.

Last week, a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council on the agriculture sector was cancelled and this simply is not good enough. We need the engagement of the Irish and British Governments, completely and intently, on the current activities in Northern Ireland. As the Taoiseach mentioned, he discussed with the Prime Minister the very worrying violence that happened on the streets of Belfast, Coleraine and Derry. There is a need, as we face into a period of potential confusion in Northern Ireland, for the British and Irish Governments to show leadership, and leadership has to come from the top. I refer to the letter from four former Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland of last week, in which they wrote that the British Prime Minister needs to take a personal interest and involvement in what is happening in Northern Ireland right now. I again call on the Taoiseach, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, to play that strong role with the Prime Minister, regardless of what may be happening domestically in the UK, to ensure that both Governments are fully invested in this process.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I agree on the need for the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to meet. I met the Secretary of State this morning, who is, as Deputy Richmond said, in Dublin. I echo the call for constructive leadership and that means we need to deliver on the spirit and the letter of the Good Friday Agreement. We need to remain steadfast on the need for the protocol to sort out the teething problems and to secure the protections it entails. We also need delivery on the substance of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, the precursor, as Deputies will recall, of the re-establishment of the Executive and the Assembly.

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That means producing an Irish language Act and that the Stormont House legacy mechanisms need to be in place.

I raised this issue earlier with the British Secretary of State to make clear that any resiling from those Stormont House arrangements, any dilution or watering down of them, simply will not suffice. I very much hope the Taoiseach and the Government at every level, including the Minister, Deputy Coveney, will apply all necessary pressure to ensure we get delivery. This is essential in the short and medium terms for the health and robustness of the Executive and for a government that delivers in the North, but it also has a longer-term significance, which I hope is not lost on any of us.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Irish language Act was an essential part of the Good Friday Agreement, 23 years ago. It was also a central part of the St. Andrews Agreement, 15 years ago, and an essential part of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which is well over a year old, yet I understand there to have been no progress on the delivery of an Irish language Act. This Act is a threat to nobody. It recognises for the first time the integral quality of the Irish language in the culture of many people in the North of Ireland. One of the major frustrations with the political processes in the North of Ireland is that things are agreed to and then not implemented. It is bad faith on the part of any political party to enter into talks, agree to a process and then simply not implement what has been agreed. Will the Taoiseach give us an update on what steps he has taken to put pressure on both the British Government and the Executive in the North of Ireland to fulfil their commitments in those agreements?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The violent scenes in the North over recent weeks were a worrying reminder of how the institutionalisation of sectarianism can lead to these sectarian outbursts. If we are to challenge that and achieve the unity of this island and the end of partition, and undermine the conscious stirring-up of sectarianism by forces such as the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, we have to offer a better alternative, not just joining together two somewhat dysfunctional states. We cannot hope to convince people in the North to become part of a united Ireland unless we have a state-of-the-art national health service. Our national health service is failing in many regards. It is a two-tier system. The majority of our student nurses and midwives want to leave the country because they are not paid enough, are treated badly and have to work in intolerable conditions. Over recent weeks, I have raised issues affecting young psychologists. I am overwhelmed by the response I have got from them. They are living in poverty while trying to train to get into psychology to deal with the mental health crisis and they say it is an absolute nightmare. Those are just two examples. We need a single-tier quality national health service. If we do not have that, why would people of a unionist tradition in the North want to be part of our country?

We also have to separate church and state. It is unbelievable that the national maternity hospital is to be controlled by a Catholic religious order. How could people in the North want any part of a health service like that?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Richmond for tabling this question in the first instance. I accept the points he made. He has retained a very consistent and constructive interest in this issue for quite some time. He mentioned the importance of meeting with the British Prime Minister and the necessity for ongoing open exchanges between the British Prime Minister and myself. Such exchanges will continue in the context of the realisation of the Good Friday Agreement agenda, the spirit of that agenda and the legal obligations associated with it. In that context, any pulling back from obligations under the Good Friday Agreement in respect of the

North-South Ministerial Council or sectoral meetings is not acceptable and is very regrettable. A number of such meetings have now been cancelled due to non-attendance, the most recent being a meeting with regard to agriculture. That is not conducive to the full realisation and operation of the agreement.

I am conscious of the correspondence of the four former Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. This is important because of their experience and their insights into how the British Government should approach these issues. I briefly met with the current Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, this morning in advance of his substantive meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, this afternoon, during which a range of issues will be discussed.

I take the Deputy's point with regard to the importance of the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference, an important institution of the Good Friday Agreement. It brings together the Irish and British Governments under strand 3 of the agreement on matters of mutual interest which lie within the competence of both Governments. The continuing importance we place on this institution is reflected in the programme for Government. We believe it is important that the next meeting of the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference, BIIGC, takes place at an early stage, as circumstances allow. We are currently engaging with the Government of the United Kingdom through the secretariat of the BIIGC to set a date and agenda. The most recent meeting of the BIIGC took place at the Cabinet Office in London on 8 May 2019. At that stage, the conference discussed east-west matters, economic and security co-operation, legacy rights, citizenship matters and political stability.

We are, of course, continuing to engage bilaterally with the British Government on a range of key issues. As I have said, such engagement is continuing today. Crucially, we continue to engage in support of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland. As the Deputy will know, since the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has been in regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, on a range of matters including Covid, the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement which was referenced by Deputy McDonald, Brexit and issues pertaining to the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. There is also regular contact and co-operation between our two governments at official level. We have to work closely on North-South and east-west agendas in support of the power-sharing institutions and, in the context of what Deputy McDonald said, the fulfilment of what has already been agreed with regard to a range of issues.

With regard to the Irish language Act, is Acht tábhachtach é gan dabht. Tá dualgas ar gach éinne an tAcht a chur i bhfeidhm agus tacaíocht a thabhairt dó, mar a luaigh an Teachta Tóibín. Níl aon dhainséar leis. Léiríonn sé an meas atá ag gach éinne ar an teanga agus tábhacht na teanga i ngnáthshaol agus i gcultúr daoine mórthimpeall an Tuaiscirt agus ar fud an oileáin ar fad. The Irish language Act is important legislation that respects and reflects the principle of parity of esteem that is embedded in the Good Friday Agreement. That idea of cultural and linguistic parity of esteem is very important. The initiatives in Wales with regard to language give context to the importance of the language Act. It has been committed to on all sides and should be followed through on. Language should never be weaponised politically. That can undermine a language. Fundamentally, it sheds light on a culture and creates opportunity for creativity and enjoyment. That is what a language is all about. I would like to see the Irish language Act enacted by the Assembly and brought forward. I would also like to see the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement followed through on. The spirit and letter of the Good Friday Agreement should be preserved.

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I could not agree more with Deputy Boyd Barrett's points on the need to deal with sectarianism. We need more substantive work with regard to disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to encouraging those young people in disadvantaged communities who might leave school early to complete the second level cycle of education. They should be enabled and empowered to progress to further and higher education. That is a critical policy area that needs far more attention from the Executive, the Assembly and the British and Irish Governments collectively. They must do something fundamental to give people a brighter future, particularly those young people who do not have that future at the moment. This relates to access to work or further education and to people's capacity to complete the second level cycle. That is critical.

With regard to the state of our national health service, in the context of this pandemic, we should acknowledge that, relatively speaking, our health service has stood up well in terms of both the quality of its personnel and the planning and work the HSE carried out. We love to knock and criticise but at times we seem very slow to acknowledge that the Irish healthcare service responded in a very positive, robust and resilient way at different stages of the pandemic while under a lot of pressure. We need to build on that. We need to learn lessons from the pandemic and embed the reforms that have been introduced during the pandemic. This Government has put unprecedented investment into health through the winter initiative, which led to those reforms. We need to embed these into the future of the health service.

Sitting suspended at 4.18 p.m. and resumed at 4.40 p.m.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Deputy Verona Murphy: Will the Government consider taking from the shelf the proposal to build an outer ring road to the M50, which would prevent traffic congestion on the M50 and reduce NOx emissions? Dublin is the only major capital city in Europe that does not have an outer ring road. Instead, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has decided to install speed cameras and fine people for getting it wrong and being confused about the speeds they should be doing on a motorway.

We are slowly making changes, albeit changes to our detriment. For example, we recently ceased the production of peat in Bord na Móna plants. Instead of producing our own peat, we are importing it, resulting in no overall impact on the environment, only money leaving the country and jobs being lost. When the transport emissions associated with importing peat are taken into account, our actions have probably increased global emissions. Along with the loss of sugar and flour production in Ireland, the saving of this to the environment probably equates to Germany producing ten fewer cars.

Regarding the carbon tax on fuel, let us consider the road haulage sector. The carbon tax makes it more expensive to transport goods, yet the same amount of fuel still has to be used. All that is achieved is an increase in tax revenue, with no real impact on the environment and no assistance to the sector. The Bill provides no information on what the sector will use as a fuel

source. We should bear in mind that, if someone pays €150,000 for a truck today, it will still be in service in 2030 and it will be diesel.

The past behaviour of governments is a key indicator of the type of self-flagellation that is likely to continue in this regard. Farmers are likely to bear the brunt of the Bill if passed. It will be more expensive and less profitable to farm. Costs will rise and, therefore, prices will increase for the consumer. What account does the Bill take of the thousands of carbon-sequestering hedgerows that are found on farms across Ireland but not in other EU countries? According to Teagasc and the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, 5% to 7% of Ireland's landmass is covered by hedgerows, equating to thousands of kilometres. These are extraordinary figures, but what carbon credits do our farmers get for them? More importantly, who gets them?

I agree with my colleague, Deputy Naughten, when he made the point that the poorest in society would be the hardest hit by the measures contained in the Bill. The poorest are least likely to be able to afford to retrofit their homes, install solar panels or buy new electric cars, and they spend a higher percentage of their incomes on food and fuel than others do. We will penalise everyone, but the poorest will feel it the most.

In global terms, we are a tiny player. We have abandoned the production of peat, turf and coal and continue to discourage tillage and dairy as if these farm practices were major problems rather than national assets while countries like China are ramping up their use of solid fuels on an industrial scale. In the past 30 years, China's coal consumption has quadrupled, yet we in Ireland somehow believe that closing a bog in Longford is the solution. I support sensible measures to encourage people to lead more environmentally friendly and healthy lives, but what we are doing and, more importantly, the way we are likely to go about it will have no measurable impact on climate change, so why burden current and future generations in using our greatest national asset, the land, with increased regulations, resulting in the destruction of businesses and livelihoods to meet unachievable targets, targets that were devised by large industrialised countries? Successive Irish governments should never have agreed targets that were overambitious and unachievable in that timescale.

Under the section on carbon budgets, the Bill allows for the wishes of the Dáil and the Seanad to be ignored by the Minister. This is concerning. The Bill states the Minister must present a copy of the carbon budget to both Houses and that, if the motion fails, the Minister can amend the budget, if appropriate. If the Government approves the carbon budget again, the Minister shall "cause a copy of the carbon budget to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and it shall have effect from the date on which it is laid before the Houses". This provision allows a carbon budget that has been rejected by the Dáil to be brought in through the back door without the Dáil ever having an opportunity to vote on it again. In other words, the Dáil cannot stop a carbon budget of which it disapproves being introduced. It can only delay such a budget. This is a scandalous abuse of the Parliament and an erosion of democracy.

Another worrying section of the Bill that needs to be highlighted is section 10, which outlines who should be on the advisory council. According to the Bill, we must:

...ensure that each member has knowledge of, or expertise in, at least one of the following areas:

- (i) climate science;
- (ii) adaptation policy;

- (iii) transport policy;
- (iv) energy policy;
- (v) agricultural policy;
- (vi) behavioural and communication science;
- (vii) biodiversity and eco-system services;
- (viii) economics;
- (ix) finance;
- (x) political sociology or ethics in relation to climate,

There is no mention of practical experience. This means it is not a requirement for any of the advisory council to have practical experience of working in any of these areas. How will farmers, fishermen or transport providers be represented? If the advisory council is truly to be effective, it should have people with extensive knowledge of practice as well as policy.

My main fear about the Bill is that it ties the hands of future generations and, as a result, we will spend much more time over the next 30 years cutting our nose off to spite our face without achieving what was envisaged while decimating what we had. We are using our best assets, not abusing them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We have all been passed this Earth to live on and we have to pass it to the next generation. We have a moral responsibility to hand the planet on to the next generation in at least as good a shape as we received it. Despite all the talk, virtue signalling and greenwashing of the past 15 or 20 years, though, this generation is the most damaging the planet has ever seen. That is an incredible thing to say, but it is true. We are living at a time of species mass extinctions, man-made global warming and unprecedented levels of ocean pollution.

Aontú is an environmentalist party because doing nothing is a significant threat to our lives, incomes and futures and the world's habitats, on which we all depend. It is possible to decouple economic growth from the increase in global carbon emissions. This can be done in a number of ways. Ireland imports a significant amount of energy, most of it in the form of fossil fuel. That is incredible, given our country is ideally placed to create sustainable energy, thereby reducing imports, making money circulate in Ireland and adding to the positive sustainable development of our environment. The people who are probably most targeted by the Bill - farmers - are ideally placed to provide most of this energy. Energy should be seen as a crop and as a way of ensuring we can increase farmers' incomes by €5,000, €6,000 or €7,000 per year. If we developed our approach to climate policy in this manner, we would be able to bring people with us instead of creating widespread opposition to our efforts.

I have a problem with an incredible situation, that being there are no solar panels in the State connected to the grid. I welcome that the Green Party has been instrumental in creating an auction process that will soon remedy this situation. From March to September, Britain will create more energy from solar energy than it will from coal and nuclear at the same time. We do not have microgeneration of energy. Even with the Government's auction process, the idea of small-scale wind, solar and biodigestion that can be used by farmers is still out of the reach of most farmers who are in need of an income increase. It does not have to be this way. In

the North of Ireland, the roof of one out of every three houses is festooned with photovoltaic panels, creating electricity for that home and earning its family an income. I find it difficult to believe we are not starting with the low-hanging fruit and positive opportunities that could and should be approached by the Government.

The energy efficiency of our buildings presents another incredible situation. Every year, governments fly flags about having done X amount of retrofitting of homes and public buildings with insulation. All those projects are only scratching the surface. If we want to reduce energy consumption, the first thing we need to do is to stop wasting that energy. Stop wasting that energy means insulating and properly protecting buildings and homes. Doing that will save the money of the people living in those homes and make those homes more comfortable, warmer and healthier places for them to live. The same applies to public buildings. However, there has never been a real project trying to ensure that buildings are properly insulated and efficient. That needs to be done before we start to look at other sections of society.

One of the difficulties I have with this Bill and the Government's approach is that it is being built on the backs of the sectors of society that can least afford more pain at the moment. It is very seldom recognised in this Chamber that the farmers of this country are absolutely stuffed. There are about 130,000 farmers in the State and year after year farmers are selling up and getting out because their incomes are already a pittance.

For example, in beef sector, only for European intervention in the form of grants, after their full week's work, farmers would earn a minus figure. Imagine asking tens of thousands of workers and their families to engage in a sector that produces a minus figure at the end of the year. That is an incredible situation and it is wrong to treat any sector of society that way.

The beef sector is an enormously profitable sector in its own right. Hundreds of millions of euro in profits are made in the beef sector. There are three elements of the supply chain: the producers, the factories and the supermarkets. However, the profits reside with the factories and the supermarkets at enormous cost to the producers, the farmers. This is allowed to happen because it is a dysfunctional market. In economic terms, it is known as an oligopoly with enormous buyer power. The factories can dictate every element of farmers' engagement with them. The Government has stood idly by in every case.

In the last Dáil, I sat on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and Marine where the Fine Gael Chair said it was unreasonable for farmers to expect a price for their beef above the cost of production. That was a startling and astonishing attitude by the Government. We have seen no change at all. We now hear that the Government is considering reducing the national herd. The Government cannot propose reducing the national herd without increasing the unit price of farmers' product so that it provides a living for them. Farmers will simply not buy any reduction in the national herd that does not include a fair income for a fair day's work for them. It is important for the Government to get real.

It also needs to get real in respect of the needs of rural areas, where the population is dwindling. The average age of people in Killarney is 40. The average age in Balbriggan is 30. A vicious circle is happening. When students leave college, the only place they can get graduate jobs is in or around Dublin. They cannot afford to live in Dublin and so live in the sprawling commuter belt, which, in itself, is a threat to the environmental health of the country. They move away from the communities they grew up in. This approach by the Government damages rural areas by not providing sustainable ways for people to live there, including sustainable

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transportation. This means the Government will not bring people from rural areas with it either.

I do not want to see this approach - an approach that is necessary for fixing the country's disastrous environmental record - built on the back of sectors of society already in severe trouble. I ask the Government to go back to the drawing board and come up with a solution that includes all of Ireland, and that has a future for farmers and those living in rural areas. It needs to turn the country, not into a sprawling commuter belt of Dublin, but into viable communities where people can work in remote working hubs and in their own homes.

Over the bank holiday weekend, I was out and about in my constituency, talking to families. It is an incredible situation. Based on the national broadband plan, people living two or three miles outside of Navan, Trim and other towns in my constituency have no chance of getting broadband for the next two or three years. I am reminded that Noel Dempsey promised them broadband in 2004 and a further two or three years is probably optimistic at the rate that this Government goes. The Government needs to ensure it brings all of Ireland with it. It should not build a process on the back of the misery of those in rural areas.

I wish to raise one other matter with the Minister of State, which is the issue of local citizens who have been campaigning against companies which are breaking the law on the environment regarding quarries. Companies are slapping legal cases against these individuals, tying them up in terms of money, energy and time. It has a chilling effect in respect of public participation in their own environments. Article 3.8 of the Aarhus Convention states that every citizen should be able to exercise their rights in conformity with the law without being penalised, persecuted or harassed in any way. Will the Minister of State meet people in my community to discuss this issue to ensure that Article 3.8 of the Aarhus Convention is brought into law?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will start with a quote, with which I am sure the Ceann Comhairle is familiar:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

Shakespeare put those words in the mouth of Brutus as he went to battle with Mark Antony, but it could well have been said of the debate about climate and our approach to the challenge of global warming that is having such an impact on communities. The stakes are truly enormous if we fail in this challenge. However, it cannot be said at the moment that we have been seizing that current; we have considerable ground to make up.

I take the opportunity to thank the officials in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, as it was when I was Minister there. We had responsibility for seeking to manage two of the most globally impactful forces hitting our world. One was digital

transformation. I am very proud that we delivered the national broadband plan, and I am glad to see Deputies now calling for it to be delivered more quickly. Most of the time, I was faced with opposition to that. We also have in train the online safety Bill.

We put in place the first climate action plan that was compliant with the obligations to our European Union colleagues that we adopted. We put in place the first just transition commissioner to work with the profoundly impacted communities in the midlands and we laid the foundation of the climate Bill that we are debating today. I wish the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, well in the work he is taking on there, which is of enormous importance. Today is a milestone as we are carving a pathway to deliver the transition by 2050 so that we will have a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy.

Enshrining these objectives in law is an important statement of intent by the Oireachtas. However, I am not one of those who seeks to find the tightest possible straitjacket and seeks to find hooks for litigation so that sectors can be whipped into line. That is not how we will deliver what we need. If we end up in the courts fighting about progress on climate, we, as politicians, will have failed. The challenge is not about defining and finding bulletproof legislation; it is about winning citizens and showing them that to cling to business as usual is to condemn their sector, their community or their children to a stunted future.

I was not among those who sought to enshrine the 51% goal of the programme for Government into law.

It is not that I do not believe in that ambition, but that I believe it is risky to seek to bind our citizens in a legal obligation without properly teasing out with them what it implies. We cannot do that without consultation and a clear roadmap. However, I accept the majority view was different in the committee and I will accept that here in the House, but there are no grounds for the suggestion in the letters to the three party leaders, which I have seen, that the programme for Government signed up to a cumulative 7% per annum reduction in carbon emissions. The Government signed up to our being at a level 51% lower by 2030. The programme for Government recognised that the path to that could not be 7% per annum but would have to take account of the slow impact of some policies and the need to build up over time.

I respect the science behind the 51% ambition. However, I believe it is the height of cynicism for some politicians to insist on the science in embedding high ambition and then to turn their faces resolutely against both the science and common sense when they tell us they will reject what is needed, such as a higher carbon price, such as quicker planning processes to allow infrastructure to be built, such as the pure illusion that only the enterprise sector need take up the slack in making the changes, or such as claiming that banning liquefied natural gas, LNG, will reduce our emissions. It will not reduce our emissions by a single gram.

Too many of the responses I have heard on this Bill from politicians embrace the principle of environmental sustainability but insist on hands off sacrifice in their backyard. They want to find solutions and impose obligations upon others. That is the height of cynicism. The sad truth, regardless of whether we like it, is that the take, make, use and dispose culture that has been a feature in the creation of environmental degradation is embedded in all of our lives, not in the lives of a small number. To reverse it, we will have to change the habits of a lifetime. We will have to accept infrastructures with which we are unfamiliar within our communities. For years, we have accepted having gallons of inflammable liquid buried below our towns and

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villages, but we baulk at the idea of renewable energy replacing those fossil fuels. We have to get our heads around that and we have to work with people to bring them with us.

We will also need to mobilise a lot of capital. This will not all be mobilised capital provided by Government. This is about changing the direction of travel of our communities, our sectors and our enterprises. Usually, disruptive change of this nature is brought about by a technological revolution that is sweeping all before it. What makes this different is that we, the politicians, have to find the momentum to make the changes that disrupt the traditional ways of doing things. I am up for the battle of delivering the 51%, but let us be honest with ourselves about how challenging that will be. The hard-won climate action plan which I put in place sought to stretch what was achievable. It set out that by 2030 we would have 12 GW extra of renewable energy - a quadrupling of what we now have, one million extra vehicles on the road, 500,000 homes insulated to a B2 rating, 600,000 homes with heat pumps, 19 farm measures, outlined by Teagasc, fully implemented on every farm in the country, a carbon tax of €80 to drive the change, the end of peat and coal and 8,000 ha of forestry planted each year. We are now signing up to increase those commitments by 75%. No Deputy I have heard contribute to this debate thus far has seriously addressed how that gap is to be filled. That is where our attention should be focused now.

As we seek to find the extra 13 million tonnes reduction annually, we will have to embrace more costly interventions than we have considered to date. The technologies that are coming will not provide us with solutions in the next ten years and so a new climate action plan will have to examine challenging changes, such as substantial increases in the carbon price, significant cuts in our herd - people do not want to talk about that - and higher retrofit targets. These are discussions we need to have and to face honestly. We need to engage with people on how those changes can be achieved and how they can still have a strong and prosperous future having made those changes. Unfortunately, the instinct of some politicians is to whip up fears around these changes instead of finding ways in which we can deliver them and give people a better livelihood.

The question needs to be looked at differently. If we do not start to make these changes now, we will be leaving a legacy to the next generation that, as I said previously, is stunted in every dimension. Our farms will not be able to support a decent family farm income if we do not start to make the changes. Our enterprises will not be able to compete in a carbon neutral Europe if we do not make the changes. The living patterns will condemn us to high costs and poor comfort if we do not make the changes. This is about a vision of a better Ireland, better for farmers, better for enterprise and better for communities. That is what we have to carve out and bring people with us on.

The challenge is to rethink the way in which we do a lot of things. That is difficult. Politicians on all sides need to face that challenge. Some 70% of us are living in homes that are far too big for our needs. Our fleet of 3 million vehicles are idle 95% of the time. Some 30% of our food is wasted, imposing a carbon footprint of 3 million tonnes lost. We can change our way of thinking in these areas. There are huge opportunities to do better, to give us a better standard of living, but with less impact on our environment. We need to find ways of doing that.

In the area of land use, some of the practices now in place are pushing farmers to the very limit of their effort yet yielding them virtually nothing from the marketplace in return. By changing the way we use our land, they can capitalise on a very substantial carbon dividend. In some cases, as much as €700 per ha could be gleaned by making a switch in the way farm-

ers farm and manage their lands. Farmers often ask about where the dividend is for them. We have to find ways of producing that dividend for farming in sensible ways that build the type of vision we have set out for ourselves in 2050. I believe that is possible.

Members of this House have also opposed vehemently the idea of a carbon price. A carbon price is merely a way of saying that some of the practices that are generating carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are imposing massive costs on the rest of the globe and on our communities. That is why we are talking about putting a price on carbon. The other side of that is that in putting a price on carbon, we will have revenue we will have to devote to cutting other taxes so that we can reduce the burden on work and provide support for changes in practices in our sectors and in our communities that will make life better for all. As a community, we need to get that into our heads. The reason there is a price on carbon that is rising year in and year out and will hit €100 per tonne by the end of the decade and, on a conservative estimate, €250 per tonne by 2050 is because it is doing such damage. The other side of that coin is the huge opportunities for people to earn from managing and farming carbon to deliver cheaper ways of reducing the impact of it on our environment than some of the many more costly items that would otherwise enter into the calculations.

Much of the more imaginative thinking we need is embraced by the concept of the circular economy and the strategy that could be created if we rethink the supply chains of all the activities that we undertake as a community.

I am pleased that the climate committee has accepted my request to act as a rapporteur on how thinking around a circular economy can help us to make that transition, particularly in sectors such as food, construction and retail where the impact is very high.

Agriculture has received more attention than it deserves in this debate. It is important to note that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, recognises that biogenic methane, that is, the methane that comes from livestock, can only be reduced between the ranges of 24% and 47% by 2050. We need to recognise that agriculture in this country is different and is not going to be treated the same as other sectors because of its important contribution to food supply and rural economies. However, it would be blind to pretend that farming cannot make significant changes that will make the journey to achieving our environmental targets much easier and can, in the process, prove rewarding for farmers. In the future, farmers will have smaller herds because they will earn a large part of their income from the way in which they manage carbon. That is a future people will embrace if we provide the institutional arrangements to deliver it.

Finally, we have a great deal of really important information from scientists, who have provided us with a vision of a burning globe. That creates the sense of urgency we need if we are to change. However, that change will not be achieved by pointing the finger at communities, sectors or enterprises. To make changes, we need to embrace what I call the three Ls, namely, legacy, legitimacy and leadership. We need a vision of a better future as a legacy we pass on to the next generation. That legacy will be better homes for our children to live in, better farms for them to manage and better enterprises in which they can find work. We also need to found authority to make changes on legitimacy. That is why the citizens' assembly was so important. It showed how dialogue, fairness and just transition are integral to this process. We need those elements to empower us to make the sometimes quite radical changes needed to cut through the barriers that otherwise will hold us back. Finally, we need to mobilise leadership in every section of our community, including sports, community, economic and financial organisations,

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to recognise that this is a change that requires a truly national effort and will deliver for us if we achieve it. If we miss this opportunity, we will spend our time, as Shakespeare said, “bound in shallows and in miseries”, having failed to live up to the expectation that is set upon this generation.

I warmly commend the Minister on presenting the Bill to the House and look forward to the debate on it. Most of all, I look forward to the sorts of actions we can collectively take and that will bring our citizens with us on an exciting journey of change, at the end of which we will have a better country.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I am sharing time with Deputies Daly, Tully, Clarke and Mythen.

This amending Bill introduces targets into hazy and ambiguous legislation dating from 2015. It comes as no surprise that the coalition Cabinet at that time, led by Fine Gael, introduced a half-baked Bill to appease the growing ecological lobby. Under scrutiny, there were found to be major issues with that legislation, mainly the lack of any specific greenhouse gas emissions targets. Even though all the right jargon and buzzwords were present, the legislation lacked something vital, namely, accountability. Luckily, a number of grassroots and civic society groups in Ireland have been hard at work, relentlessly following up on the promises of Government and advocating that the State’s commitments under international obligations and the European Convention on Human Rights be honoured.

As the imminence of ecological instability looms and the pattern of freak natural disasters becomes more associated with the effects of climate change, people are taking matters into their own hands. 2020 saw an increase in droughts, forest fires, floods and tropical storms across the globe. In this country, the forest fire in Killarney National Park ravaged much of the estate land and was a direct effect of the climate crisis. A increase in temperature leads to less precipitation, meaning fires can spread more easily. Everything is interconnected when it comes to the natural world. The environment is an area in which, internationally, there has been almost a consensus among states to introduce reactionary policies instead of paying heed to the growing body of evidence published by climate scientists and ecologists over the past 20 to 30 years. Here in Ireland, local and national groups such as Friends of the Earth, VOICE Ireland, Extinction Rebellion Ireland and, in my constituency, Futureproof Clare, have tirelessly resisted the decimation of our planet’s biodiversity by corporations.

I refer to an issue of particular concern to my constituents, namely, the Shannon liquefied natural gas, LNG, project to develop a fracked gas import terminal on the Shannon Estuary. New Fortress Energy is seeking to construct this terminal and an equivalent facility in County Longford, despite the fact that fracked gas generates extremely damaging net carbon emissions. Sadly, although the issue of fracked gas was used as a talking point in the programme for Government, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is yet to produce a report, guideline or, at the very least, statement outlining his stance on fracked gas. I urge him to do so.

The main issue with the Shannon LNG project is that it features on the fourth European Projects of Common Interest, PCI, list, which means, in effect, that it can bypass standard planning requirements, namely, approval through An Bord Pleanála, and avoid any risk assessments that would impede its development. It is very concerning that there are 32 natural gas infrastructure projects listed on the PCI. This could lead to the wasting of €29 billion of European public funds, which amounts to an inordinate mismanagement of public expenditure. Proceeding

with those projects seems highly illogical and myopic if we are truly intent, as an international community, on curbing our reliance on fossil fuels. The central loophole in this Bill is that the Government, as an agent or actor, is exempt from the list of relevant bodies that must adhere to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. This loophole has been exploited by the Cabinet in its pursuit of keeping the Shannon LNG project on the PCI list against the recommendation of an Oireachtas committee, following its pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, that a ban on the importation of fracked gas and the development of LNG terminals should be explicitly stipulated.

In summary, the aspects of the amending Bill that remain substandard are the omission of a blanket ban on fracked gas and the weak definition of just transition. Both are areas where I am convinced that ambiguity will lead to ineffective or redundant policy issues and conflicts in the future.

Deputy Pa Daly: This is a very important Bill for our country. We have seen the result of climate change in every county and, globally, in the displacement of millions of people from the southern hemisphere. My county of Kerry has been affected by numerous weather events in recent years, including flooding. The Ring of Kerry has seen bad flooding on high mountain passes and White Strand beach in Cahersiveen was under water in February this year. Kenmare has had a number of very bad flooding incidents in the past number of years. In the north of the county, west of Tralee, Ballyroe, Barrow and Ardfert have been hit, along with Fossa, Faha and Caher. More and more extreme weather events will continue to affect the county, which could be said both to suffer and benefit from a high degree of peripherality and its proximity to the Atlantic and other waterways and lakes.

Reference was made in the House this week and last to the fire in Killarney National Park. An issue that has not been mentioned is the response rate. We need a committee in place that can respond as quickly as possible when there is a severe weather alert for anywhere in the country. The 48 hours or so it took to get a second helicopter down to Killarney was not acceptable. Another factor is that the rhododendron problem has not been dealt with for years. Now is the time to address that issue once and for all. A 15-year plan should be put in place to eliminate rhododendron from the national park and beyond, over the Caha Pass into County Cork. Unless we take action, ordinary communities are going to suffer. Everyone must play their part and be seen to do so. This Bill does not rule out measures such as a carbon tax, which we oppose, and which does little to tackle the big polluters. Kerry is a coastal county so industries such as fishing and tourism will be displaced first, and individual and unequal measures will fuel scepticism and resistance around climate change. Fairness and social justice must be the priority and the most vulnerable must not bear the cost with additional charges on their solid fuel. Anyone who canvasses in poorer areas will see the reliance there and poorer people should not be punished more than anybody else or disproportionately. Clear targets must be put in place. The recent results-based environment-agri pilot project, REAP, for example, could be more ambitious and the farmers are willing to engage in schemes such as the rural environment protection scheme, REPS, but more engagement is necessary and unfortunately the scheme that is in place has been criticised by farmers' organisations. The Government must work with them. There needs to be more ambition in the Bill as aspirations without the backing to achieve them lead to unnecessary conflict.

As has been stated, the Shannon LNG terminal is not mentioned in the Bill but a political football has been building up around it.

We cannot ignore climate change's impact on the environment and biodiversity more gener-

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ally in County Kerry. I was a little confused to hear the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on national radio last week speaking about the planting of forestry along waterways and contributing to water quality. A wise man recently told me that there was a type of fish, the cabhlach dubh, the sea trout, which is white when it comes in from the sea but used to make its way as far as the parish of Brosna, which is nearly in County Limerick, and up at Carroll's Cross. That has been decimated by over-forestation. There is a difference between a plantation and forestry. We must have more emphasis on forestry and not on plantations.

We also see the worldwide effect of climate change and there will continue to be mass movement of people as much of the world becomes uninhabitable. I look forward to the rest of the debate and hearing the contributions of the other speakers.

Deputy Pauline Tully: While Sinn Féin supports this Bill there are aspects of it I am concerned about. A just transition must occur if this is to work. I live in the heart of rural Ireland and am very concerned about the effects that initiatives under this Bill are going to have or indeed are having on people living in rural Ireland and on the farming community in particular. The vast majority of people generally agree we need to change the way we live to save the planet, we all know it is at crisis point and Ireland, as small as it is, must do its part.

However, carbon taxes on people in rural Ireland are totally unfair. The increase in the cost of petrol and diesel impacts on people in rural areas much more than people in urban areas because in rural areas people do not have alternative transport options. Farmers and contractors must use heavy machinery, which operates on diesel. They have no options. Farmers are already caring for the environment and are willing to find environmentally friendly ways of operating but ways must be found to work with farmers instead of penalising them by imposing taxes and tariffs.

I am also aware that turf and peat harvesting is being restricted on many bogs throughout the country. This has led to the importation of briquettes from other countries and the importation of peat for those who work in the horticulture sector. That sector has no option but to import peat to ensure business continuity and it cannot access peat here. The importation of products is not just bad for the economy; it is also bad for the environment. Fumes from transporting these products are causing significant damage. A proper plan must be put in place for the safe harvesting of peat products for the sectors that need them, rather than having to import them. Many rural families also depend on turf for heating their homes out of economic necessity and cannot afford to buy other types of fuel. Traders from the North are also selling coal and briquettes down South much more cheaply than traders here are, due to the fact that registered traders must pay carbon tax in the Twenty-Six Counties. Nobody is monitoring this activity. In County Cavan, fuel is being sold door-to-door out of vans and there needs to be an all-island approach to carbon taxes and indeed to how climate change is tackled. County Cavan and other Border counties are not the only areas affected by this illicit fuel trade and it represents a loss of revenue to the Government, non-adherence to smoky fuel bans and the real possibility of fuel merchants here having to close and therefore a loss in employment.

I am also still seeing widespread use of single-use plastic. This needs to be totally cut back and penalties imposed on companies that still insist on using single-use plastic in their packaging. Packaging should also be clearly marked as it is still quite confusing as far as what is recyclable and what is compatible is concerned. People will be swayed in what they buy if this is clearly marked and identified to them.

We are aware of the positive impact of sustainable forestry. It needs to be promoted and not forced on farmers as the planting of trees on land which is suitable for such purposes is so beneficial to the environment. However, I am told by some of the forestry companies that they are totally frustrated by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's delays and bureaucracy. There are now delays in applications, they cannot get licences to fell trees and the sawmills are running out of logs. Is the solution to import logs too? That is not on.

Retrofitting houses is an important part of fighting climate change but even with grants, it is far too expensive for most people to afford. The waiting list for the home retrofitting schemes are also ridiculous. For example, the waiting list for the warmer homes scheme is now in excess of two years. Approximately 8,000 houses are waiting to be surveyed for the SEAI grant scheme and the number of local authority houses being funded for the retrofit is dismal - I think it is only 1,300 for the year. Thus a greater investment in this area is needed to do with the backlogs and to have more education, apprenticeships and business support in this area.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: This Bill offers some tentative first steps in the right direction but it is not quite there yet. Engagement with all sectors from local government to each Department is something climate activists have been crying out for for years. Specific goals offer an attempt at long-term strategising but achievement on that must be sensible, consistent and within a framework that is unambiguous. The Bill falls short in a number of areas. The long-promised commitment to end the issuing of licences for offshore exploration and the extraction of gas and petroleum remains conspicuously absent. The Government has also committed to banning the importation of LNG and fracked gas and I urge the Government parties to support amendments and follow through on its promises.

The proposals give too much discretion to Ministers. If there is no discernible penalty for failing to meet a target, the majority will fail to meet it and when a Minister must balance political expediency with long-term planning, one does not have to guess too far which side a decision will be made on. The ability, however limited, to borrow carbon credits from future budgets allows for the opportunity to pass the buck to a future Minister. There must be some level of responsibility if this Bill is to be worth the paper it is written on. After all, we are elected to this House to write legislation, not fancy words or poetry.

Most crucially for my constituency of Longford-Westmeath, this Bill barely mentions, let alone defines, a just transition. The use of very weak language such as "best endeavour" and "as far as practicable" act as get-out clauses and make just transition measures almost meaningless. Let us compare that to the Scottish act, which definitively defines and lays down words that are not open to interpretation, including "environmentally and socially sustainable jobs to maintain social consensus through engagement with workers, trade unions and communities, the creation of decent, fair and high-value work". None of those words are present in our Bill and that is a missed opportunity. Climate action can improve people's lives when it is done right but that means that there has to be trueness to just transition at the very heart of us because without that we will leave communities behind and we will lose buy-in from the rural communities most affected by this transition process. A detailed just transition policy could develop green energy with local community control and provide jobs and wealth for our declining communities in both rural and urban areas. It could allow for urban planning to revitalise and improve quality of life while meeting environmental goals. It could do many things but without concrete commitments it is doomed to fail. There was zero reference to just transition in the first draft of this Bill, which is very telling about the Government's commitments to areas such as mine, which are most impacted by job losses. This is important for several reasons, namely,

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that climate change and inequality are inextricably joined at the hip. It is a gross overaccumulation of wealth that has allowed corporate interests to concentrate resources and produce. Yet we see time and again those least able to afford it being burdened by consumption taxes and higher heating, electricity and transport costs. Ultimately, these are ineffective at achieving environmental goals. We have one opportunity to make a big difference for the future of climate change in this country but that needs to be binding and fair because we are here today not only for ourselves but for future generations.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill today. Climate action is about us all being good custodians and leaving the planet in a healthy condition for future generations. It is about respecting and protecting nature but above all it is about a just and fair transition. I recently met with a group of climate activists from my own County Wexford in a Zoom call and their focus and drive was very clear to see. I hope we will see the same determination from us all as we deal with the threat of global warming and climate change.

The core principle of any climate action must be a just transition, which is a weak link in this Bill. We are asking people to change the traditional way we live, but this must be done in a respectful, fair and equal manner. The just transition to carbon neutrality is one of the most challenging issues for rural farmers and coastal areas such as Wexford. With the development of offshore farms, the Government must include social contract clauses in any development of offshore wind or solar panel farms and a community wealth-building approach should be taken. Such an approach would mean wind farms would not only provide greener energy but would do so in a way that benefits the communities not in a piecemeal way but rather in a genuine social and monetary way through the supply of local materials and labour.

This Bill introduces a requirement for each local authority to prepare a climate action plan which will include mitigation and adaptation measures. Mitigation means how emissions will be reduced. Adaptation includes things like flood defences. This will no doubt strike a nerve with the people of Enniscorthy, my own town, who have endured extreme hardship through floods. Serious floods have occurred six times, including in 2000, 2015 and 2020. The flooding is a disincentive to the growth of the town, further crippling businesses, and homeowners are already under severe pressure from the prospect of another wet winter. It is time to deliver this flood defence scheme now.

People lose confidence when promises are not delivered on. This cannot happen to the climate action plans which will be developed following this Bill. Climate action means solid plans on rural transport, fuel poverty, farming and fishing, to name but a few. Scientists are saying we have less than the ten-year span to get things right. I trust and hope the Government will work with all Members of this House to treat our farming, fishing and rural communities with respect and develop fair policies that will have at their core a fair and just transition for all of our sakes.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I am sharing time with Deputy Richmond. I fully support this Bill. By any standards this is comprehensive legislation with far-reaching implications and involving many challenges. We have no choice but to enact it if we are to avoid a global catastrophe. The Covid-19 pandemic represented a major global threat to humanity. It has inflicted death and serious illness on thousands of people worldwide. It has given us an insight into just how fragile life is on this planet. I suggest that climate change represents a greater threat to life as we know it on this planet Earth in the medium to long term. It is the most serious existential challenge of our time.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call for us all to do something about climate change. During the pandemic many of us became very aware of our fragile biodiversity, which is a related issue. We discovered and appreciated nature. Dr. Michael Ryan from the World Health Organization has suggested that pandemics are due to our failure to protect the natural world. Researchers are coming to the conclusion that the destruction of biodiversity is the cause of the conditions for new viruses and diseases such as Covid-19. It is in all our interests to tackle climate change and to save our fragile biodiversity.

We live in an interdependent world: interdependent between continents and countries and between humans and nature. We must, therefore, tackle climate change at a global level first. Ireland has signed up to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and to the Paris Agreement on climate. The EU has also made the tackling of climate change a central objective through the so-called European Green Deal. I also welcome the new emissions goal announced by the US Administration. It now aims to halve its carbon emissions by 2030. Other countries, including China, must now step up to the plate and follow suit. The recent virtual summit of global leaders gives us some grounds for hope and we await further developments arising from the UN General Assembly session this September and the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, in Glasgow.

I welcome the provision in the Bill requiring local authorities to prepare their own climate action plans every five years. Both Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council are making ongoing efforts to encourage people to walk and to cycle more and they have a number of walking and cycling projects at the design stage which need to be agreed with all of the relevant stakeholders. I single out the Baldoyle Racecourse and the Clontarf seafront cycle tracks that are now in place. They are fantastic facilities and I have used and enjoyed them.

We also need to complete the Sutton to Sandycove cycle route which has been on the table for many years in planning form and it is now time to complete it. I welcome plans by Iarnród Éireann outlined in the DART+ programme. DART+ coastal will see the extension of electrification of the line from Malahide to Drogheda and improvements along the existing DART line from Malahide and Howth to Greystones, which will increase passenger capacity along the eastern commuter corridor by almost 50%. That will certainly be welcomed by the commuters in my constituency.

Dublin City Council has also launched a school zone initiative to discourage parents from driving up to the school gate to leave their children as close as possible to the school. This initiative needs to be rolled out to all schools in the Dublin City Council area.

The National Transport Authority's core bus corridor project will also be important in getting people out of their private cars and onto public transport, in this case buses. These plans are to be agreed with all relevant stakeholders.

I draw the House's attention to a conference taking place on May 12 next week as part of the Climate, Heritage and Environments of Reefs, Islands, and Headlands, CHERISH, project. The conference will investigate the impact of climate change on the North Bull Island and on Ireland's Eye. The Discovery Programme and Geological Survey Ireland are involved in the conference and I look forward to receiving the deliberations of the conference in due course.

Achieving the targets in this Bill will be difficult for everyone and every sector. We need a just transition. The corporate sector, obviously, has a major role to play in dealing with climate

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change but every sector and individual is going to be affected by this. Increased carbon taxes, higher electricity and heating bills and increased fuel costs are inevitable. The programme for Government commits to ensuring the increases in carbon tax are progressive by spending €3 billion on targeted social welfare and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and to ensure a just transition. The potential for fuel poverty is a very real one and is something on which I intend to be particularly vigilant in the run-up to the budget every year.

The tackling of climate change can be seen as a daunting challenge for individuals, individual householders and consumers as they go about their daily lives. We need an information campaign by the authorities as to how individuals, households and consumers can play their part. It all seems very highfalutin in people's everyday lives, yet there is so much that we all, as individuals, could be doing. I would like to see it spelled out more clearly that ordinary individual consumers or householders can make small changes in their daily lives to play their part in bringing down greenhouse gas emissions.

Agriculture is the single largest contributor to overall emissions, at 35%. As such, it is obvious that changed ways and practices are required from farming communities. Farmers have a big role to play but it is not necessarily a doomsday scenario. New practices and procedures can bring about new markets and new ways of production such that, in the long term, we will all benefit, including the agricultural sector.

I welcome the commitment given by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to ensure less reliance on fossil fuels across every sector of society. He has committed to ending the issuing of new licences for the exploration and extraction of gas, similar to the decision in 2019 to end oil exploration and extraction by not issuing new licences.

Ireland has a role to play in dealing with this global challenge. The Bill puts into law a commitment to arrive at a climate-neutral economy by 2050 or before. There is a commitment to decrease Ireland's total emissions by 51% by 2030, which is only a few years away. This will be done by agreeing five-year carbon budgets on a rolling 15-year basis. There will be a central role for the Climate Change Advisory Council and climate action plans and a national long-term climate action strategy will need to be prepared.

Ultimately, what is needed is buy-in and engagement from everyone in the country. We need to promote and explain what is in the Bill such that people are not surprised when new measures are announced. If we get that buy-in and everyone engages in this process, we will be successful in our endeavours.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is a privilege to contribute briefly on this generation-defining legislation. I pay particular credit not just to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, who is present, but also to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and his predecessor, the former Minister, Deputy Bruton, who spoke so eloquently in the Chamber in the past hour about the truly magnificent opportunities this legislation provides not just for the entire country, but for the world and Europe at large. The legislation makes clear that when dealing with the climate emergency, there is no single solution. It takes an all-encompassing approach that factors into every arm of government.

I wish to continue on the issue on which Deputy Haughey finished, that is, the importance of buy-in. We need to get buy-in to this legislation, and not just political buy-in. I welcome the fact that the majority of those who have contributed to this debate have been in favour generally

of the Bill, although one or two Members would like it to go further, while certain others do not wish to even have a debate on it. We absolutely need to lead by example as public representatives to ensure that we get buy-in not just to the Bill, but to what it is trying to achieve. That means buy-in from industry, individuals, society at large, the agricultural sector and so much more.

Crucial to getting that buy-in is trying to achieve the rewards the legislation provides. This should not all be about the stick. There is plenty of carrot in the legislation for everyone in society who seeks to seize the opportunity. The altruistic reasons for backing the legislation are that is vitally important to the sustainability and future of the planet, but the selfish reasons for backing it are that there are many new opportunities and industries provided within the schemes it contains. Deputy Bruton referred to opportunities when it comes to carbon farming and so much else.

I refer to local opportunities in particular. When the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, looks southwards from his home, he looks up towards my constituency and sees the beautiful Dublin mountains. We should appreciate the foresight of Arthur Griffith, one of the founders of the State, in pursuing one of the first afforestation programmes in the State in the Dublin Mountains, at sites such as Ticknock, Tibbradden and all the places I love to spend the weekends with my kids but which also, crucially, provide absolutely vital opportunities for the city. I remember attending the opening of a wooded walkway and trail, which now also includes a mountain biking trail, with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, when he was a member of a previous Government. He referred to the Dublin Mountains as being the lungs of the capital. Through a widespread, sensible and proper afforestation process we will ensure the lungs of the entire country are maintained and have the opportunity to play their part in this process.

An area to which reference has been made in so many speeches in this House not just in the context of the climate emergency but also when we are discussing housing, the economy or the impact Covid-19 is having on society is the opportunity offered by remote working. It provides the opportunity to ensure people can work close to where they are from, thus taking pressure off congested roads and urban areas and providing a much better balance of life for those who avail of it. It may involve working at home or in remote working hubs. A colleague recently told me that a remote hub with 20 desks is opening in a small rural town in his constituency. That is 40 or 50 jobs. If a company announced a 50-job development in that townland, it would be front-page news for the local paper. That is how we have to look at remote working. We should ensure we harness every aspect of government to play its part in tackling the climate emergency.

One thing that is critical is using the Bill as a marker to embrace an imaginative solution to public transport needs across the country, but particularly in the capital city. That is of particular importance for those of us who represent suburban constituencies that have a significant commuter base, with people travelling to the city centre for work. Significant work has been done by central government and local authorities in this regard - Deputy Haughey referred to it in terms of the provision of cycle lanes and greenways - but it is also necessary to examine the model for public transport and ensure we have clean public transport. I welcome the pilot scheme by Dublin Bus which involves electric buses but we have to be imaginative and look at the potential to also utilise hydrogen buses.

All Members acknowledge that the issue that frames the debate on this legislation will not be solved by one Bill, public representative, Government or country. The international dynamic of tackling the climate emergency should not be lost on any of us. We are a small country, an

island in the Atlantic with a relatively small population and a relatively small industrial sector, but we can lead on this issue within the European Union and the global community. We have to take on the chin the criticisms of global agencies, NGOs and lobby groups that we have not done so previously. We must acknowledge that we have been laggards in this area. However, what has been done in the past couple of years and what is contained in the Bill show the potential that exists for Ireland to move from the back of the class right up to the front of the class. It will take sacrifice, commitment, imagination and ground-breaking legislation such as the Bill in order for us to achieve those goals and opportunities.

Deputy Haughey referred to the impact of the United States Government thankfully coming back into the Paris climate accord. That is so important. There is a need to ensure that, within the European Union, policies within the new green deal are reflected not just in our domestic legislation but in every conversation and every function of the Council of the European Union and elsewhere at EU level. It does not matter whether it is a council dealing with agriculture, fisheries, health, economy or justice; everything has to come back to the biggest challenge facing this generation, namely, tackling the climate emergency. The pandemic will come and go. It has had a lasting effect and been disastrous for many families, households and businesses across the world, and particularly in this country. However, the challenge of the climate emergency will not be resolved by a vaccination. It has to be approached in a coherent manner. That is why it is important, when we consider our scope for partnerships and our energy security, that we ensure Brexit does not have a massive detrimental impact on our energy supply. We rely on the UK for many of our imports but we should look at embracing the Celtic interconnector that will result in energy from continental Europe, specifically France, landing into Cork. That shows the major potential for Ireland and France to work proactively and progressively together within the EU.

Ireland and France have a strong relationship when it comes to dealing with the Common Agricultural Policy and the future of our agrifood sector. We need to take that initiative and those decades of co-operation between the French and Irish Governments and throw that into energy supply and energy security to ensure, as we develop our domestic energy capacities through wind, wave, solar and everything else, that when we need to import, we import clean energy from continental, reliable sources. That provides a significant opportunity for international co-operation. It gets to the heart of this legislation and of why it is important for us, as a small, open liberal democracy in the EU to be shown to lead.

We have a proud history in this State of overseas development aid work, going back to the time of the missions. We know climate change impacts the poorest in the world more than anyone else. Anyone who has travelled around central Africa can see it in the desertification process and the droughts and we see it in the wildfires in other parts of the world. This is focused on those who are most exposed and that is why it falls on us, as a developed country and a country that has had many privileges laid upon us by geography, economy and so much else, to seize that responsibility and show leadership to the people in our own country and the wider world.

There are many aspects to this legislation on which I hope to contribute when we get to Committee and Report Stages. At this general stage, I wholeheartedly commend this legislation to the House. It was a privilege to spend a couple of hours subbing into the committee that did so much work in recent months to bring this to this Stage. I thank the Minister for his time and indulgence and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Anois, the Rural Independents Group. Deputies Nolan and Michael Collins are sharing.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Rural Ireland and the farmers of Ireland do not need any lectures from the multitude of environmental NGOs or Green Deputies and Senators about looking after the land or our rural heritage. This is what they have always done down through the years. Unfortunately, they do not get credit for the great work that is done. For example, there is sequestration of carbon taking place. That is happening but it is not given enough credit.

The Bill is ambitious but it is ambitious nonsense. Where are the costings? Where is the sense of proportion or even the most minimal understanding of the extraordinary damage this Bill will create for the model of farming that currently exists?

The Oireachtas Library and Research Service is clear in its comments on this legislation that certain sectors will be more affected in the short term, namely, agriculture, energy and transport. Many people, such as those working in fossil-fuel powered electricity generation, will lose their jobs. We have had enough of that already in the midlands. Our communities in Laois-Offaly and the wider midlands area are being left behind. Not one job has been created under the just transition process.

Last weekend, we were all shocked to see that a local man who built up a bicycle hire business at a scenic spot that attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists, namely, Lough Boora in County Offaly, cannot even hold onto his job. He has been passed over with a tendering process. It is totally unfair. Local people are not getting fair play. There is nothing fair about the transition taking place in the midlands. Jobs are being lost while none are being created. Local people are being excluded from the plans in terms of the policy and Bord na Móna's transition. Bord na Móna appears to have forgotten its loyal workforce and the local people who helped build up the company and build up a local attraction at Lough Boora into what it is today. I hope justice will be done in regard to that situation involving Pat Barrett and his family.

This Bill is essentially a just transition for the entire country. I urge colleagues, if they want to see what this looks like, to take a good hard look at the midland counties and to talk to peat contractors, Bord na Móna workers and many who have lost their jobs and still have mortgages and bills to pay. They are paying the price for idealism that borders on nonsense. That is what this is. Our experience of a just transition is one where entire communities have been left behind and where employment losses are masked by empty rhetoric of biodiversity strategies that care little for how ordinary people want to live their lives.

In terms of the costs, which do not figure prominently in this debate, an article on Bloomberg recently made it clear that making America carbon-neutral could cost \$1 trillion a year. Relatively speaking, can we expect similarly unsustainable levels of costs here? Closer to home, it has been accepted in the UK that reaching carbon net zero will incur large costs. For example, in 2019, it was estimated that the total costs of getting to net zero would be £50 billion per year.

In this policy area, I highlight what is happening with the importing from Germany of lignite briquettes, which are not good for the environment. Lignite briquettes are being imported and the people of Laois-Offaly deserve answers. How is that reducing the carbon footprint? I strongly call on the Minister to answer that question and to be respectful to the people who have been punished. How will it reduce our carbon footprint, when we take into account all the transportation involved? What is happening is ludicrous. I cannot understand how logical and

good people can honestly stand up and say this is a good thing when people are losing jobs and lignite briquettes and peat are being imported while 17,000 horticulture jobs are at risk of being lost here. It does not make sense and never will. The people imposing these policies on us need to stand up and explain themselves. At the very least, they should have the respect to do that. As a reasonable and logical Deputy, I am asking for answers. The people of the midlands, who are being severely punished under a just transition, need the answers to these questions. I urge the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to come in here and answer the questions that need to be answered.

In terms of forestry, it is a total joke. The programme for Government states the afforestation target is 8,000 ha. per year. The Government is missing that target by almost 80%. That was highlighted a few days ago in the *Irish Farmers' Journal*. How can the Government punish the people of rural Ireland while missing its own targets? Is that not double standards at work? It is crazy stuff. It needs to be questioned and I am strongly challenging it, along with my rural colleagues. It is not right what the Government is doing to people. It is totally unjust and I ask Government Members to come in and explain how it is working and why they think we should accept this and have such harsh measures foisted and imposed upon us. Has the Government seen the utter shambles the forestry sector is in and has been in for years? What is the solution? Is it to throw more farmers on the pile to clog up an already broken system while destroying their traditional way of life?

This Bill will ensure transport is directly hit with a sector emissions ceiling.

The implementation of various policy measures will have an impact on this too. That includes how quickly the level of electric vehicles increases. We know the Government set a target of having 1 million electric vehicles on the road by 2030 as part of the 2019 climate action plan. That is equivalent to one third of the vehicles currently on the road today, but only if the Government keeps its commitment to ban petrol and diesel cars by 2030, which is ludicrous. From the parliamentary questions I have submitted we know that not a single local authority has made a move to install electric vehicle charging points. Perhaps they see how ludicrous the whole situation is and the policies and decision-making here. Let us be clear, the Government's proposal to outlaw the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030 is ludicrous and must be urgently re-examined. My sense is that the proposal to force everyone to buy electric vehicles is being greeted with disbelief and genuine anger in many parts of the country, but especially in rural Ireland. The Government does not seem to understand how rural Ireland operates. It is making decisions and imposing them on people in rural areas. That is why we have such division. That is why we are coming into the House very frustrated. We are trying to get the message across to the Government that we are hearing from our constituents, but the Government that is made up of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party is not listening to us. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael seem to be very happy to let the Green Party run riot and to destroy rural Ireland.

As I outlined, there is no confidence in the Government's proposal to roll out a nationwide line of electric vehicle charging points, given the fiasco it has made of the national broadband plan for example. While there is obviously some merit in encouraging motorists to make the change to electric or hybrid cars voluntarily, the current proposal would actively discriminate against those who wish to continue to buy petrol or diesel vehicles and those who may not be able to afford the high prices demanded for electric cars. There seems to be no appreciation of the distances that some people have to travel in rural Ireland and the challenges that would result from an absence of charging points.

This Bill is a disaster. It is a dangerous piece of ideological lunacy that cannot and should not be supported by anyone with even the remotest concern for the future of rural Ireland.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am here today to speak about the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill. I will be very clear with the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, that if the amendments we will table are not accepted - that would work in rural Ireland - I will not support the Bill as it currently stands. It is an attack on the people of rural Ireland and agriculture.

I am shocked by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies. I know they bought into power, but it should not come at a price to the people who put them there, who supported them to get a seat in Dáil Éireann and to stand up here. They will sell their soul for that seat. That is a sad reflection on politics and on this piece of work they have done.

The Government is in place for 12 months already. We will table amendments to the Bill. I see no difference in the situation whereby there is raw sewage in Castletownshend, in Goleen in west Cork, in Belgooly or not even an extension to the sewerage scheme in Ballinspittle. Nothing is happening. The parties are in government, shoving on taxes. We had a carbon tax over the weekend which was an absolute attack on rural Ireland. I put something up on social media about it and I was stunned at the reaction. People are furious. The cost of home heating oil has gone through the roof. The cost of living has gone up. People must drive cars to take their children to school, thanks to the Green Party, backed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil who pat them on the back-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: And some Independents.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----and a few nod-and-wink Independents. That is what they are. They will come in here and give out about it, but they will vote for it at the end of the day.

There is a need for emergency funding for toilet facilities on beaches in west Cork. Local authorities say they cannot afford to put bins on the side of the street. The country will be covered in litter. There is no money. Where is the money going to come from for that or for public transport? Does the Minister of State expect someone like me to support the Government's attack on rural Ireland and on motorists? Instead of a three-mile limit for people to be collected from school the Government will have to cut it down to 1 km to give parents an opportunity for their children to be collected from their homes and brought to school. That is how the Government will win over the people of rural Ireland, not by fining them in their pocket and swiping it out of their wallet. The Government's plan at the moment is to insulate Dublin by crucifying west Cork, and I will not stand for that for a moment in this Chamber or anywhere else either.

I was saddened to hear a Deputy from west Cork say that Deputies will be delighted when extra jobs come from this Bill. Of course we would be delighted if there were, but what he forgot to say is that in west Cork we lost five jobs under the warmer homes schemes three or four months ago, and there was not a whisper out of this Government. This scheme was supposed to provide insulation in homes. It is the biggest con job that was ever known to mankind. That Deputy is quite happy to say jobs will be created, but we have lost them already. Some people are waiting for two years to get their home insulated.

We will be tabling amendments to ensure this works out the way it should work out and not the way the Government has it. Has the Government decided what it is going to do about insulation? The VAT should be cut from 23% to zero if the Government really wants the scheme to

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work and to heat people's homes through insulation. Imagine people trying to buy insulation with 23% VAT when the Green Party is in government. There is nothing in the Bill to address that. All the Government wants is money from the pockets of the people in rural Ireland. We will watch this Bill and name it for what it is.

The tourism sector needs protection from increased costs in aviation. The Minister said he is going to shove up costs. The Government is saying the cost of flights into this country will not affect tourism. Of course it will affect tourism. Will Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies wake up and come out of the fog where they are at the moment? Are they so hoodwinked by power that they will sell anything to get this across the line?

The Minister says there will be no negative impact on road building. I sincerely hope that is the case. There has been no road building in Cork South-West for the past 20 years since the Skibbereen bypass was put in place. Nothing has been done with the Innishannon bypass or the Bandon bypass. The only thing we will get is a bit of money for pothole repair. My God, the parties in government should be proud of themselves. As for the new expert group, this is the new Dáil - shove it over to an expert group. Is it going to be made up of farm organisations, rural dwellers, rural communities and rural transport? No, it will be made up of collar and tie pencil pushers from the Green Party. That is what we are going to have in this country.

I would like to speak about REAP, the results-based environment-agri pilot project scheme. How could any of the Green Party's senior Ministers in Cabinet approve of a REAP scheme that is coming before the people of west Cork and the people of Ireland which disallows heather? In the name of God, what is wrong with the Green Party? The party will have rural Ireland on fire thanks to its carry-on. It is time to wake up and see what is going on. The Government has approved of a scheme whereby farmers will get less money, and if they have heather on their land, they are excluded. That is a scandal beyond belief. That is what is before the people.

The Government tells me that this is going to do some good for the people of rural Ireland. For the love of God, wake up. If the Government does not approve of our amendments, we will make sure it will be dragged through the country for what it will do with the Bill. When Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Social Democrats and the Labour Party, the usual gang – they are all the one – and probably Sinn Féin and a few nod-and-wink Independents knock on the doors at the next election, how will they answer the man and woman who tell them they cannot afford the home heating bill? They are supporting driving the price through the roof. What will they do when people tell them they cannot afford the fuel bill for the car, as the price of diesel and petrol has gone through the roof? What will they do when people tell them they cannot get a bale of Irish briquettes, but they can get a German one? What will they do when people tell them they cannot get a bag of Irish peat moss at the nurseries, but they can get a South African bag at an extra cost? What will they do when people tell them they cannot fell or grow forestry, but they can get timber in from Russia? How will the politicians look them in the eye and say they voted for the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which will heavily penalise rural Ireland? It was they who supported the carbon tax Bill that penalised rural Ireland so we could insulate the high-class Dublin. If the politicians tell the truth at the doorstep or tell a lie, they should be prepared to run as the public are watching and seething that Deputies are coming in here and blindly supporting the Bill without serious amendments. They are simply with the birds and not with the people.

The Government is saying that this will not be an attack on agriculture. In a recent front-page article in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* the heading was "Climate Bill threatens national

herd". It is not Deputy Michael Collins that said this; it is the *Irish Farmers' Journal*.

It went on to state that up to 53% of the suckler herd, or 530,000 cattle, would have to be culled by 2030 to meet emissions targets. It continued to state that with a 51% target reduction by 2030, the livestock sector is facing significant challenges. It also stated that targets would be counted for the first five-year period from 2021 and that cutting the national cattle herd suggested a scenario where 536,000 suckler cows would be culled by 2030. Under the climate Bill targets published this week, a potential cull could be substantially bigger and affect dairy and suckler herds.

This is independent research; it is not from Deputy Michael Collins. Fianna Fáil has told us there will be no problem, and Fine Gael has said this is all pie in the sky and there will be a great boost for agriculture. For God's sake, who do they think they are kidding? The Bill would be highly destructive to every facet of the economy, including the agrifood sector which employs 164,400 people. The Bill aims to cut carbon emissions by 51% by 2030 and meet net zero emissions by 2030 but makes no exception for the agrifood sector. As a result, the national cattle herd faces a 51% cull by 2030.

According to independent research this will mean culling 3.4 million cattle. A farmer with 50 cattle today will only be allowed 24 in 2030. This crushing and counteractive move will destroy family farms. For example, the Mercosur trade deal will allow 99,000 tonnes of beef to come into the EU from countries like Brazil. Ireland should not worry because the Government will back that. New research from Oxford University highlights this would in fact be more environmentally destructive than home-grown beef, thus underlining the stupidity of the Government's approach. It is truly astonishing that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would agree to such drastic proposals which would see our meat coming from the opposite side of the world instead of from local farms.

A Fine Gael Deputy referred to Shakespeare during this debate, but I will keep it Irish. All Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Green Party Deputies and the rest who will support the Bill should remember the words Eamon de Valera said about the great Michael Collins, "It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time history will record the greatness of Michael Collins and it will be recorded at my expense." Let me tell Deputies this. It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time, history will record that this Bill was the biggest attack on agriculture and rural Ireland and will be at the expense of every man, woman and child living in rural Ireland.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I would first like to note with appreciation the work of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and his Department in producing a comprehensive Bill for consideration before the House. As Members will know, the Joint Committee on Climate Action, of which I am a member, spent several months working on recommendations for implementation of and improvements to the draft Bill provided to us in late 2020. I am very proud of the work we achieved as a group and I am equally pleased to see so many recommendations we made being incorporated into the Bill.

I also acknowledge the work of the members, from all parties and none, of the previous climate action committee and the then Minister, Deputy Bruton. The recommendations from and work in prior years led to the 2019 Act, which we aspire to improve through this Bill.

The committee report was informed by relevant experts who gave of their time and for that I am very grateful. As have Members of both Houses, members of the committee received hun-

dreds of emails making various recommendations. The majority of these are contained in the Bill, though there are some notable exceptions which will undoubtedly be dealt with by way of other legislation in the coming term.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and others have at this stage gone through the objectives of the Bill but it is important, as a member of the committee, to set out some of the points here today. The Bill places on a statutory basis the national climate objective, which commits to pursue and achieve no later than 2050 the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and carbon neutral economy. It embeds the process of carbon budgeting into law, which will see the Government required to adopt a series of economy-wide five-year carbon budgets, including sectoral targets for each relevant sector, on a rolling 15-year basis, starting this year.

Actions for each sector will be detailed in the climate action plan and will be updated annually. A national long-term climate action strategy will be prepared every five years. Ministers will be responsible for achieving the legally binding targets for their own sectoral area, with each Minister accounting for his or her performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas committee each year. This of course gives all Members of the Houses an opportunity to scrutinise in detail their own sectoral interests.

The Bill strengthens the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, tasking it with proposing carbon budgets to the Minister. It provides that the first two five-year carbon budgets proposed by the council should equate to a total reduction of 51% in emissions over the period to 2030, in line with the programme for Government commitments. Furthermore, we will see the expansion of the council from 11 to 14 members, and the Bill provides that future appointments to the council provide for a greater range of relevant expertise and gender balance.

The Bill introduces an opportunity for each local authority to prepare a climate action plan that will be updated every five years and which in itself is an extremely important public participation tool and will include mitigation and adaptation measures. Local authority development plans will have to conform with their climate action plans, which is an important step. Public bodies will be obliged to perform their functions in a manner consistent with climate plans and strategies and to further the achievement of the national climate objective.

Many have commented that Ireland is a small island off the coast of Europe, that what we do in the context of climate action and carbon emissions reductions simply does not matter, and that we are too small and insignificant to make any difference to global warming. I am not alone in believing Ireland has a duty to the world to use our unique global influence, within the EU and our broader reach across the globe, to lead by example. We are one of the richest nations on the planet. We are leaders in technology, education, longevity and wealth, to name but a few. Despite what my colleagues opposite believe, we are a wonderful country and have extraordinary potential to punch well above our weight, and in regard to climate action we should be no different.

By way of example, last month the OECD reported that Ireland had the second-highest rate of university graduates in the EU. Recently, it ranked Ireland in the top percentile, that is, 13th in the world, for safety and security and noted our life expectancy is higher than that of the European average. Indeed, at the end of 2020, the UN ranked Ireland second in the world for quality of life. We are far from flawless, but we are not just a small island off the coast of Europe; we are global influencers.

The Bill is a step in the right direction in recognising our responsibilities and putting in place legislation that will give us the tools to be ambitious with our targets. Bringing all communities with us in this goal will be fundamental to our success or failure in reaching our targets. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches are needed, linking public and private interest where necessary to achieve the kind of climate responsible Ireland we all want to see.

Many scientists and experts have highlighted the year 2100 as a year of unthinkable severity. Children born in 2018 in Ireland, in line with the average life expectancy of 82 years, will be alive in the year 2100. Without action, by this time our planet will be experiencing some of the most dramatic impacts of climate change. This, therefore, is not some abstract debate. The generations that will live with the consequences are already among us and we can already see it. The children of today will be the voters of tomorrow, and they will not easily forget who did and said what.

Improving our infrastructure and making it more climate resilient will play an increasingly important role in the coming decades. This is not just about sustainable public transport and a reduction in car dependency. It is about ensuring the energy used to power our transport network is low or no carbon emitting. Simply replacing our national fleet of combustion engine cars - I understand there are nearly 3 million cars - with electric ones is not really a solution. We must put in place the transport infrastructure that meets our needs, even if it does not turn a profit, because it is in our interest, no matter the cost.

We must ensure that worsening storms and other severe weather events do not impede our ability to deliver reliable services to the population. We must also be aware that transition fuels will have a role to play as we advance to our goal of becoming carbon neutral. This includes the realistic need to rely on gas in the short and medium term.

We must, as is our responsibility, provide energy security in Ireland. Simply turning off all fossil fuels is not possible at this very moment, despite how much we might wish it so. I suspect, for example, that deliberately blurring the lines between gas, liquified natural gas and fracked gas will not serve the best interests of our population as we move towards green energy sources. Investing in wind and solar energy will be a positive move in the short to medium term and can create both direct and indirect jobs and provide a new sector in the economy. Policy and technical innovation in this area are welcome, particularly with regard to deeper waters off the west coast. This innovation that we are so good at, as can be seen in new national policy regarding apprentices, is something we can achieve but we must aim higher.

Environmentally sustainable technologies will continue to grow and play an ever larger role in the international economy. Ireland is well placed to take advantage of this emerging market. Our business environment, high third level attainment and young population lends itself to a competitive advantage over other nations. However, to capture these jobs and revenues, we must be proactive and progressive in our policy decision-making processes. We must also move faster.

Many changes will be necessary to achieve our goals, however, these do not need to be negative, many can have positive impacts improving our efficiency, cost of living and home expenses. Not all change is bad. By developing research and development funds and fostering a culture of innovation across our business and universities we can be at the forefront of cutting-edge technological developments, key to our global success in this endeavour. We have seen the introduction of funds that I hope will be developed over the years to come, namely, the

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green enterprise fund announced in the July stimulus in 2020 and the green innovation fund, within the EU. I firmly believe that if we can make the necessary steps in providing supports and funding, we will, in time, enjoy a return that far outweighs its costs today. As is the case with many aspects of climate change, we recognise that acting sooner could have limited the number of risks we now face. We must, therefore, not forget that lesson and instead look forward to the challenge ahead, ready to engage with all sectors and build an innovation coalition. If we are successful in this goal, we can lift our communities to new heights.

As with any major societal or industrial change throughout history, there are risks and occasionally certain communities have been marginalised. What sets this situation apart is that the Government has an opportunity to steer these changes, insofar as it can, towards climate justice, ensuring that no section of society is left behind without support. This can only be achieved through hard work, good faith and co-operation between business, communities and Government. Providing sector-specific supports will allow industries to make the necessary changes that will allow us to reach our goals, and for some sectors this will not only benefit the environment but also workers. For others it may be necessary for the Government to provide meaningful upskilling and retraining programmes or deliver economic opportunities. A shift in trajectory of the nature we are discussing, can only be sustained if it is done in a balanced and considered manner. I referred earlier to the apprenticeship programme recently announced by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris. It is a key innovator in carbon neutral elements to an emerging economy, particularly in areas such as retrofitting and maybe other innovations we have not yet embraced.

There is no corner of this land that will be insulated from the kind of changes we are discussing here today. This presents us with a burden of responsibility to ensure that Government policy in one sector is co-ordinated with the policies of other sectors and in conjunction with our overarching climate goals. Retrofitting will be a major undertaking and we must ensure that the resources and skills are there to allow an efficient roll-out of the scheme. Investing in apprenticeships will not only create jobs but allow us to hit our targets in the fastest time possible, particularly in the residential market. The targets are around 25,000 per annum. With 2 million properties in Ireland, we are proposing to do 400,000 by 2030. That leaves a lot left over which is why these reskilling programmes are imperative, not just in job creation but in giving students options other than third level and in terms of climate action. This is also true of other innovations such as heat-pumps and smart-metering which will play a significant role. These schemes will work for the economy, the consumer and the environment. Retrofitting, however, has an obvious deficiency. Our targets are extremely difficult to hit for a number of reasons. We lack the builders, the relevant expertise to transform the sector and, frankly, we do not have the national resources to fund everything that we should or want to achieve. This will be a major challenge in the near future and that is all without touching on commercial buildings.

Electrification of our national public transport network will be a major undertaking but one that will have to happen. Plans already under way must receive the support of the Government and this House. I am sure the Government recognises that we need to speed up this process. Many decry that metro, for example, has been planned since 2007 - in fact, it was 1974 when it was first proposed by Forfás, a lifetime ago. It is 40 years too long - we need to move faster.

Increasing transport links and service reliability will increase public confidence in these services, and work in favour of our goal of encouraging greater passenger numbers, who would otherwise have to use private vehicles. Increasing the safety and functionality of our cycle and walkways across towns, villages and cities will further provide the public with access to clean

public transport. The Fingal Coastal Way is a prime example of community development that will benefit everyone and the environment. These routes, dotted around the country now, can also form part of our transit offering, and not just for recreation. Electric scooters and e-bikes can also play an enormous role in getting people out of their cars. Micro-mobility needs to be adopted for the last few kilometres of a journey, and providing legislation for these vehicles should be implemented without delay. There are two Bills before the House in this regard and a further undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny. Like a Dublin Bus, one waits a long time for something to come along and three arrive at the same time. We must move faster.

All of these public transport plans should not and cannot be the preserve of urban Ireland. Rural Ireland must also benefit from measures which are sustainable and allow choice when it comes to transiting from work or education.

I touched on our global presence earlier. Ireland's role on the UN Security Council puts us in a unique position at this time and affords us the opportunity to impress upon the nations of the world that climate change is a security and, indeed, an existential threat to all nations, big and small. We have, through our hard work, developed a strong voice in Europe and this has allowed us the opportunity to play a continuing role in the development of climate action policies which will change how many aspects of our society at home and abroad operate.

I admire the growing recognition that 51% by 2030 may not be fast enough. Ireland is committed to the Paris Agreement and should continue to ensure that the international community remains so. We must take a Paris-plus approach and continue to increase our ambitions and our actions when technology and innovation allow us to do so.

Many countries are already suffering and will continue to endure hardship in the years ahead as a direct result of climate change. This threatens to disrupt trade routes, the global economy, regional security and cause humanitarian disasters, the likes of which we have never seen. We must use our international position to prepare for and help those nations most exposed. We have it within our power to help those nations prepare for these issues, while also allowing them to develop their economies, if we act together on climate change. It highlights the importance of our overseas development programme. Citizens of Ireland are often noted as being the most generous individually for their contributions to charitable causes but, as a nation, we have a target that we have not yet met of 1% of GDP. We have to recognise that will form an integral part of dealing with climate change.

In November COP26 will be held in Glasgow and will be a moment on which future generations will look back and highlight as one where we, as an international community, finally acted with conviction or let the moment pass without consensus. The latter would have dire consequences for the world and all those who will follow us. The Dublin climate dialogues will take place shortly and provide an opportunity for us to lay the groundwork for COP26, another opportunity to press our vision of the future on our partners.

I appreciate that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, will entertain improving amendments to the Bill at a later Stage. I look forward to that process on Committee Stage. I am a member of the committee. There are great opportunities. Notwithstanding the remarks of the speaker I have followed, there is consensus in this House and the Seanad that it would be simply unacceptable to do nothing. We now have an opportunity, perhaps a little later than we should, to enshrine in legislation the targets we have set out in the programme for Government and other agreements to which we are signatories. It is important that we take our responsibility as Members

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of this House extremely seriously in this matter. I mentioned in my contribution how future generations will look back and say there was either success or failure. I would hate to believe political squabbling over ambitions and targets within this climate action Bill will somehow result in Members opposite voting against a Government proposal, particularly on fracked gas and such matters, which we know will be included in a later Bill. This has already been stated by the Government.

We are less than a year into the first of what will presumably be five years of government so it irks me somewhat when I get emails saying this or that process has been delayed. We are not even into year two. We have time but the climate does not, and that is why we have to act quickly on climate change and set about carbon budgeting as soon as we possibly can. We should bear in mind this will have implications for all sectors and Departments, and all of us, as Members of this House, have a responsibility to follow through on the commitments in the legislation. Whether Members vote with this Government or not, they have a responsibility to their constituents that is as valid as my commitment to those very same people. I very much look forward to the Bill progressing through the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhartha ar an ábhar fíorthábhachtach seo anocht sa Dáil agus ar an bpíosa reachtaíochta tábhachtach atá os ár gcomhair. Beidh tionchar mór aige ar obair an Rialtais agus ar an ngeilleagar fosta, ar chaighdeán saoil ár saoránach agus ar an todhchaí atá bunaithe ar charbón íseal. Ní cóir go mbeadh gníomhartha ar son na haeráide mar bhagairt d’aon duine. Is teachtaireacht iontach láidir a chaithfimid a phlé, go háirithe leo siúd nach greideann go bhfuil fadhb ann ó thaobh na haeráide. Is a mhalairt ba chóir a bheith i gceist. Ba chóir go mbeadh sé ina chosán i dtreo poist úra le pá maith in earnáil luachmhar na todhchaí. Ba chóir go ndéanfadh sé cinnte de nach bhfuil aon duine fágtha ar gcúl. Níl mórán sa reachtaíocht seo a bhaineann le haistriú atá ceart ná cothrom agus ar an drochuair cífidimid fiú amháin an tseachtain seo go bhfuil daoine fágtha ar gcúl agus tá an Rialtas seo ag brú cánacha níos airde ar shaoránaigh na tíre seo ó thaobh carbóin de.

The record of the three parties in government during the financial crisis and its aftermath would do little to inspire confidence in their willingness to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable as we deal with this transition. This has already been evidenced in the attitude towards carbon tax. People right across the State have felt the burden of the policy introduced last year to increase carbon tax. The ESRI and Department itself said this policy was regressive and would affect rural dwellers and, worse, those on low incomes and households with single parents. All the increase in carbon tax will do, unfortunately, is make households poorer when heating their homes over the coming months because the alternatives do not exist. If they do, they are not readily available or affordable to the individuals concerned.

When we talk about just transition, there needs to be more than words; it has to mean something. With annual increases to 2030 now hardwired into tax legislation, the burden will increase continually. As I said when the carbon tax was introduced, it is striking that the Government did not match it with annual increases in welfare payments through the Social Welfare Consolidation Act to prevent vulnerable citizens from bearing the brunt of its regressive impacts, which are well known and documented.

The legislation demands change from the Government. Change is needed. Despite the high rhetoric of Fine Gael, its actions and policies have ensured that the State has missed its target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions year after year. Its willingness to subsidise the activities of

big industry undermines not only homeownership but also environmental protection. Fine Gael provided €2.4 billion in subsidies to the fossil fuel industry in 2019. This was higher than in the previous year. As always, actions speak louder than words or targets written in any legislation.

My principal concern regarding this legislation is whether its objectives can be achieved. The Bill will see the introduction of five-year carbon budgets, with Ministers and Departments responsible for achieving legally binding targets. There will be three carbon budgets, covering the periods 2021 to 2025, 2026 to 2030, and 2031 to 2035, with a 51% reduction in emissions to be reached by 2030. My concern relates to what will be achieved during the first carbon budget. Achieving these targets will require massive investment the likes of which we have never seen before. I do not believe that this Government is up for the type of investment required. While we are legislating for carbon targets here, there is no similar legislation for targets concerning the mental health or welfare of the population or, indeed, the provision of health services and housing. What we do not need to see as a result of the lack of investment by the Government is Departments being forced to make decisions that will put those aims on the back-burner.

The plan is for an annual increase in expenditure, as we see in the stability programme update, of 3.5% to 2025, reaching a broadly balanced budget. That is roughly what the Government published at the beginning of 2020 before the pandemic, programme for Government and this Bill. In the words of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, it really just allows us to stand still. It deals with inflation, wage increases and demographics but does not take into account any other commitments. Therefore, the contradictions between the position of the Department of Finance and this legislation will become clear in upcoming budgets. I advise the Green Party to measure the significance of this legislation against those contradictions. To achieve the targets in this legislation will require a new approach and significant investment. For that reason, without more transparency from the Department of Finance on the impacts of this legislation on budget expenditure, taxation and deficits, I believe we are blind in this debate. The Bill's objectives, though well intentioned, are in doubt.

Deputy Martin Browne: My colleagues in Sinn Féin and I are committed to measures that benefit our environment and address the potential catastrophe of climate change. Nobody is immune to climate change. We see its consequences across the globe right now. Around the world, we see a migrant crisis that is due in part to climate change. We see water poverty, polluted seas and rivers and the desertification of land. Floods are affecting the lives of countless people each year.

At home, we have seen climate change affect people across the country, especially those living near waterways and coasts. The need for swift action has never been more pronounced. Our future generations depend on it. Any action that is taken for this purpose will require people to change their habits and embrace diversification. This is fundamental but it must be done carefully. While a framework like the one we are talking about is needed, we must be aware of and cater to the human aspect. We will benefit from our collective efforts only if the poorest are protected from bearing the brunt of the cost. This must be done very carefully. We cannot expect it to work without the buy-in of our workers, families, family farmers and society in general. This is important because it is primarily the poorest who suffer, whether it is through the direct impacts of climate change or the obligations imposed on them to address it. That is why we must examine the fine text of this document. If we do not do so, we might overlook the fact that the term “just transition” does not feature very much, meaning climate justice falls victim to applying only where its realisation is practicable. We can talk about a transition all we like but if we cannot guarantee it is just, we cannot guarantee it will work.

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There has been much talk, debate and argument about how we should tackle pollution, climate change and emissions. There are varying views on how to do this but we must all agree that there should be buy-in from everybody. Once that is the case, we will know we are on the right path. A just transition is identified by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, as “the policies and investments needed for a fast and fair transformation to a low carbon economy”. It means charting a path that assists everyone in making the journey and making a concerted effort to reduce inequalities, but that is thrown out the window by the definition of climate justice in the Bill. It is defined as “the requirement that decisions and actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the effects of climate change shall, in so far as it is practicable to do so, safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable persons and endeavour to share the burdens and benefits arising from climate change”. I think Deputies will agree the latter definition indicates that justice will not apply equally to those with less.

We have only to look back a few days to when the increase in carbon tax took effect. It penalises people who could not afford to carry out large-scale upgrading of their homes, that is, those who can least afford the tax. It leads to fuel poverty and is not very just. The range of grants available on both domestic and organisational bases are attractive only to those who can afford large-scale projects. Take, for example, community centres or community sports centres, which form the backbone of many communities. Many of them could do with money-saving measures that solar panels or rainwater-harvesting systems could provide them with. I have been approached about this in my county. When it comes to rainwater harvesting, no specific grant is available for these organisations. If a community facility wanted to install solar panels with a view to ploughing the money saved into further retrofitting in the years to come, it would once more be disappointed because stand-alone projects are not provided for through the communities energy grant scheme.

I appeal to the Government to consider those groups that want to play a part in energy saving and the benefits that go with it. I refer to the approach we must take to ensure that climate action measures are effective. It must bring all our citizens with it, including our agricultural sector. Family farmers are well positioned to contribute to Ireland’s reductions and want to play their part, but it is far from certain that the principles of a just transition and climate justice extend to them. It must not be forgotten, amid all our ambitions, that farm families, rural communities, entire regions and a considerable proportion of our exports are dependent on the ability of our farmers to continue with their livelihoods while also effecting these changes. We cannot expect the agricultural sector to adapt to the changes needed without being facilitated in this process.

This is evident in the horticultural sector. Nurseries and mushroom factories in County Tipperary face additional costs to import horticultural peat because they are being prevented from obtaining Irish horticultural peat. A just approach does not extend to them and as a result they find themselves alone in meeting the additional costs of importing peat, along with the carbon footprint involved. This is an example of where joined-up lateral thinking is needed but this, like horticultural peat itself, is in short supply and our businesses are suffering through a lack of support.

Sinn Féin is of the firm belief that aligning labour with social and environmental priorities is a vital ingredient to dealing with climate change. In this regard, the Minister must define what he believes a just transition to be. We have pressed him on this since a draft of the Bill was published in October last. As a result, it is briefly mentioned in the Bill but, unfortunately, is given no prominence and little reference and lacks clarity. Sinn Féin will work to strengthen the Bill’s provisions in regard to a just transition and climate justice. We will do this to protect

workers and the industries and sectors that will be impacted throughout the island.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: We are all aware that change needs to happen as regards climate action. To do nothing is not acceptable. Whether it is a heating system in someone's home or the mode of transport he or she uses, it is going to happen but it needs to be done over time and in an affordable manner. We need incentives for people to change, whether in regard to electric cars or speeding up the insulation and retrofitting of homes. I have previously raised the issue of the increasing cost of living through the prices of gas, coal, home heating oil, petrol and diesel affecting the people who can least afford it.

Emissions from transport are one of the biggest issues. The growing number of cars on the road has pushed up transport emissions, overtaking those of electricity generation and making it one of the highest polluting sectors. For example, no electric buses have been bought for any of Ireland's cities, with Ireland falling far behind eastern European states in this regard. Instead, we have focused on buses and trucks that run on gas, as a greener alternative to diesel. Many would suggest that the leakage of methane from such vehicles means their beneficial climate effects are minimal. They say electric is a much better option and action on electric buses for all our major cities is long overdue.

Electric cars have also failed to take off in a significant way in Ireland, with sales well below the EU average. The previous Minister with responsibility for transport announced that by 2030, all new cars and vans would produce zero emissions, with a target of 800,000 electric cars on the road by 2030. There were just 3,500 in 2017, and I can tell the Minister some of the reasons for this. Recently, a constituent spoke to me about how his family had switched to an electric car a few months previously. They have no driveway, so the only way in which they can charge their car is by running a cable from their sitting room through the window and across the footpath to the car as there is no charging point in their housing estate. This person was so conscious that this could cause an accident outside his home with someone tripping over the cable that he applied to Meath County Council to inquire whether he could install a charging point outside his home. This was refused and I am sure many others are in the same position.

My conversation with this gentleman made me wonder whether all new house builds from 2021 or 2022 should come with charging points in the driveway. Every household will have the use of an electric car between 2030 and 2050. Homes last a lifetime, as will charging points. Do we need to put in place this measure to ensure that families will have all the infrastructure in place when moving into their new homes? My constituency of Meath West has eight e-car charging points, two in Enfield, two in Trim and four in Navan. This leaves out a huge area, with places such as Oldcastle, Athboy, Delvin, Collinstown and Castlepollard without charging points. The ESB has no current plans to install them in these areas but has stated there is an e-car charging point near to the towns, in Kells. This is a 35-minute journey for someone driving from Oldcastle or Castlepollard. The charging points in some of the eight locations have continuous problems, as engineers have been trying to fix them remotely during the lockdowns. I have recently been in contact with ESB Ecars over a number of complaints from constituents.

Furthermore, electric cars are very expensive. Some families have told me they used to spend €50 a week on diesel but now their new electric car is costing them more than €80. Will the Government invest in the installation of charging points and speed up their roll-out, as families cannot be expected to drive for more than half an hour just to charge their cars? If we are serious about electric cars, there need to be charging points in every village and town in rural Ireland. This will alleviate the problem of people being stranded on roads because their car

battery has gone flat.

We also need more bus and rail services to every part of the country, which will take thousands of vehicles off the road. The Navan rail line is the project in my county of Meath that would make the greatest and most positive difference to climate action. The consensus among most people is that doing nothing is not an option.

Deputy Seán Crowe: For the first time in history, we fully understand the damage that human beings are doing to our planet. Our planet is burning and this is probably the last opportunity we will have to put things right. It is heating up. Sea ice and glaciers are melting, animal habitats are disappearing and time is running out. Human beings are responsible for the greatest level of extinction since the most recent ice age. We need to act now because once we tip the balance, we will not get a second chance. It is already too late for vast areas of our planet, as rising seas engulf more land and fertile soil becomes sand, with vast dust plains replacing greenery.

In pursuing climate action targets, we cannot underestimate the need for buy-in and engagement from the public. Citizen engagement has to be key to any climate action plan. Without really explaining this man-made crisis to people, a great deal of the change needed will never be made. We can have all the high policy we like, but if we do not have a grassroots approach, our green spaces, waterways and ecosystems will continue to decline and die. In my local area, I help a group called the Litter Mugs, who clear streams, rivers and public parks. There is a great sense of satisfaction after a long day of clearing great stretches of ground of plastic bottles, coffee cups, beer cans and all the other rubbish a minority leave behind. Unfortunately, in many cases, a week later one will find that much of that work has been undone. The river or park will be covered in plastic, including floating plastic, hundreds of broken bottles and every kind of rubbish known to man. Community outreach programmes rooted in community and voluntary organisations that encourage local communities to drive change at the local level should be a fundamental part of any climate action plan. Removing burnt-out cars and clearing pollution requires both time and money and uses up badly needed resources that could be invested in communities. I know of a GAA club in my own area, Croí Ró-Naofa. Members recently told me that 84 cars had been burnt out in the local park in which they play since 1 January 2018. More needs to be done to support clubs such as Croí Ró-Naofa.

Words on paper will not help to solve the deep crisis facing us with regard to climate change and the pollution that is contributing to extreme environmental damage. Any plans must be fully resourced and funded by Government. Councils should not have to choose between clearing polluted sites and improving other public spaces. Again, the financial burden cannot fall entirely on local authorities. There must be a whole-of-government effort to put climate action at the heart of our policies and policy agendas.

To paraphrase Bobby Sands, whose death occurred 40 years ago today, everyone has their part to play. We owe it to future generations to do things differently. That is what we are asking for. We all need to start doing things differently. We need to pull together to save our planet and to save those habitats and ecosystems. Most of all, we need to do things differently. There is a responsibility on us all to do so. Time is running out. We need to do more. That is the message we need to send out today. We need to do more and we need to do it ourselves.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank the Minister for introducing this long-awaited Bill. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, inspired the modern environmental move-

ment, which began in earnest a decade later. It is recognised as the environmental text that changes the world. The following quote, first published 59 years ago, still rings true today:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road - the one less traveled by - offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.

Some 19 years on from the publication of Rachel Carson's book, Christopher Fettes formed the Green Party in Ireland. That was 40 years ago. His vision was international, as a global movement began in earnest to protect the path to which Rachel Carson referred. For 40 years, the Green Party has campaigned for this legislation against climate deniers, naysayers, lobbyists, complacency, fear and, let us not forget, the populist politicians who stand on the sidelines, afraid to get on the pitch and make a decision. There is a global commitment to collective climate action, and a growing awareness of the need for it, irrespective of the party to which one is committed or where one stands on the political spectrum. This is very evident in the latest German poll, which shows the Greens leading on 28%. Climate change is the greatest threat we have ever faced. It is looming while Ireland stands on the sidelines and ranks among the worst EU countries with regard to climate action.

We are, however, making progress in recognising the gravity of the crisis we are in. Most parties and Members of our Parliament have adopted green politics in their manifestos and have joined the collaborative effort to transition Ireland to a greener, fairer and sustainable state. Owing to this collective effort, today I speak to this monumental Bill and tell the people of Ireland that we will no longer be climate laggards. This Bill will allow us to lead on tackling climate change, no matter what administration or party is in government. It is a response to scientific consensus on climate change and the threat of irreversible global damage to our environment and to our security. It is a response to the natural disasters we are seeing globally and the destruction of wildlife and biodiversity. Importantly, the Bill will protect those people who are most affected by climate change but least equipped to adapt to its effects.

I have heard the saying many times that we know the price of everything and the value of nothing. I have witnessed farmers declaring that they can earn more from organic produce with half the stock. Farmers and their families must be supported so they can earn appropriate incomes from their farms. Diversification of land-use practice will make this happen. Farmers should be afforded a fair share of the profits of industrial agriculture or at least be provided with fair access to the market. Evolving land-use models incorporating forestry are creating carbon-smart agriculture and empowering less intensive agriculture methodologies through which farmers gain and in which industrialisation is not the drumbeat of Irish farming.

Ireland has the fastest growing forestry sector in Europe, with forest currently covering 10% of our land after coming from a standing start of just 1% in 1923. Our maritime climate is unique in Europe. We can grow trees at twice the speed of our European partners. In recent years we established our own structural grade construction timber, C16. In the main, we export this relatively new sustainable construction material to the UK to build homes. Many farmers have already begun to diversify their land, which will see Ireland doubling its roundwood harvest over the next 20 years, increasing the existing rural workforce in this sector with sustainable employment and revenues of up to €6 billion.

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In 2017, South Dublin County Council became the only local authority in Ireland to have a wood-first policy, promoting the use of our own sustainable construction material. This is one of the many steps Ireland is taking to use sustainable carbon neutral materials in construction procurement.

The construction sector is one of the main emitters of CO₂, alongside transport, energy and agriculture. The embodied carbon of materials alone contributes 11% of global emissions. Europe is ahead of the game in setting targets for reducing the embodied carbon of our construction materials - as I noted, South Dublin County Council has a wood-first policy - but this is at the ha'penny place when it comes to real action. A new paradigm of construction methodology is evolving whereby building materials will be reused, locally sourced, maintained and measured to meet sustainable building practices to ensure we meet our climate targets. This Bill seeks to provide such targets.

A just transition is at the core of Green Party policy. Climate action cannot be achieved without climate justice. Retrofitting is a vital component of the programme for Government. It brings families out of fuel poverty and is a great example of how we can create sustainable employment by transitioning our energy sector. Previous Green Party policies, now enshrined in Part L of our building regulations, have taken more people out of fuel poverty than any other policy to date. It is projected that 25,000 people will be upskilled and employed in retrofitting, which will make homes warmer and energy bills cheaper and, importantly, bring families out of the fuel poverty trap.

I will conclude by thanking each and every one of those campaigners, both here in Ireland and globally, who have raised awareness of the rising challenge, who have called for more action, and who have held governments to account for the past six decades. While some have come to the climate change table very recently and may not see this Bill as perfect, they should realise it is the platform on which to build and create and it brings hope. I am sure those who condemn it will get on the pitch in the future to make it perfect.

I thank the Minister for his incredible work on this Bill, which will be his legacy. Eamon has devoted his career and personal life to this global movement to ensure that Ireland becomes a leader in tackling climate change.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Fáiltím roimh an deis cainte sa díospóireacht seo. Is é an Bille seo an Bille is tábhachtaí a chuirfimid tríd an Dáil seo. Níl aon amhras orm faoi sin. Tá gá le leasuithe níos láidre chun a chinntiú go ndéanfaidh an Rialtas seo, agus cibé rialtais a bheidh againn sa todhchaí, beart de réir ár mbriathar. Níl fágtha againn ach fuinneog bheag.

Tá dualgas orainn bearta cuí a thógáil chun a chinntiú nach leanfaimid ar aghaidh ar an mbóthar ar a bhfuilimid. Níl an dara rogha againn. Tá moladh tuillte ag an gComhaontas Glas gan dabht ach ní mór dúinn an cheist a chur, cad atá déanta roimhe seo chun an pointe seo a shroicheadh? Ba mhaith liom dul siar air sin. Ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt don Rialtas seo, agus don Chomhaontas Glas ach go háirithe, ach tagairt a dhéanamh freisin do na feachtais a tháinig roimhe seo, don dochar atá déanta don aeráid agus don todhchaí atá ag teastáil go géar uainn.

I welcome this opportunity. Sometimes, I complain that I do not have enough time, but I will have plenty of time today, which is welcome. I welcome this legislation, which is undoubtedly one of the most important Bills that will pass through the Dáil. It needs strong

amendments. I might return to this point, bearing in mind that the unanimous judgment of the Supreme Court on 31 July 2020 stated that the mitigation plan was vague, among other criticisms. That judgment is one of the reasons we are having this discussion.

I asked myself where we had come from and what the background was to the Bill. Deputy Duffy mentioned *Silent Spring*, which I have with me. I started with the Earth Summit in 1992 and went right up to the declaration of a climate and biodiversity emergency on 9 May 2019. That date is looming. I could go back to 1962 when Ms Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*. She was asked by the then President Kennedy to examine the issue of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, DDT, which is now banned. Her book ignited the environmental movement. I could pick anything. We did not arrive at this position because of the Green Party, Independents or the Government. We have been forced into it. I am glad that the Bill is before us, but it is important that we consider the damage we have done and the amount of effort required to get us to this point. The Kyoto Protocol was agreed in 1997, the year my second son was born. It only entered into force in 2005. We then had the Paris Agreement in 2015. Significantly, Ireland passed the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act that year. We have had reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, including its recent summary for policy makers. There have been more reports since. On 24 September 2019, the Special Report on the Ocean and the Cryosphere in a Changing Climate was published. While I hope I pronounced “Cryosphere” correctly, what is important is not the pronunciation, but that the report spells out the risks posed by melting snow and glaciers, rising sea levels, storms and so on. We have seen evidence of the consequences, with many countries burning, hurricanes and storms. I do not wish to be depressing because what we need is transformative action and a message of hope, but it is important to understand what has led us to this point.

Notwithstanding the legislation we have passed since 2015, we are described as laggards. I thank the Library and Research Service for the digest it has produced. I am indebted to it. According to the digest, Ireland remains a laggard in an international context as regards reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as highlighted in the 2021 Climate Change Performance Index, which was published in December 2020 in the middle of Covid. That index has been published annually since 2005 and tells us that we are the worst. It notes that Ireland, which should be leading the way on reducing greenhouse gas emissions because we have all the natural advantages of a small island, Cyprus and Estonia distinguish themselves by being the worst performing EU countries. According to the digest, Ireland exceeded its annual binding limits in 2016, 2017 and 2018. There was a recent report on last year.

Where am I going with this? Every single step has been forced by such reports, people on the ground and the children of this country and the world who asked us to please take action for their sake and the sake of their children’s children. To bring us up to date, the latest report from the International Energy Agency predicts that, as a consequence of repeated failures to meet targets on reducing our emissions, emissions will rise to 33 billion tonnes in 2021, the largest single increase in over a decade.

Our Joint Committee on Climate Action produced a report. There was then the Supreme Court judgment. We often give out in the Dáil about judges, so it is ironic that they have been the most vocal where our environment is concerned, culminating in the judgment on the last day of July last year. Mr. Justice Frank Clarke delivered that unanimous verdict on behalf of himself and the other six judges. Given that I have time, I will read out some of it for the benefit of people who are tuning in or might tune in later. It reads: “However, it is important to emphasise that these proceedings are concerned with whether the Government of Ireland

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(“the Government”) has acted unlawfully and in breach of rights in the manner in which it has adopted a statutory plan for tackling climate change.” The Supreme Court held that the Government had acted illegally. Mr. Justice Clarke pointed out: “First, the overriding requirement of a national mitigation plan is that it must, in accordance with s.4(2)(a), “specify the manner in which it is proposed to achieve the national transition objective” ... to a “low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy”.” This is not coming from the Green Party or Independents. Rather, the Supreme Court is telling us that the overriding requirement of a compliant plan is that it must specify how the objective is to be achieved. Mr. Justice Clarke wrote: “The public are entitled to know how it is that the government of the day intends to meet the [national transition objective].” The key point is that, under the legislation, the public are entitled to know with some reasonable degree of specificity what the plan is. He continued: “For the reasons also set out in this judgment, I have concluded that the Plan falls well short of the level of specificity required to provide that transparency ... On that basis, I propose that the [national mitigation plan] be quashed.” This is what the Supreme Court thought of our plan.

We are here today with the most important Bill, and I hope it will be even stronger when it becomes law. I mentioned the Supreme Court’s judgment in detail because I will now turn to some of the good elements of the plan. However, there are also some very obvious gaps as well as sections that are open to interpretation. Níl aon chinnteacht. Tá doiléire i gceist. There is no certainty. If we have learned anything from the judgment, it is that we should let the committee examine this matter again. Let us take on board what Professor John Sweeney and other academics told the Government in the letter they wrote to it. They welcomed the 51% reduction target but pointed out that the year-on-year figure of 7%, which is not in the Bill, was ambiguous. They asked how it would be achieved and what its cumulative effect would be. I am no expert in this area, but I am well able to read a letter and see the concerns raised therein. These should be dealt with on Committee Stage.

I welcome that the Government is strengthening the Climate Change Advisory Council and extending its membership. However, that is being done in the context of a January report that, while paying tribute to the advisory council, stated that the council was more reactive than proactive, its communication of the message to the ordinary people of Ireland was poor and there was a focus on economics as opposed to transformation. I hasten to add that Professor John FitzGerald took this on the chin and did not disagree with it, which I welcome. The Government was asked to change the council’s remit in January, but when I look at the Bill, I do not see a significant change in that regard.

I see additions, but the Minister will still hold the power as to who goes on that. The lack of gender balance was appalling. The proposal not to have anybody from the environment or from public health is simply unacceptable. If we have learned anything from the pandemic and Dr. Ryan, who is quoted regularly here, it is that public health is very important in fighting any pandemic and we need to be ready for it. He also said we are pushing nature to its absolute limits. I am making the connection on the record between this pandemic, what we have done to nature and the environment, and future pandemics.

The solution must be transformative. If the Minister is seriously saying this is transformative, he will have my full support. I have serious doubts about that when it comes to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. We need transformative action and cannot go back to the way we were. We need to find a different lifestyle. Again, to quote Dr. Ryan, we cannot have the pursuit of profit for profit’s sake. That is what we have done. We have development for development’s sake with none of it related to sustainability. That is the message we need to get from Covid-19 and

from this Bill.

We have more choice. We have lived our lives. We have some time left in our lives, but we are talking about future generations who will be faced with climate chaos and, of course, the poorer will always suffer. Just transition is barely covered in the Bill. These are matters that need to go back to the committee if we are serious about having transformative change.

The message in part of the Bill is that it is business as usual. The Minister might say that that is a complete exaggeration, but one section provides that due regard must be had to employment and other matters, which means climate change is being put in a competitive role with employment and with future development. That is a false dichotomy. It is not acceptable to have that dichotomy or to have uncertainty in the Bill. This is our one chance to get it right and to learn. Within that, we need to look at housing and health. They are not just out there. Climate change has reached the tipping point, as the Minister knows and as we know. I have no trust that this Government, particularly the two major parties, realise the extent of the transformation needed.

I listened with great interest to the contributions by Deputy Michael Collins and his colleagues, and I have the greatest of respect for him. We need to tackle the issue of how climate change is perceived in rural areas. I have the privilege of representing a rural area as well as Galway city, which is one of the cities destined to grow. Last week, my colleague, Deputy Pringle, tabled a motion on Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, reform and what will happen with small farmers. As I said that night, we are treating the farmers, especially small farmers, as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. We have absolutely neglected rural areas. Towns are going under while we are building cities out of all proportion. That needs to be dealt with in a transformative action.

I will talk about Galway city as an example. By no means do I intend to be parochial. I had hoped that under the climate action committee Galway, as one of again the fastest growing cities in Europe, would be taken as a green city pilot project, not just because it is my city but because it has all of the advantages to allow it to be a green city. Tá sé ar thairseach na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír. Tá éagsúlacht ag baint leis an gcathair agus leis an gcontae. Feileann sé do thogra píolótach, a green lean city. Instead of that we have developer-led development. While those are my words, on two occasions the Minister, Deputy Coveney, agreed that the development in Galway was developer led. We have Ceannt Station, the docks and the Dyke Road, but we have no master plan in Galway city that takes into account climate change and sustainable development. We have no policy on building heights and yet there is a planning application for a 22- or 23-storey development at Ceannt Station.

I am a very proud Galwegian. Rugadh agus tógadh mé i nGaillimh agus táim thar a bheith bródúil as sin. Ba mhaith liom forbairt a fheiceáil, ach forbairt atá inmharthana. We have a docks development that has been given the go-ahead by An Bord Pleanála inasmuch as it now rests with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I come from a tradition of gleoiteoga and sailing boats. I know the importance of the sea. However, subject to me seeing it again on Friday in a Zoom meeting, I worry intensely about the sustainability of that development for the docks, based primarily on cruise ships and the green energy, which I welcome. There is no mention of climate change in the An Bord Pleanála report that I read.

We are also awaiting a result from An Bord Pleanála about an outer bypass for Galway. I would hope at the very least that it will be climate proofed when the board gives its decision on an outer bypass. We have a perfect opportunity to look at light rail and I am glad the Minister,

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Deputy Ryan, is here. I do not want to get at him, but as he is in power now, all I can do is keep raising it. At the very least, feasibility studies should be carried out. At the very least he should demand a master plan for the common good in Galway that takes into account the docks. We have now theoretically taken it under the wing of Galway City Council while leaving it as a commercial development. I expect public land will be sold to pay for the development because it does not come under one of the recognised ports for Government assistance. We have neglected Ros an Mhíl, which is just out the road. It is already a deep-sea port and only gets a tiny amount of money.

We have a housing crisis that is simply out of control. We have a task force that has sat for two years without producing any final report on the nature of the problem or the nature of the solutions. Galway has the status of a bilingual city and the solution is also within the Irish language, which has always been very close to nature. This is the second time for me to mention a book which is bilingual in Irish and English with only approximately 70 pages in each, *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht*, which points out that the Irish language is part of the solution.

I wish I were a member of the relevant committee, but I have trust in the members who are there to bring in changes to make the Bill stronger. The Minister will have my full support. If he is talking about an overall plan, he should look at Galway city as an example of somewhere going ahead again with developer-led development without a master plan. He should look at the rural-city divide which is simply unacceptable because we cannot live without each other just as we are dependent on other countries. We need to have a sustainable plan. We are awaiting a policy for seaweed and a policy for the islands. These were all discussed in the previous Dáil. Various Deputies, including me, tabled motions and we are still awaiting those policies.

The last day, Deputy Pringle spoke about acting locally but thinking internationally and globally. He is right because we need to come back to the notion that small is beautiful. The solution lies within the communities. If we are to sell green energy, we need to sell it on the basis of the community owning the green energy and benefiting from the green energy, not with big infrastructure coming through Galway to benefit the big boys, na boic mhóra. That is the transformative action we need. That is what Dr. Michael Ryan from the World Health Organization has said and I could not put it any better. We quote him regarding vaccinations and public health, but we are not listening to his message on the damage to nature and the consequences of that, which are epidemics and pandemics.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá an-áthas orm deis a bheith agam labhairt ar an ábhar fíorthábhachtach seo. Ar ndóigh, is fada atáimid ag caint air seo. Go minic, is mó caint a dhéanaimid agus is mó aer te a chuirimid ar fáil, seachas gníomh. Ní hionann dlíthe a achtú agus gníomh a dhéanamh. Mura ndéanaimid gníomh de réir ár mbriathar, beidh thiar orainn sa deireadh. Caithfimid a bheith cúramach faoin gcaoi ina ndéanaimid gníomh. Cé air a bheidh an t-ualach? Caithfimid a dhéanamh cinnte nach ar na daoine is boichte a thitfidh an t-ualach, mar a thiteann go minic. Tíocfaidh mé ar ais chuige sin ar ball mar go minic bítear ag tromaocht faoi rudaí an-bheag - daoine ag obair le sleánta ag baint ualaigh mhóna - nuair atá dreamanna eile ag déanamh fíorscriosta ollmhóra ar an aeráid. Aontaím go gcaithfimid a bheith neodrach ó thaobh carbóin de. Aontaím leis sin ar dhá chúis. Tá sé ag déanamh dochar don aeráid agus bheadh muid i bhfad níos saibhre dá n-úsáidfeadh muidne na hacmhainní aiceanta, atá amuigh sa bhfarraige go mórmhór, le fuinneamh a ghiniúint seachas a bheith ag iompórtáil ola, gás agus gual le dó. Mar sin, tá ciall ollmhór ó thaobh na haeráide ag baint leis seo ach tá ciall ollmhór ó thaobh na heacnamaíochta ag baint leis freisin.

As I said in Irish, it makes sense to tackle the climate action issue, but I am not as convinced as everyone else that endlessly passing legislation and drawing up plans is the same as delivery. In my view, the past ten years were wasted in that very little has happened. We have not looked at our economic model. We have generated more renewable energy but we are still only at the tip of the iceberg. There has been a lot of talk and hot air. This time, Government needs to act. I will return later to the role of Government in this area.

We cannot, and should not in this House, devolve decision-making to unelected people. To do that deprives the people of their democratic right. The Minister's target of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 is ambitious. It is a very laudable ambition and one that I support, but I would like to know the concrete measures by which he proposes to do that. By 2050, we want to be neutral in terms of carbon emissions. I agree that that is an international obligation.

I am somewhat intrigued by section 4, which provides for a limitation of liability. It appears to say that when the law is in place, there is no entitlement to financial compensation or remedy if there is a failure to comply or a breach of the Act. I would welcome clarification on what that means.

The thing about climate change is that it requires immediate action with a long-term plan. We need to decide now what we are going to do, but some of the things we decide to do will take time to do. We know how tortuous and slow our planning processes are. We know also how slow it is in the modern world, when all of the studies that have to be completed from an ecological point of view are done and so on, to get things up and running. If we want to see significant results by the end of the decade, we will need to have decided by the end of this year what we are going to do and to have a ten-year plan of where we are going.

I do not like the modern construction of putting in place of an advisory council which Government is afraid to change or question when things that are being proposed will put an unfair burden on the poorest and the most vulnerable in society. Ultimately, it is wise always to take advice from experts, but it is wiser still for politicians to look at the human consequences of the actions proposed by experts and then to make up their own minds as to how the objective can be achieved based on the expert advice, but also based on their own expert knowledge of what affects the most vulnerable in our society or, maybe, disproportionately affects some communities more than others. At the end of the day, Government only is accountable to the people and Government only can be sacked for non-performance or unfair burdens and inequities, not expert bodies who always conveniently disappear nuair a thagann an crú ar an tairne.

I note that every county is to have a plan, but many of the things we need to do are much bigger than counties. I will speak more about this later. It is fine that every county would have a climate action plan as part of its local plan, but here again ultimately plans are now dictated not by local elected politicians but by the regulator and what it believes the law says. We will discuss that again another day.

Whereas micro and individual action is important, this problem is much bigger than that. If we are really going to tackle it, we must have large-scale production of energy. One of the big challenges if we are going to have data centres in this country is that we will have to fuel them renewably. It would be a total contradiction in terms if it was not an absolute condition that all new data centres be 100% carbon neutral. There are many ways they could achieve that, including by investing in the renewable sector. We cannot on the one hand allow the consumption of

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large quantities of energy and on the other hand expect a micro action such as somebody putting a solar panel on an individual house to mitigate against that.

If we are to have a big economy, we will have to have big carbon neutral energy. We will have to decarbonise all of our transport fleet. I do not go along with the popular theory that we are not going to go anywhere and that the only places people will go will be places they can get to on public transport. I do not think that is realistic. I do not think it is necessary. I believe we should 100% decarbonise the fleet through the use of renewable electric. The use in the grid varies during the day. Most people do not do huge mileage in a day and, therefore, can recharge their vehicles at night when the demand is low and there is surplus energy available from renewable sources. By using hydrogen and other new technologies that are coming on stream, this is possible.

We all know what happened in the UK when oil was found off the coast of Scotland. We are sitting on something much better than oil, something that has endless energy within, namely, the wind, the wave and the tide. That is our nuclear energy except that it is safe and does not pollute. We are probably one of the most advantaged countries in the world in terms of natural resources. We have a huge coastline and we will have to use it. Mar a dúirt mé ar ball, caith-fimid déanamh cinnte de nach leagfar a t-ualach ar na daoine beaga. Ar an gcéad dul síos ní oibreoidh sé agus ar an dara dul síos tá sé mífhéarálte.

I will give a few examples. We introduced lower taxation on cars with lower emissions. I was agreeable to that at the time and have no issue with it. The problem is that the people who are still driving the cars that predate the low tax are the poor people who cannot afford to buy newer cars and are, therefore, paying an unfair burden every year, even though many of them do not do much mileage. We are all the time saying we are going to use the carbon tax to insulate homes for poorer people. I have great doubts about its efficiency and effectiveness in this regard. For the poor people in my constituency, who live in the worst houses, it is not insulation they need but a total renovation of their home. When they apply for insulation, they are told the house is too bad to insulate. They cannot get the money from anywhere.

I was contacted by the people on the Aran Islands - the Minister will be interested in this - who said they were given a great scheme except it is not workable. They cannot access the scheme, get the money or get the builders. Many schemes that are meant to offer compensation do not work for the little people, but we still salve our conscience by telling ourselves we are looking after them. I am a great believer gur fearr daoine a mhealladh seachas iad a cháineadh agus pionós a ghearradh orthu. I believe that the proposition of encouraging and enticing people and making it economical for them to do the right thing is way more efficient than taxing and penalising them. However, I am not sure this is really what will happen. As I said, many of the schemes that came out in recent years are great in theory but when you start checking the number of successful applications and the bureaucracy involved, you find that very little has changed.

From talking recently to the people on the Aran Islands, I think there is potential for an all-island policy, involving Rathlin Island and all the islands off the coast, to make them carbon neutral. The islanders have been wanting to do that for years. The Minister might remember that a few trial electric vehicles were put on the islands some time back. After making inquiries, I learned that there is a significant number of such vehicles in use there but, in general, the cost of buying them to travel 5 or 6 miles of road on the largest island and 1 or 2 miles of road on the smaller islands is not economical. I should be talking in kilometres but I am sure the Minister

will understand. It would be very easy to decarbonise the islands totally. I note there is no provision for small renewable energy projects in the Galway county plan, but still we lecture people. These are people who want to do it and have their own energy co-operative. They are co-operative but I am not so sure the State and its agents are.

It is very interesting how things work out. We banned peat briquettes and now we find turf coal briquettes in all the shops, some of which come from eastern Europe. They have to travel halfway across Europe before they can be used. I have to say that, in terms of burning, there is no comparison with our own brand. Surely fossil fuels are fossil fuels and we have not really done much to reduce the total footprint of carbon in the form of turf or turf coal briquettes.

I understand a maritime area Bill is to be introduced this year. That legislation is needed and it must provide for quick, fair and definitive decision-making in regard to maritime planning. We need to make sure the State gets a benefit from this but we also need to encourage development. My understanding - I am sure it is part of the Minister's plan - is that up to 6 GW of energy is in planning for the east coast. In fact, I understand planning has been given for 2 GW and the remainder is in a process. This would be a considerable contribution to the electricity needs of this city. I understand there is talk of putting 30 GW offshore in floating wind power, which has the attraction that it would be located reasonably well offshore and would not, therefore, be in anybody's face. In fact, the reality is, and I remember the Minister talking about this ten years ago, that if we had the proper interconnection between here and Britain and between here and continental Europe, we could become a major exporter of carbon-free energy. In other words, we could have negative net carbon as a result of providing carbonless fuel to both Britain and continental Europe. That is where we should be going, using our resources just as we used our resources quite well in previous generations.

I am a great believer in technology. If we want to make cars safer, all the driver training will not be half as effective as new technology that helps to avoid accidents. We know that very well from the past. When it comes to energy, technology is now in use that overcomes many problems, such as the challenges of dealing with the issue of surplus energy at one stage and a shortage of energy in another period because of the intermittent wind. We also know the better the grid we build, the more we can work on the basis that if it is not windy in one place, it inevitably will be windy somewhere else. There is an endless amount we can do, but talking about it, passing Bills and drawing up plans is not doing it. We need action.

There are communities in Ireland that are carbon positive but they are often the communities that are most blamed and penalised for any fossil fuels they use. I am talking about communities such as Connemara where, yes, we use motor cars - please God, in the future we will use electric vehicles - but if you add up the sums, that is offset to a much greater degree compared with our city neighbours anywhere in the country because we produce a huge amount of renewable energy within our community in the form of wind energy, way in excess of what we consume. We are net exporters of renewable energy versus the amount of fossil fuel we bring in, but we never get any credit for putting up with the windmills.

We need new regulations on windmills requiring that they be set back further from houses. We need to recognise they are getting taller and taller and are an unfair burden on the host communities. We need to make sure the gain is for that host community and not for some community far away. I understand that with the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, when you contact the Department, the officials are totally non-specific as to the neighbourhood in which the so-called secure community partner has to be located. It could be a community at

the other end of a county like Galway that would get the benefit without having the pain. We are not going to tolerate that and we should not have to do so. Ní chuirfimid suas leis agus ba chóir a bheith dearfa cinnte de sin. Caithfear déileáil leis na ceisteanna seo agus creidiúint a thabhairt do na pobail atá sásta leis na tuirbíní gaoithe, atá ag ligean do mhór-ghiniúint leictreachais tarlú ina bpobail féin agus ag an am céanna go bhfuil pionós á ghearradh orthu i ngeall ar chúpla beithíoch agus caoirigh a bheith acu, agus carr a bheith ag an teach acu. Ní ghlacfar leis sin níos mó.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I come from an agricultural background. Before I was elected to this House, I spent a long number of years representing farmers. We run a family farm in County Tipperary and I am delighted the next generation is taking on that mantle. I want to ensure he is economically sustainable on that farm and that he can make a living like I did before him, his grandfather did before me and the generations before us did.

I am proud to be one of the many thousands who make up the Irish agrifood industry. This is an industry that totalled €14.5 billion in exports in 2019, 9.5% of Irish merchandise exports. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine stated in September of last year that 164,000 people are employed in the agrifood sector, 7.1% of the total population of our country. Last week, a respected analyst and economist said we should renege on our responsibility to feed a large proportion of the world. I fundamentally disagree with that statement. We have the ability in this country to produce food sustainably. We are able to produce food for 60 million people and we do that more sustainably than virtually all other parts of the world. To say we would reduce our production to allow food to be produced elsewhere less sustainably is environmental madness as well as economic madness.

Agriculture is the backbone of rural Ireland. It is the backbone of the rural economy. When this country was pulled out of the last recession, it was the SMEs and our rural farmers who were looked to in order to boost the economy. Moreover, with over 160,000 people employed and exports with the value of €14.5 billion, it is impossible to deny the essential role farmers play in the Irish economy and Irish society. I will quote from the European Commission's website:

Rich, fertile soil, a mild climate and all that rain we love complaining about makes Ireland perfect for farming, and we've taken advantage of that fact for generations. Agriculture has provided us with food and income for thousands of years and it's a vital part of who we are.

The Commission also highlighted that 71.6% of our country, almost 70,000 sq. km, is agricultural land. Another 11% is used for forestry. As a result of all this, we are one of the most sustainable producers of food on the planet. Our little island feeds a significant part of the world. Members will not hear me denying that climate change is a massive issue; I fully accept it is. I appreciate that change is necessary, that burying our heads in the sand or soil will fix absolutely nothing and that it will actually make things worse. I will never be one of the Members of this House who shouts and roars from the sidelines, ignoring the science and trying to rile up the masses. However, I will not sit back and allow a naive and at times ignorant view of Irish agriculture to decimate this essential industry and cut off our nose to spite our face. I fully recognise this country faces massive challenges in relation to climate change but any moves we make must be both economically and environmentally sustainable, and that is of paramount importance for rural Ireland.

The Glanbia cheese plant in Belview, County Kilkenny is a prime example of this. This plant is environmentally and economically viable and sustainable. While objectors did their best to frustrate this plant, thankfully they were not successful. Thankfully that is now over and the development of this plant can continue at pace. This plant followed Government policy exactly, specifically on diversifying dairy production post Brexit, by building a plant that can produce 50,000 tonnes of Gouda cheese for the European market, thus reducing our dependence on the British market, which is absolutely essential in the post-Brexit era. This plant met the rigorous standards and expectations of An Bord Pleanála and the objections launched against it did nothing except defeat the purpose of everyone working together to meet environmental targets. When An Taisce uses weak environmental arguments in court to attempt to defeat a viable process of development, it does more harm than good to the green agenda. It polarises opinions and makes those who would rather bury their head in the sand than acknowledge the major issue of climate change appear legitimate. There must be a middle ground in this debate that recognises that change is necessary but it must be change that is sustainable and viable and supports the farmer and rural Ireland in moving towards more sustainable climate-friendly practice, which also protects the industry that is the backbone of rural Ireland. Farmers, who are the custodians of rural Ireland, will not forgive or forget this attempt to stop this vital infrastructure.

There are two camps who are already firmly entrenched in the climate change debate in this country. There are those who scream and shout about rural Ireland and the rural people and make a song and dance about being the saviours of the rural way of life. They would rather deny climate change exists than try to offer up viable solutions to the problem and tackle the issue in a way that will support and benefit rural Ireland. On the other side of the debate are those who vocalise short-term solutions to climate change; those who demand the cutting of the national herd. Their proposals are almost comical in their naivety and do absolutely nothing to support rural Ireland and nothing to ensure a just transition for farming communities. They do nothing more than appeal to their mostly urban bases. Unfortunately, both these sides are vocally and loudly represented in this House. I will not respond to either side's attempts to polarise the debate or force their own agenda through, as both sides will, in my view, do more harm than good. I will passionately hold a centre ground that is sustainable, logical and achievable. It is a reasonable approach that will tackle climate change and protect our environment but will also bring rural Ireland along with it in an environmentally and economically sustainable way.

There are new technologies and new methods of farming which must be adopted to reduce emissions and guide farming towards a more sustainable future. By means of State investment in and support of some of the technologies and methods I will discuss shortly, we can turn the narrative away from rural Ireland being intimidated and a victim of environmental policies and climate change. Instead, rural Ireland and farming communities will have the potential to drive the agenda, benefit from it both environmentally and economically and not be driven by the polarised view some in this House would try to force on rural Ireland, on both sides of the argument. In other words, let us adopt a common-sense approach to this issue. I refer to anaerobic digestion, the installation of solar panels on the acres of roofing on the farm buildings we already have, wind turbines and solar farms. All of these have huge potential for the creation of renewable energy and to meeting our carbon reduction targets. All of these technologies can be rolled out in rural Ireland for the benefit of rural Ireland. Policies that promote and support the production of renewable energies on farms could also have additional positive impacts such as the reduction of electricity bills for farmers. The electricity is a considerable expense, especially on dairy farms, and any way to alleviate this while also benefiting the environment will

always be welcomed. My reason for making this point is simple; introducing policies which promote renewable energy production on our farms such as solar, wind or biogas will benefit rural Ireland instead of rural Ireland being intimidated by climate-friendly policies.

I am Chairman of the Oireachtas agriculture committee. We recently invited Teagasc to appear before us. Teagasc is a body with a huge reservoir of research and knowledge in this area and it is being completely underutilised. The short-term utterances we hear from certain people on the cutting of the national herd are comical in their naivety and will do nothing to seriously tackle the long-term global issue that is climate change. We are the most sustainable producer of dairy produce in the world and of beef in the EU. Management of climate change must be sustainable but we must also be able to feed the world. What is the point in cutting the national herd in Ireland and sending the world's population elsewhere to source its food from countries that are over twice as inefficient at producing food as we are? What is the point in tapping ourselves on the back, feeling superior as proud environmentalists, having slashed our national herd, decimated rural Ireland, and having lost billions of euro in export revenues just to drive even more demand to beef production in Brazil where the animals bear the impact, or to other countries where environmental protection or food quality could not be further down the list of priorities?

We must bring this debate on agriculture in rural Ireland back to a common-sense approach. I will not deny that changes must be made but let us look at long-term solutions. Research has been done into the feeding of animals and how this might reduce methane emissions from farm animals. This research should be supported, funded and rolled out as common practice when it is workable.

Low emission slurry spreading and protected urea are seeing huge advances in their respective areas. The fact that contractors cannot avail of grants for low emissions slurry spreading is nonsensical. The vast majority of farms are now using contractors to spread slurry and we want to advance this area. They need grants to improve the machinery and technologies they are using to reduce the environmental impact of this work. Protected urea is significantly dearer than other forms of nitrogen. Again, to encourage its use, it should be subsidised until farmers are in the practice of using it on an extensive basis. This is not a black and white debate and it cannot be us versus them. This cannot be about urban versus rural Ireland. We need a middle ground common-sense approach that supports our moves to a more sustainable future that protects both the environment and our food production.

There is growing evidence of the role that anaerobic digestion technology in producing biogas and biofertilisers must play across rural Ireland alongside more established renewable energy sources in a transition to low carbon climate-resilient communities and sustainable food production within a high quality environment. Agri-based biogas and biofertiliser production is uniquely placed as the one viable renewable energy option to decarbonise Ireland's food production. The effectiveness and commercial viability of this technology has been proven through economic research and scientific advice. Biogas production could also contribute significantly to decarbonising agriculture without competing or impacting on food production. By using anaerobic digestion technologies we can dramatically reduce our emissions while also continuing to reduce water pollution and considerably cutting the work involved in managing slurry on farms and in piggeries. This can lead to less slurry going out on the land, less time spent managing slurry, lower emissions, the creation of biogas for sale to the grid, and the production of organic fertilisers. The technology is one obvious and sensible way to considerably reduce our emissions, to protect our environment and benefit farmers all in the one go. This

agri-based biomethane green energy model not only tackles climate change but also sustains farms, creates rural jobs, and benefits water and air quality, soil regeneration and biodiversity.

There is a serious logjam in the system which needs to be addressed in respect of selling electricity back to the grid, whether it is produced by wind, solar or biodigesters. This has to be removed and the selling of this locally produced energy to the grid must be incentivised and supported financially. Community involvement in these renewable projects is vital going forward. We need community buy-in.

I welcome that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, opened up certain sections of the power grid to community power sources last year and I spoke on this issue in the House at that particular time. That is what just transition must look like for rural Ireland. These are the conversations that we will voice and that this debate must have. We must develop policies that will make the most of modern technologies and that can assist in our battle against climate change without destroying the industry that is the backbone of rural Ireland.

The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, was formulated as the cornerstone of EU policy to ensure top quality food at lower prices and this has been achieved for the past 60 to 70 years. Now we are fundamentally changing CAP with the taking away of price supports and a significant amount instead being paid into greening measures. We see that the French Government is now calling out for an appraisal of the cost of production for primary producers. If CAP is going to be green-based going forward, this policy must work in tandem with the primary producer getting a fair return from the marketplace. This is a complete change of policy and when the Commission is doing this, it has to ensure that this happens. If this new policy direction happens with an EU-wide evaluation of the cost of primary production, what the French are doing at home must be done by all EU countries. If CAP is to be changed for good then we have to ensure that fair prices are protected for producers.

We find ourselves at the moment in a laughable situation on peat production where we are now importing peat from outside this country. Horticultural peat moss is being imported from the eastern side of the Continent and briquettes are coming in from Germany. By attempting to protect the Irish bogs by ceasing all production, we are doing even more harm to the environment. This is a nonsensical approach to take to climate change. Some 1.5% of our bogs is all that we need to produce the peat moss necessary for the horticultural industries here in Ireland. At the moment, what is more natural and sustainable than using this horticultural product to grow plants that rot back into the soil? We currently do not have a suitable substitute product for this available, so we must use what we have.

The idea of bringing this peat moss across the EU is laughable and does nothing more than give ammunition to those who refuse to acknowledge climate change and gives them a stick to beat the sensible approaches that are out there. The middle ground of common sense needs to be adopted. Common sense has to be part of all environmental decisions and it certainly is not when it comes to peat harvesting in this area. A blanket ban is not common sense. As Chairman of the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine, our committee held a briefing on this issue and we received an assurance from an official in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage that a licence would be granted to harvest this summer. We were told that this would happen in April. Unfortunately, it still has not come through. It is completely regrettable that we are allowing our horticultural and nursery industries to be treated in this way where their cost base has been destroyed by the extra costs that have been imposed on them. This is of no environmental or economic sense.

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Forestry can play a very significant role in meeting the challenges that we have with climate change. Unfortunately, our forestry sector in this country is grinding to a halt. A timber contractor rang me last Friday and he was in both economic and emotional despair. This man had built up a business over a great number of years cutting trees either for thinning or clear-felling. He had 12 people employed and had invested in significant new machinery and had equally significant repayments to meet on that machinery. On Friday he made a decision that he had to let his men go and try to sell his machinery. This is all because we have a Department which is failing to get licences through the system. We introduced legislation last year to deal with the appeals mechanism that was delaying the process. Unfortunately, the Department is still not functioning in this regard. Our forestry sector is grinding to a halt because of the failure and bureaucracy of the Department in getting licences issued. Last week the Department issued 37 licences. That is to deal with afforestation, roads, thinning and clear-felling. We have 6,500 licences in the system. The public and the people involved in the forestry sector have completely lost confidence in the industry. In 30 years' time people will wonder why Ireland stopped meeting its afforestation targets. In this year of 2021 we will be lucky to hit 25% of the targets in the programme for Government. Last year, again, we only hit approximately 25% of our targets for afforestation. If we are serious about climate change and about tackling the issues around it, we have to have a viable forestry sector.

8 o'clock

The blanket ban on planting forestry in designated areas is a significant barrier to having a viable and efficient forestry sector. There is serious evidence that different stages of afforestation growth in these designated areas benefits the creation of habitats for the various species we are trying to protect with these designations.

It has completely devalued the capital value of the land owned in those designated areas. In my time, I have never seen how a ruling can reduce the value of land by 80% without proper compensation for the landowners but that is what has happened in these designated areas. In my view, it was done without any useful environmental purpose behind it. This needs to be looked at. In my view, afforestation on a planned basis in designated areas can benefit everyone. I appeal to the Minister to speak to the Minister of State with responsibility for forestry and get the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to up its game immediately. Issuing 37 licences a week, and the average is only a little greater than that-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We are over time.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: -----will result in the forestry sector being decimated and in financial ruin. It would be a pity for rural Ireland if the forestry sector is let down by the failure of the Department to issue licences.

Debate adjourned.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Social and Affordable Housing

28. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether costs of between €18,000 and €28,000 per unit per year for 25-year long-term leases represent value for money for the taxpayer in view of the rising cost of long-term leasing and Part V long-term leasing and given that building or buying social homes by local authorities and approved housing bodies is cheaper and provides tenants with lifetime security of tenure. [23276/21]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As I am sure the Minister is aware, 48 leasing projects have been approved by his Department so far this year, totalling approximately 603 leased units. The average cost of those leases is €18,000 per year. That is €451,000 per unit over the lifetime of the lease. Does he believe that represents good value for money and the best way to deliver long-term social housing to social housing applicants?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for his question. As he will know, the Government's stated objective is to focus strongly on new build activity and, in particular, local authority-led new build activity. The latter will comprise 9,500 of the target of 12,750 set down for this year. The new ambition under the programme for Government is to deliver 50,000 new social houses primarily through new build. That is what we want to see.

Leasing is one of a range of options available to supplement delivery, particularly at a time of acute housing shortage. It helps to supplement delivery, particularly under local authority and approved housing body build and acquisition programmes. It is a means of delivering additional social homes in an off-balance-sheet way, freeing up much-needed fiscal space for other spending requirements, including the housing capital programme that I want us to focus on in a very particular way.

My number one priority is the delivery of houses for the households on social housing waiting lists. In many cases where leasing is assessed to be a viable option, local authorities may not have access to adequate land or build pipelines to cater for demand in their area. That needs to change. I am working with local authorities on that issue and we will see some measures in the national development plan, NDP, review to address it.

While relative cost efficiency is always an important consideration in terms of the mix of delivery, it is not the only consideration and must be viewed in the overall context of the wider delivery issues. This is particularly important in the current climate, where it is essential to ensure the highest possible level of supply in the shortest time possible. All present wish to ensure we can continue to drive down homeless numbers and move people out of emergency accommodation.

The Deputy referred in his question to the most expensive of the leasing arrangements, the cost of which is influenced by the units' location in Fingal, Dublin and the size of the units. For his information, the average cost of new leases across all the leasing streams in 2020 was €13,850. I am happy to give the Deputy a full breakdown of that figure.

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Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister. The data to which I referred is from this year. He is absolutely correct about the average cost last year. The difficulty is that the origin of leasing is back in 2008, 2009 and 2010, when there was no capital funding. We know from a report published by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, in 2018 that long-term leasing represents very bad value for money, particularly in high demand areas such as cities or when compared with the low cost of borrowing to build and buy now. In addition, it does not provide lifetime security of tenure for tenants because after 25 years they either have to renew the lease and pay again or terminate the lease and rehouse the household elsewhere.

One of my big concerns is the dramatic increase in the number of Part V leases so far this year. There have been more than 100 such leases, the highest number to date. Some of those Part V leases are exceptionally expensive and, to me, make no sense whatsoever, given that Part V is meant to ensure permanent social housing and social tenure mix in private developments.

Given that IGEES has said this is bad value for money, and as we know it is bad for tenants, will the Minister commit to undertaking a value-for-money exercise, particularly in respect of Part V leases, and using this money more wisely?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a fair question. It is timely in the sense that tomorrow evening the House will take Second Stage of the Planning and Development (Amendment) (Repeal of Part V Leasing) Bill 2021 brought forward by Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. I have indicated that the Government will support that Bill moving to Committee Stage. To be frank, Part V leasing has been up to now a very small part of overall provision, with 16 such leases in 2020. That said, it is not a mechanism that should be expanded much further than that. I know that more have been approved this year. There can be particular reasons for that to happen but it should be, in my view, a last resort. I have given a commitment to review it and it is being reviewed in the NDP review.

I will be publishing the Government's housing for all plan in July. The focus must be on new build. The predominance of what will be delivered will be new build. Part V leasing in particular is an issue for me, to be frank. Leasing does have a role in other areas. We need to look at how we interact with approved housing bodies as well. The predominance of what we will do will be to focus on new build and, in the context of Part V delivery, to purchase them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Part of my concern is that, as we know, the Government's previous targets for leasing were always significantly behind. For example, 2,000 were to be delivered last year according to the target set the year before but, of course, only half of that figure was delivered. What has changed, however, is market sentiment. There has been a significant increase in the desire of institutional investors to diversify their property portfolios. We know from speaking to local authority managers that there is far greater interest in that regard. That makes sense because the yields are much higher, they are secure and there is less risk compared with activity that is more in the private sector.

All I am urging the Minister to do, not just with respect to the Part Vs but also with leasing more generally, is to seriously consider phasing out leasing where it does not represent value for money and does not provide lifetime security of tenure for tenants, unless there is a clear case that it makes sense. The 25-year cost of the most expensive Part V lease, albeit an outlier in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown from 2019, at €28,000 per year per unit, is €700,000. That simply makes no sense and surely is not something the Minister could support.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is being assessed and evaluated. I want to review it. As the Deputy will know, we have just over 20,000 tenants in leased properties. The cost of that to the Exchequer is €250 million per annum. They are secure homes for people right now and we have to ensure that continues to be supported through the social housing current expenditure programme, SHCEP. There is a distinct change in the programme for Government in terms of housing targets. We want to move toward direct build and to empower local authorities to build, which I have done already by setting out their targets this year on an individual basis so that they are clear on what they need to deliver.

There is a role for leasing in other areas, such as the repair and lease scheme. I have seen where that has worked really well, particularly in the regions, such as in Waterford, Fermoy and Limerick in particular. There is also the mortgage-to-rent scheme, which is a mechanism for people with systemic mortgage arrears issues and failures that cannot be recovered in the medium or long terms. I am working with others to seek to expand that programme. I can give the Deputy a commitment that we are reviewing it. I will see when we publish our-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will come back to it. It is being reviewed.

Rental Sector

29. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the action he has taken to ensure that an independent valuation of rents has been carried out in cases in which rents are set for long-term leasing contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22884/21]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: With respect to the growth in long-term leasing in recent years, what action has the Minister taken to ensure independent valuations of rent levels are carried out when leases are agreed?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. While the Government's objective is to focus strongly on local authority-led build activity, long-term leasing is an important option available to authorities to supplement delivery and secure high-quality social housing on a long-term basis. Lease payments are paid to the property owner based on a discounted market rent, with the level of discount reflecting the variation in maintenance and management responsibilities taken on by the owner. The maximum lease is 25 years and rents are reviewed every three years, linked to the harmonised index of consumer prices.

The standard long-term leasing programme has been in operation for over ten years and has a well-established assessment protocol. Local authorities have that delegated sanction to lease up to four dwellings. All proposals to lease five or more dwellings must be submitted to my Department for approval. These proposals must be accompanied by an independent valuation of the market rent for the properties carried out by or commissioned and paid for by the relevant local authority. The enhanced leasing scheme was launched in 2018 and all potential proposals are submitted by the proposers to the Housing Agency for initial assessment and co-ordination with local authorities. The proposal is then submitted to my Department for approval. As with all long-term leasing, enhanced leasing proposals submitted to my Department must be accompanied by an independent valuation of the market rent for the properties carried out by or

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commissioned and paid for by the relevant local authority in the area in which those properties are located.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank the Minister for the answer. The question refers to long-term leases involving five or more dwellings. Documents released to me under the Freedom of Information Act show that, at least in some instances, multimillion euro long-term leases were signed, having effectively gone through that process, without independent valuation. Incredibly, the valuations provided by the developer and the developer’s agents were relied on. Has the Minister investigated this? How did this happen? Is he confident it will not happen again? What action has he taken to ensure it does not happen again? In how many cases were the market rents submitted by the developer not accepted by the Department or a local authority?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Deputy is probably referring to the Herbert Hill development. That was the first enhanced leasing project approved by the Department. Following the approval, a standard review took place on all application procedures. As a result of the review, it was decided that an additional requirement for approval under the scheme would be that a local authority would, in addition to any red book valuation provided by the proposer, also provide a valuation on its own behalf. The purpose of this was to provide an additional safeguard to help local authorities achieve maximum value for money in their negotiations and to harmonise requirements under the standard long-term and enhanced leasing. This change was made in December 2019 and the second development approved was the Millrace development in Ballinasloe. An independent valuation was requested and furnished for that application.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Is the Minister confident this practice is no longer happening and there are no other instances of it? I would be grateful for an answer on that. An investigation by Killian Woods in the *Business Post* found evidence of institutional landlords and investment funds advertising and recording artificially high market rents that do not reflect the rents being charged. The practice of rent-fixing has serious implications for long-term leasing, which is based on discount off-market rents. Have the Minister and Department investigated the extent to which rent-fixing or artificial market rents could be influencing market rents agreed under long-term leasing?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: To answer the Deputy’s first question, I am not aware of any other issues with regard to valuations and independent assessments. If the Deputy is aware of any, I ask him to bring it to my attention. We have made abundantly clear to local authorities what the procedure is. We have had instances where properties have lain vacant for a long number of months, which is not something I support. With Covid, some properties were kept back for contingency reasons to house people in the event that they needed to isolate.

The Deputy’s second question is not part of his written question but it is a valid one and I am happy to respond to it. I have read the report to which he referred, which was brought to my attention. I have asked my officials and the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, to look at this matter in the round. I have made clear that I want rent transparency. It is important. It is also important that, where reasonable landlords provide deals or cut rents for tenants, we need to make sure that happens. In this instance, it appears an institutional investor artificially left the rent price higher than it actually was. I have asked my officials with the RTB to look at that matter.

Dáil Éireann
House Prices

30. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he plans to take to bring down the all-in cost of residential development in order to make homes more affordable for working persons in view of the 2020 and 2021 reports by an organisation (details supplied) on the real cost of house and apartment delivery. [22934/21]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister knows, the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, SCSi, has produced two reports on the real cost of housing and apartment developments last year and this year. These have confirmed the growing gap between the all-in development costs of residential developments in the private sector and the sales price. Separate from specific measures targeting eligible affordable home buyers, will the Minister outline the work he and his officials are doing to address the key viability and affordability gap that the studies identified?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I appreciate the opportunity to address this matter. I met virtually with the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland and its representatives went through the report with me. It is a very informative and good piece of work, which the SCSi did with my senior officials. We have taken that work on and are continuing some collaborative work with the organisation. The reports, Real Cost of New Housing Delivery 2020 and the Real Costs of New Apartment Delivery, published in 2021, set out the typical costs associated with residential delivery. The reports identified the constituent costs, which include construction, land, developments levies, professional fees, selling costs, finance and VAT.

A multipronged collaborative approach across government and industry is required to address and reduce the wide-ranging costs involved in residential delivery. Interestingly, the report found apartment developments of between five and eight stories recorded reductions of between 2% and 9% in overall cost delivery in that area where the focus was on off-site build and delivery. I would like to see more of that.

Both reports demonstrate that construction costs account for almost 50% of the delivery costs. Issues relating to construction costs are generally a matter for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform but the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has an input in that area.

An innovation and digital adoption team to improve industry productivity across seven actions has been established. My Department is actively engaging on these initiatives which aim to improve efficiency and reduce construction costs, while achieving compliance with building regulations and other minimum quality standards. Separately, I am bringing forward reforms to the planning system, such as mainstreaming aspects of the strategic housing development process, which will conclude once the extension granted by the previous Minister has expired, reviewing the judicial review process and developing new e-planning initiatives, which may contribute to some reduction in holding times and costs and provide greater clarity around procedures.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: This issue has a wider relevance than just first-time buyers. Last year, only 1,000 of the 5,000 or so real social homes that were delivered were directly delivered by local authorities and approved housing bodies, and more than half of them were turnkey properties. I do not object to turnkeys. They deliver social homes but the price paid is far higher if they are acquired when all-in development costs are rising. Some of the figures in

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the SCSi report are startling. All-in development costs for a standard two-bedroom apartment in Dublin city range from €410,000 to €521,000. In fact, at the very top end one is looking at €618,000. The biggest areas of cost growth are finance, land and other aspects of the soft costs, so that there has been some increase in construction costs. Could the Minister outline specifically what the Government is doing, both his Department and his colleagues, to tackle the dramatic increase in land costs and finance costs because they are driving the rising gap between viability and affordability in the private sector, especially in the city?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am pleased the Deputy mentioned that. There are a few initiatives. One very significant one was the creation of the Land Development Agency, which ensures that State-owned land is used productively. We bring land that has not been previously identified or used for housing into public use, and if we bring more land like that at a greatly reduced cost in many instances, effectively a zero value, that will have a positive impact on the overall cost of land because in many of those instances, the cost of land will be near zero as a result of the 90% affordability threshold we will be setting along with the 10% affordability element. There are other measures but the Land Development Agency will be significant in terms of ensuring that we use State-owned land productively at a much lower cost than normal land prices.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is being wildly optimistic about the impact of the Land Development Agency on the price of private land in the private sector. We will have a row about the Land Development Agency when the Bill comes before the select committee in two weeks.

The real problem here is that the Minister does not seem to understand the question. Due to high levels of speculative investment, particularly in the inner city but also at suburban land sites, land prices have gone up dramatically again. The SCSi report shows an increase of between 40% and 60% since its previous study in 2017. That adds enormously to the cost of delivering the homes and then selling them. The Minister is aware that his constituency is particularly badly affected and median house prices are between €460,000 and €540,000. Escalating land prices are part of that. Is the Government taking any initiatives beyond the Land Development Agency to bring down the cost of finance, land and construction in the overall private sector, which is still ultimately responsible for 80% to 90% of construction, including PPPs, turnkey projects and smart finance?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I fully understand the question. As the Deputy knows there are many aspects to this. In terms of direct interventions, the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, is one which involves the direct allocation of €200 million to provide for public infrastructure. There are issues with the planning process including delays and continued objections. There are some infamous delays affecting social and affordable homes on State-owned sites across the country.

A group within the Department is working with the industry on costs, including those relating to construction. The SCSi report was interesting in that regard. It pointed to reductions in certain types of building. We need to look at what we are delivering in terms of off-site construction, smarter buildings, the Construction Industry Register Ireland, which we are bringing forward as well and also with regard to registration and building standards. I would not underestimate the impact of what the State can do in the delivery of affordable homes in bringing down costs. The purpose of the Affordable Housing Bill we published yesterday is to bring down cost for the people who need it most.

Social and Affordable Housing

31. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will review the planned affordable housing scheme in view of the impact of the scheme on increasing house prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23275/21]

Deputy Mick Barry: Where the Minister left off is precisely where I want to begin, that is, the affordable housing scheme, particularly the shared equity element within it. The Minister says it will bring down housing prices, but it is not just his critics on the left, as many establishment politicians as well as establishment economists have spoken about the potential for this to increase prices. I would like the Minister to comment on the issue.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Barry for the question. The fundamental point is that if we keep doing the same things, we will get the same results. We need new initiatives. We need to help first-time buyers and the members of “generation rent” who are stuck paying exorbitant rents. We are going to introduce our new cost-rental scheme, the first national scheme of its kind ever. The affordable purchase shared-equity scheme is being designed specifically to help first-time buyers to buy new homes at a price they can afford much sooner than would otherwise have been the case without this intervention. There is nothing wrong with that. In so doing, it will build confidence within the sector and increase housing supply also. This is a supply-side measure. Extensive engagement has been undertaken with key stakeholders to ensure the optimum design of the scheme and significant feedback has been factored in. I welcome the feedback. I am confident that the final design of the scheme can mitigate against any potential inflationary risks. It is not a debt-driven scheme, it is an equity stake that the State will be taking.

I closely analysed a similar scheme in the UK, where, in 2019, a review by the National Audit Office, the equivalent of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, concluded that it had increased housing supply by 14.5% and house price inflation was less than 1%. Our scheme will be calibrated and targeted in a much more focused way. I intend to employ more targeted measures than those relating to the British scheme. The scheme will be specific to new builds and will establish conditionality linked to maximum allowable home price by local authority area and maximum levels of equity support that will be available. Support provided will be limited to bridging the gap between the maximum mortgage available to the household and the open market price of the home. I will review the scheme after a year to ensure it is doing what it is intended to do. I am very confident about this measure. It will work. It provides hope for that whole generation of people who have been locked out of owning their own home and at an affordable rate. I hope Deputy Barry will see his way to supporting the scheme.

Deputy Mick Barry: Could the Minister comment on the breaking news of the statement by Deputy Lahart that Fianna Fáil is drowning in the shadow of Fine Gael’s housing policy? I presume the Deputy is referring to the sweeteners to the vulture funds in respect of corporation tax, capital gains tax, rent roll, stamp duty and so on, all of which Fianna Fáil allowed it to make because it was propping up the previous Government. A former Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, famously said he wanted to facilitate the attraction of foreign investment capital to the Irish property market, recovering profitability for the banks and their balance sheets at the expense of affordable homes and ordinary people who want to buy homes, including first homes, in this country.

We have heard all day from the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste that the Government is going

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to do something about this, but the question is when. The Minister had a round of discussions with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, this afternoon. Could he tell the House when we will see action on this issue?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: A number of questions have been asked and a number of charges have been made. I believe in home ownership. Some others do not and that is fine. I believe it is an honest and just aspiration for people to have, and one that the State should support. I am not sure what Deputy Barry has against young people or potential first-time buyers and why he would not want to help them to own their own homes at an affordable rate or for them to be able to rent homes on a secure long-term basis through the new State-backed cost-rental scheme at a lower rate. I am sure that we all want that.

The bulk sale of properties is a legacy issue. It is one which we intend to help to tackle. I do not like seeing funds buying up family homes. I have been very critical of that in the past and I remain critical of it. I want to play my part in providing a solution to it. The market is already constrained. First-time buyers cannot compete with these type of funds. It is as simple as that. The Taoiseach was very clear on the matter, as was the Tánaiste, earlier today.

Deputy Mick Barry: Let us be clear about who has prevented young people buying their first homes: it is not Solidarity or the Socialist Party that have been in government while young people have been locked out of the market and developers have made a fabulous profit. Let us talk about house prices. Capping affordable housing for the equity scheme at €400,000 in the city of Cork is just unreal. What planet are the Ministers on with these kind of figures? I want to ask the Minister about a statement he gave to the *Irish Examiner* yesterday in which he said price capping will not lead to developers driving up prices. What research did he do to back up that statement? The only example he gave me from London is one where prices went up. The Minister's claim is that they did not go up as much as others have claimed. He said it will not lead to developers driving up prices. What scientific research has he done in this country to back up this statement?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is hard to know where it begins and ends with Deputy Barry. I will say it again. There was 1% house price inflation over that period. There has been house price inflation. That is what we are talking about. This scheme is focused on those who need it most.

I heard Deputy Barry and Deputy Boyd Barrett, in particular, talk about price caps. They are caps, not targets. In every area in the Deputy's adopted city of Cork there will be different prices for different homes. We are making sure with a cap that no one can enter the shared equity scheme if the price of the home is over that amount. It will not drive prices up to that level. It depends on the type of house.

The scheme is a supply side scheme and will help. It is one of a number of measures in the affordable housing Bill, some of which I hope the Deputy will support, such as the delivery of direct build affordable homes on State-owned land through our local authorities. There is a €310 million fund. We are making changes. The first homes will be delivered in Boherboy in Cork and we intend to deliver up to 6,000 homes under that scheme. We have to establish it on a primary legislative footing at a national level. I expect the Deputy to support it.

Dáil Éireann
Housing Policy

32. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider raising the financial threshold for an applicant to qualify for entry on to the housing list given that it is currently €25,000 for a single applicant or couple in County Donegal which is too low to allow a person to purchase a house; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22676/21]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The financial threshold to qualify for entry onto the Donegal County Council housing list is €25,000. That threshold is for a single applicant or couple and, as the Minister knows, there is a small increase for children. It is simply far too low. What can be done as a matter of urgency to raise this threshold, especially given that Donegal County Council has finally received an increase in the funding allocation for housing? It is not enough and it is too little too late, but small increases are welcome. The funding provided to Donegal County Council for the delivery of housing programmes for 2016-20 is set out. How will housing be delivered?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a fair question, and one that I have asked. Deputy Pringle will respond to my reply.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility conditions set down under the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated social housing assessment regulations 2011, as amended. The regulations prescribe net income limits for each local authority in three different bands, as Deputy Pringle will know. The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single person household of between €25,000 and €30,000, depending on the area, with additional allowances for further adults and children.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those who need social housing support the most. We would all agree with that. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs.

It is important to state that as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for socialising support in each local authority is under way. The review will have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordable housing. That will be important because it will deal with the next cohort above the social housing limit and how we can deliver cost rental and affordable housing at scale, which I hope the Deputy will support. We brought forward the terms of the affordable cost rental housing scheme, and the review will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been completed. I want to bring it to a conclusion, to be very honest. I expect it to be concluded this year. We will then examine whether there should be a band system into the future and what the levels need to be.

The system needs to fit in with the new cost rental scheme, which is the next threshold for people, and the affordable rental model which deals with people who are just above the social housing income limits. The review is well under way at each local authority level.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: It is to be hoped the situation will be reviewed. I would not have

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much faith in the review and I do not think it will deliver anything further. Last week I had to tell a mother with three children that she could not get on the housing list because her income was far too high, at €26,000 a year. It is ridiculous.

This affects people right across the board. This is a cynical way for this Government and previous Governments to massage the figures for people who depend on social housing. In Donegal there are 1,849 people in HAP tenancies and 510 people in RAS tenancies, yet the Minister has said there are only 926 people on the housing list. It is mental. It is a way of keeping the figures down. That is all it is. The Government is not dealing with the issues. People cannot get houses and they cannot live in these situations.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Pringle has asked a question and I have answered it straight. The review is under way. The Deputy need not try to make something out of it that it is not. I have said it on the record of the Dáil. I mean it. The review needs to happen, and it is happening. It has to take into account the new measures on affordability we are introducing. I am bringing changes forward for larger families. I have already signed them in respect of the additional income that would be permitted per child. Some of those measures are coming through.

Further social housing reform is required. A lot of work has been done by me and my colleagues in the Department on that issue. I expect in the autumn of this year to bring some of those reforms forward. I intend that the review will be completed this year. I am not trying to massage any figures or anything like it. We have the single biggest budget in the history of the State for the delivery of social housing.

I have been in Donegal with Deputy Pringle and have seen the homes delivered by the local authorities there. There are some fantastic estates. Donegal County Council has more money now than it has ever had to deliver social homes, and I want it to do more. That is the target we have set this year. I assume the Deputy will support us in that endeavour.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The reality is that there were 30 houses delivered in Donegal. I was there on the day the Minister launched the estate. There are 1,600 people on the housing list in Donegal town but only 30 houses. That is shocking. The list is not accurate because it does not take into account the people who are just over the income level to get on the housing list and cannot provide housing for themselves. There is also a ridiculous situation in Donegal whereby landlords will not sign up to HAP or RAS. Applicants are left hanging. It is left to applicants to complain, which would mean penalising themselves further.

The Minister said we will see changes by the end of the year. That is fair enough; let us see the changes. I hope they will be real changes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I expect to have a full and wide-ranging debate in the autumn when we bring forward some of the changes. A fair bit of work is required. We have not had a review in this regard for well over ten years. It is long overdue.

We face a major challenge in regard to social housing delivery. We have to be ambitious in terms of delivering them, but we also have to be realistic. I think we are. The Government's housing budget alone is over €3.3 billion. That is significant and we need more direct building of social homes all across the country, including the Deputy's county of Donegal. I did not visit just one development on that day, as he knows; I visited a number of other projects. It was fantastic to see the work the local authority is doing there.

It is a challenge in every county to be able to meet the demand from people on social housing lists. We intend to build 50,000 social homes over the term of this Government and deliver affordable homes for the first time, for rental and purchase. We will come back with the review later this year. That is what I intend to do. We will debate it, and look forward to the Deputy's input.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Irish Water

33. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to parliamentary question No. 760 of 21 April 2021, the amount of Departmental funding drawn down by Irish Water to date in 2021; his expectations for the drawing down of further funding by Irish Water; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22861/21]

Deputy David Stanton: I asked the Minister a question last month about the amount of funding that Irish Water has received and he told me it received €1.4 billion. I am interested to know the amount of this funding that has been drawn down to date this year by Irish Water, his expectations for the drawing down of further funding by Irish Water and a breakdown of same, and to give us an idea of where the money is going.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Since 1 January 2014 Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of water service planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

As part of budget 2021, funding of over €1.4 billion was secured to support water services. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and waste water services, support improved water supplies right across the island, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine areas. Over €1.3 billion in voted Exchequer funding is to be provided to Irish Water in respect of domestic water service provision in 2021 of which €692 million is capital funding and €614 million is current. By the end of April 2021 Irish Water has drawn down €223.25 million of which €153.5 million relates to current funding and €69.75 million relates to capital funding.

I expect that Irish water will draw down this full provision in 2021 to continue its investment to provide clean, safe drinking water to customers, to treat and return waste water to the environment and improve water quality in our river catchments and our estuaries.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for his response. There does seem to be an issue in that many people feel that Irish Water has a shortage of money. All the questions before now have been about housing, and I am sure the Minister of State realises that in many parts of the country housing development is frozen in many towns. In Mitchelstown in my own constituency, and in Middleton and Castlemartyr, no new houses can be built now because

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Irish Water does not have the infrastructure, and maybe does not have the funding either. Has an analysis been undertaken across the country to find out what towns cannot actually build houses because of waste water infrastructure deficits? If the Minister of State does not have that information, he might give it to me at some stage. What is the timetable for rectifying these? As I said, there is a sense that Irish Water does not have the funding. There are some very good people in there. In my own area of Youghal, Cobh, Cork Harbour and Carrigtwohill, there is amazing work being done with new waste water treatment plants but we need now to unlock the land. Local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, funding has been made available in some areas, to allow housing to continue.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I wish to highlight the same issue in my own area. I thank the Minister of State for meeting representatives from my area about the Irish Water difficulty in Dún Laoghaire and the waste network that needs urgent upgrading. I thank him for providing the report on what Irish Water is doing to identify the scale of the issue and replace it, but it is a really urgent problem right across the coast of Dublin Bay. I know the Minister is aware of it and we have an awful lot of work to do to try to upgrade it.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien and I met with SOS Dublin Bay last week to discuss some of these issues. We will get a response from Irish Water on that.

To reassure Deputy Stanton, the investment by this Government will be significant over its lifetime and that is reflected in the 2021 allocation and the €87 million that was invested in Irish Water through the July stimulus last year. The projected capital investment in 2021 is in the region of €900 million overall, and within that Irish Water will deliver €103 million of new connection infrastructure to facilitate housing and commercial development. This is €103 million of expenditure which is funded externally. The funding to be provided to Irish Water is vital to maintain its asset base and current levels of service to ensure compliance and growth and to deliver improvements in drinking water quality and capacity, to manage waste water and protect and enhance the environment, and to support growth and economic development for Ireland. It will deliver projects and programmes targeted at achieving Irish Water outcomes and outputs, including the removal of projects from the EPA remedial action list, and addressing agglomerations under the urban waste water treatment directive.

Deputy David Stanton: I recognise the huge investment and amount of work being done by the hard-working people in Irish Water but that does not take away from the fact that there are towns such as Mitchelstown, Midleton and Castlemartyr in my constituency and maybe other towns around the country that are frozen and locked out of housing development because of a lack of infrastructure. Will the Minister of State prioritise those? Has any analysis been undertaken on towns like that across the country where they are locked out. I know the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is listening to this. In some instances the land and developers are available and LIHAF funding has been provided; it is all ready to go and the only thing stopping it is the water infrastructure. No developer will take a chance on building houses - they will not be let by the local authority and rightly so - unless they are guaranteed a connection. They cannot get a connection if the water infrastructure is not up to speed. I ask the Minister of State to have a look at this and to assist and support Irish Water on this. It might not be all about money but there is a feeling in some instances that it might be.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I wish to bring to the Minister of State's attention that Irish Water is failing in its duty of care on the management of its assets in Drogheda in County Louth

and that for the first time ever, the EPA has issued an instruction to Irish Water that if it does not manage its resources properly, it will be prosecuted. There is a stench emanating from the waste water treatment plant. One of the three settlement tanks has been shut down. There is septic sewage coming in from east Meath because it is not being taken out of the pipes. I ask that the Minister of State meet with Irish Water as a matter of urgency to discuss how it will deal with this. It is a shame and a disgrace that an entity that I was part of setting up is treating my town so badly.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I assure the Deputy that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Burke and I are committed to working with Irish Water over the lifetime of this Government to deliver this project. As I stated already, the removal of projects from the EPA remedial action list is a key priority of Irish Water. We are happy to take up the Deputy's request to meet with Irish Water on Drogheda, as that is important.

Housing Issues

34. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the acceleration of housing in eastern areas of County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23015/21]

Deputy James O'Connor: I raise the exceptionally important problem of a waste water treatment plant in the Mitchelstown area and Irish Water. It is holding up two housing developments that are ready to go in the area which means local people from the town and the wider community are unable to get homes there. It is completely unacceptable. I have been working alongside the local Fianna Fáil councillors there and I ask for the Minister's assistance. Perhaps the Minister will indulge me by telling me how his Department can assist in getting Irish Water to put the infrastructure that is needed in Mitchelstown in place.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tá an cheist seo faoi thithíocht. On the Deputy's specific question, I can take that up. To follow on from what previous Deputies and our colleagues have said, there is work to be done by Irish Water. They have more funding this year than they have had in many years. The national development plan review includes some requests about provision of waste water treatment and increasing capacity particularly in rural towns and villages and also in our regions. I know it is acute in Cork. I met with Deputy O'Connor and we discussed it. I am happy to convene a meeting with Irish Water on it but we are trying to drive on its capital programme. As Deputies O'Connor and Stanton have rightly said, we cannot deliver housing without waste water and fresh water capacity. It is a challenge but one that is surmountable. We will not be left wanting for funds but it is about delivery now. The local authorities also have a role. We will come up with quite an innovative solution in the summer, subject to approval by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

On Question No. 34, which relates to the provision of housing for County Cork, the programme for Government includes a commitment to deliver over 50,000 homes. I will provide the Deputy with the written answer. Cork County Council, which is one of the exemplars on the delivery of social homes, delivered 546 social homes in 2020. In 2021, Covid will impact somewhat but the council is on target to deliver 740 new social homes supported by the Government. The construction status report of the fourth quarter showed a total of 29 projects on site to deliver a total of 569 social homes in Cork county. The Deputy has been a very strong advocate for affordable housing and Cork county will play a leading role in affordable housing

for working people.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I will certainly work alongside him to continue to tackle these issues. However, the reality with Irish Water and its treatment of my constituents in Cork East is that Mitchelstown is listed on the capital plan from 2020 to 2024 but funding has not been provided. I want to tell the Minister in the strongest terms that this is completely unacceptable. Just down the road in Glanmire there have been multiple water outages too. We have a serious problem with Irish Water in Cork East and I need the Minister's assistance. I look forward to working with him proactively to deal with these particular issues. Down the road, Midleton is a huge town with potential to grow. Multiple housing developments, which are badly needed, in close proximity to Cork need the water infrastructure as well. It has to be said, they also need schools. The lack of waste water treatment facilities and a freshwater supply for new houses is holding back the development of housing in my municipal district and for the people of Mitchelstown. Perhaps the Minister will be able to reply on that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is about the delivery of the capital plan. The Deputy is correct, in that Mitchelstown, Glanmire and Midleton have capacity issues. He has raised this with me before. We need to see the delivery of the capital programme. I am happy to meet the Deputy regarding these specific issues in the towns in question. We will not be able to deliver the affordable homes we need for working people unless we can make progress in that area. I firmly believe we will.

The serviced sites funding will support the delivery of a further 360 affordable homes in Cork county, including 70 cost rental homes in Carrigaline. In addition, two of the eight newly selected sites for the cost rental scheme are located in Cork city. I will announce the precise locations in the coming weeks. Later in the summer, we will publish our Government plan, Housing for All. I am happy to work with the Deputy, who is a strong advocate for his constituency, on the delivery of the upgrade to the waste water treatment infrastructure in the three towns in question and of affordable housing for working people.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for his very good answers on affordable housing. This is of enormous concern to many younger buyers. As the youngest Member of the Oireachtas, I hear these concerns almost every day from people who are struggling to access housing in their communities. I am delighted to hear that Cork County Council is facilitating some of the very first developments under the Minister's tenure. I ask him to ramp up the level of development in order that it is spread right around the county. I am talking about places such as Midleton, Killeagh, Youghal and Cobh. These are growing areas that need housing for young populations. An interesting statistic is that the east Cork area has one of the youngest working populations in the country, as well as one of the fastest growing. Therefore, we need the housing stock. We also need investment from Irish Water. The same has to be said for north Cork, including Mitchelstown. I am delighted progress is being made in Mallow but the people of Mitchelstown need the Minister's support. I thank him for his answers today.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Affordable housing and its delivery for working people are central to the Government's response to the housing crisis. As a Government, we believe in homeownership. It is a just and honest aspiration and it is one that should be supported by the State. That is why the affordable housing Bill we published yesterday is so important. It is to deliver a suite of measures to people all over the country who heretofore found they had been left out of the housing market. These measures will work. I thank the Deputy for his support

in that regard.

On the delivery of capital infrastructure, the Irish Water capital investment plan is crucial. I meet representatives of Irish Water regularly at management level to encourage them to expedite the delivery of projects. I am happy to work with Deputy O'Connor on the three towns in his constituency and to facilitate a meeting with Irish Water in that regard. The capital plan Irish Water has is ambitious. We have ground to make up regarding waste water infrastructure all across the country, not just along the western seaboard. This is acutely the case in certain areas.

Flexible Work Practices

35. Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the policies to support local authorities to continue new work practices implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic that are more family friendly for councillors and council staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22889/21]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am raising with the Minister of State this evening the opportunity to continue with some of the work practices of local authority staff and councillors that have emerged during the Covid pandemic. Adopting the new flexible working practices we have seen has led to a better and more balanced way of life for many people and their communities. There will be less pressure on public transport if staff are not needed in the same way as they were. I am interested in hearing the Minister of State's thoughts on this.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for her question. Similar to other sectors, the local authority sector will continue to make available flexible working, remote working and family-friendly arrangements that facilitate work-life balance while ensuring the delivery of all local authority services. Consideration of family-friendly working practices is particularly important in ensuring that elected councils are fully representative of the constituents they serve. In this regard, on 20 October 2020, a ministerial order was signed by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, under section 29 of the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 allowing meetings of local authorities to be held remotely. It remains a matter for each elected council to decide if it wishes to continue to avail of this order, based on the wishes of the elected members. I am aware of the desire among some councillors, particularly those with family or other caring responsibilities, for the option to attend meetings virtually to continue. I can confirm I am supportive of this aim. My Department will continue to monitor developments in this regard.

Earlier this year, I convened a working group of key local government stakeholders, including councillor representative organisations, to examine the non-pay-related recommendations of the Moorhead report. The working group is in the process of finalising an action plan that will deal with many of the issues referred to by the Deputy, such as administration and IT supports, flexibility of meeting times and duration, and technological solutions. Also covered will be matters such as remote meetings, voting and live-streaming of meetings, along with training and development supports. Addressing these key issues will facilitate the retention of existing councillors, while also maximising the accessibility of local government to future candidates. It will also ensure the role of the councillor is manageable, accessible and sustainable, including for anyone who has other obligations in the form of caring responsibilities or work commit-

ments.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister of State for all his work in this area. It is so important in supporting people going into local politics, attracting a more diverse group and keeping them. The Minister will be aware that while Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, which is in my area, is the first with a 50:50 gender balance, two of its female councillors, namely, Councillors Lorraine Hall and Eva Dowling, have had babies since the election in 2019, because that is what people do. In Ms Hall's case, there was no provision for her to be able to adapt; she simply had to cope with a newborn baby and the council meetings. Ms Dowling was able to have a pairing arrangement with Councillor Emma Blain but these arrangements are unsustainable. It does not just end at six months. As the Minister of State has identified, young families pose a difficulty for councillors. Some councillors are hoping to have the opportunity to have hybrid meetings, partly virtual and partly in person. It is great to hear the Department is supportive of that and a range of other measures.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy. It is great news that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown is reflective of society at large. It is important to have a gender balance in our local authorities that reflects the communities they serve. Councillor Lorraine Hall is on our committee. On foot of the Moorhead report's recommendations on the non-pay items, we have established a sub-group to examine maternity benefit for elected representatives. Elected representatives are officeholders, not employees, which means they are different under employment law. We have really to work on this. The group has had two meetings. Several female councillors, representing different geographical areas, are considering this. I want to come up with a response that is meaningful, that women will use, that will be supportive and that will encourage more women to enter politics. It is so important that all our local authorities reflect the communities they serve. I am very supportive of that as Minister of State.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister of State for the update on that work. It is such welcome work and it is so important. There has been a big change for council staff. We are hearing reports from councillors to the effect that, in many ways, they have been even more accessible in recent months because people have been sharing mobile phone numbers and so on. That has made connectivity much easier, rather than leaving messages at desk phones and so on. It has been possible to resolve many little problems very quickly, which is good. If we can continue with this, it will be an important part of providing more flexible working arrangements.

I recognise the important right to disconnect. We should not be overburdening council staff or councillors. They do need a right to disconnect and do need to have the privacy of their family home and family life because everybody needs a balanced working environment. Everything we can do to create flexibility in work, whether it is by allowing one to work for two days at home and three in the office, or *vice versa*, will be really important.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for her comments. As she rightly stated, flexibility is so important for our local authority workers. They can avail of many family-friendly, supported policies that will be enhanced and continued. We are talking about career breaks, flexible working, the work-sharing scheme, parental leave, paternity leave, parent's leave, maternity leave, carer's leave and associated policies. They are so important in supporting our local authority workers.

The Deputy referred to the right to disconnect. That, in tandem with what the Tánaiste is

trying to progress in respect of remote working in his Department, is part of the measures to support employees to realise their potential and work from home, or, indeed, adopt a blended approach that suits all concerned.

As the Deputy noted, it is important for people to have that right to disconnect in order that their homes will be private and they will have time for their families. I hope that a blend of these policies will give people greater opportunities to be with their families and disconnect and will encourage a better society in general. They could be some of the rewards from Covid.

Climate Action Plan

36. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the work that is being undertaken to ensure that the planning system supports the overall efforts for decarbonisation of society in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23099/21]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Will the Minister of State ensure that the planning system supports the overall efforts for the decarbonisation of society? I welcome the decarbonising zones that have been identified, with one per county. Where the planning system is not working, however, is that a town such as Drogheda, one of the five national growth centres, has not been selected in addition to Dundalk. I welcome Dundalk's selection but it is not a national growth centre. Will the Minister of State examine the rules and regulations to ensure that national growth centres such as Drogheda will automatically be designated as decarbonising zones?

9 o'clock

Deputy Peter Burke: The climate action plan 2019 reaffirmed the important role of planning and the national planning framework in supporting national decarbonisation objectives. A top priority of the national planning framework is compact growth and its inter-relationship with sustainable mobility and transport. Compact growth is also a strategic response to counteract urban sprawl, which results in a high carbon footprint due to demands on transport and energy, mostly based on fossil fuels. Along with minimising transport demand, higher densities and shorter travel distances will reduce energy demand and use. Multi-storey and terraced buildings in close proximity require less energy and make renewables-based systems of energy distribution such as district heating more feasible. City and county development plans must promote sustainable settlement and transport strategies, including measures to reduce energy demand and greenhouse gas emissions, and address the necessity of adaptation to climate change.

The Department promotes decarbonisation through a wide range of measures including statutory planning guidelines such as the updated wind energy development guidelines; the development of the national marine planning framework and an associated marine consenting regime to enable the development of offshore renewable energy; working with local authorities to develop decarbonisation zones; and legislation to promote the use of solar panels and increased numbers of charging points for electric vehicles. I am confident in all the work the Department is doing to support the Government's efforts to put Ireland on a pathway to decarbonisation. It is clear we have a shared vision, from the climate action plan and the national planning framework to the county development plans, regional strategies and local area plans, to try to realise the targets contained within the climate action plan. It is important for a sustainable future that we do that and work together and that there be connectivity between the Government plans.

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Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I ask the Minister of State to answer the question I asked about decarbonisation zones. I welcome his analysis and all the work that has been done. He referred to the national planning framework. Drogheda is designated in the framework as a national growth centre but because the selection of decarbonisation zones is limited to one per county, the largest town in Ireland, the next to become a city, cannot take advantage of the access to new ideas and investments that will come through the Department, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and other organisations. Will the Minister of State examine the regulations in order that in an exceptional case, a town that is a national growth centre could benefit in full as the other town, Dundalk, rightly and properly does from transport, active travel, civic buildings analysis, green spaces, biodiverse land use, air quality, waste management and all the other issues?

Deputy Peter Burke: The initial question referred to the overall strategy for the decarbonisation of society. Action 165 of the climate action plan specifically requires the identification of one location or area in a local authority that will be subject to a plan for a decarbonisation zone. Thereafter, follow-up steps could include harnessing the potential to develop a low-carbon town project for future calls under the climate action fund. The early progression of decarbonisation projects harnesses a range of technologies and incentives that will be subject to a mid-project review by the local authority. Each local authority has been requested to identify before 30 April 2021 a potential area suitable for selection as a decarbonisation zone. Each application should be accompanied by a broad outline of the main projects that could be implemented in the zone and an indication of the potential outcomes deliverable in terms of the reductions in carbon emissions, while recognising that the precise details should be included in each local authority's climate plan. At a minimum, these outcomes must be capable of meeting the Government's targets for carbon emission reductions as set out. Specifically, they must meet a 7% reduction overall in greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I accept that Drogheda was not mentioned in the initial question, but I mentioned it in the question I have since asked the Minister of State. I ask him now, simply and respectfully, to examine the issue. One would expect that when a town has been identified as a major national growth centre, it would be included as a designated decarbonisation zone in order that it can take full and proper advantage of all the changes coming.

Deputy Peter Burke: I accept the question from the floor. It is difficult to comment, given that I do not have in front of me the detail on a particular town and I am talking about the broader policy. I will engage with the Department and revert to the Deputy on the matter. As I stated, each local authority was mandated to put forward one area for selection as a decarbonisation zone. We can discuss Drogheda into the future and see what we can derive from that. It is important that these plans be well connected, although I appreciate there are geographical constraints that people are concerned about. Drogheda, which the Deputy quite rightly fights for daily, is a huge growth centre with significant capacity to attract inward investment. We will do everything to facilitate that and will discuss it again with the Deputy.

Urban Renewal Schemes

37. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of progress regarding the town centre first initiative; when this process is likely to conclude and be implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22615/21]

44. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will introduce a scheme to support owners of buildings within towns and villages to refurbish these properties and bring them into use as residential units within town and village centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22874/21]

Deputy Emer Higgins: We need foreign investment in our housing markets but we need it to stimulate the supply of housing by funding the building of apartment blocks. We do not need what happened in Maynooth. That is the exact opposite of what young couples of my age who want to own their own homes need. That is why we need the Minister to limit the powers of these investment funds. They should not be allowed to buy up two-bedroom and three-bedroom houses that are already built. That is not putting people first. Will the Minister of State provide an update on the Town Centre First initiative?

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 37 and 44 together.

While our towns and villages have shown remarkable resilience through the recent crisis, they require specific policy supports to ensure they will continue to function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and raise families, to act and serve as cultural and recreational hubs for the surrounding areas and to facilitate social and community interaction. In this context, the programme for Government committed to developing the Town Centre First initiative. With a view to giving effect to this commitment and the actions outlined in the programme for Government, a Town Centre First interdepartmental group was established in November 2020 to consider the regeneration of towns and villages. The group is jointly chaired by the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Rural and Community Development.

In parallel, a Town Centre First advisory group was established to enable the experiences of a broader group of stakeholders to be brought to bear in informing the process of policy development and will support the work of the interdepartmental group. Following the initial development stages through the forum of the interdepartmental group and the advisory group, four key pillars are in development as part of the Town Centre First framework via the support of dedicated working groups tasked with addressing governance and enabling structures, an economic and social purpose, a living towns approach and investment and resources.

Work has progressed well and draft working group papers are being developed for discussion, initially with the interdepartmental group, in the coming weeks. There is a general consensus among all the groups that there is no one solution or issue that can or should be addressed in isolation but rather that a Town Centre First framework should be holistic and capable of being tailored to address the individual needs, size and characteristics of a town. Until such time as this work has been further progressed and measures developed and agreed, it would be premature to comment on the specific matters raised. The aim is that the interdepartmental group will provide recommendations for consideration by the Government in June. It is envisaged that these recommendations will cover the short, medium and longer terms to 2040 to align with Project Ireland 2040.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Recently, €5 million in funding for a connected hubs fund was announced. This is a really welcome initiative for people who are looking to work flexibly or closer to home. The fund is, however, targeted at existing remote working hubs, which means that prime locations such as Rathcoole on the N7, or Lucan and Adamstown just off the N4, cannot apply. Will projects in these areas be eligible for funding under any of the Town Centre

First plans? Will the Minister of State be looking at how we can invest in living towns farther down the country to allow for flexible working?

Deputy Peter Burke: Living towns and the hubs to which the Deputy has referred will be key elements and tenets of what we do as we assess what will assist workers and communities and as we develop a sustainable model to grow our towns. We have had a number of bilateral engagements with the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, and her Department with a view to expanding the network of remote working hubs. As the Deputy referenced, a number have already been established. I understand that the Minister has put a call out for another round, which will allow for more hubs. It is very important that we offer viable opportunities for communities to ensure that they have the capacity to engage in remote working. We must also ensure that they have broadband and any other key elements required to carry out their functions as vibrant communities. These issues will be studied. As I referenced in my initial response, we have had a pilot programme with respect to six towns at which we have looked before. We have learned from that and will be formulating a proposal for the Government halfway through this year.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. Remote working can really help us with our housing plans as well as it will give people the freedom to live outside of our urban town centres and big population areas. I will take this opportunity to commend the Government for the approval the Cabinet gave for the new Housing for All initiatives this week. We will have our first scheme for affordable housing on public land, our first ever cost-rental initiative, an affordable purchase shared equity scheme for people who can purchase homes in private developments and the extension of the Part V provisions so that 20% of homes will be ring-fenced for social and affordable housing. We are making great progress in this area and I look forward to seeing the results.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before the Minister of State responds, two more Deputies wish to speak.

Deputy David Stanton: Does the Minister agree with the report of Chambers Ireland, made available last year, which states that, if all vacant properties in towns, villages and cities around the country were made available, 18,000 new homes could be activated? Does he agree that this would require incentives and a carrot-and-stick approach? I am sure the Minister of State knows, as I do, that there are small villages all over the country in which 20 properties may be lying idle. Dealing with this requires an incentive on one end and some kind of penalty on the other for owners who decide to leave such properties lying idle. Will the Minister of State comment on that?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have spoken to the Minister and told him that I welcome the return of the requirement for 10% of homes in new estates to be sold as affordable housing. It is a measure that should never have been dropped. It should have been continued. It is a sustainable model. It goes without saying that it is highly important that towns and villages be rejuvenated but I ask that this be done in a sustainable way. The density guidelines currently in operation outside of Dublin are not sustainable. If the densities are in the mid-30s, we are looking at large apartment blocks. That is not sustainable in towns, villages and even in suburban areas outside of Dublin. Young people want to be able to buy starter homes. Apartments are needed but we must have an integrated model. It is something at which the Minister of State might look at in the context of this and the whole issue of building outside Dublin.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Higgins for her comments, for articulating aspects of the affordable housing Bill and for all her good work on the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. She has been very articulate on it. On the comments of the other Members, Deputy Stanton has raised the issue of derelict homes on a number of occasions. We have a stick approach in the form of the vacant sites levy. It was 3% of the market valuation until 2018 and has increased to 7% for sites listed on local authority vacant sites registers from 2019 onwards. As part of our Town Centre First initiative, of whose advisory group Chambers Ireland and similar actors are members, we must consider how we can adopt a carrot approach to unlock these brownfield and infill sites and derelict buildings and to open them up. That is very important. That will increase the vibrancy and we are working hard to deliver that.

In response to Deputy O'Donnell, I absolutely concur on the density issues. I issued a circular in connection with the matter last week. I am absolutely willing to meet with the Deputy to discuss the matter further.

Mica Redress Scheme

38. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will carry out an urgent review of the financial assistance offered by the State under the defective concrete blocks grant scheme on the basis of the applications received to date by Donegal County Council and the serious concerns of affected families across the county. [22859/21]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I ask the Minister to urgently review the defective concrete blocks scheme as it applies in Donegal. He will be aware that a large number of families have engaged with the scheme, which is simply not fit for purpose. I ask him to listen to the many voices from Donegal he is hearing and to urgently carry out a review of the scheme to see how it can be made fit for purpose and help families to make their homes safe. These are families that have waited many years for a scheme to protect them

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn for the question. I have met many of those homeowners. I was actually in Donegal last summer, as the Deputy will know, when we opened the scheme for applications. I have quite a lot of personal experience with this type of remediation scheme. I was involved with the pyrite remediation scheme, going back to 2011, with the late Minister of State, Shane McEntee, who was heavily involved in the scheme.

All schemes evolve from their initial condition. My colleague, Deputy Calleary from Mayo, has also been raising matters relating to the scheme with me. With specific regard to Donegal, when I recently met with the defective block group there, I asked it to forward a submission to me. I asked the group to come back to me with a little bit more detail so that we could assess exactly what it was looking for and get an understanding of the size of homes involved and the issues with the banks. I have written to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on those issues. Some of the banks are not interacting with people, even to help them with the test. Only on 29 April, just a few days ago, I received quite a detailed submission from the group through Councillor Martin McDermott, a colleague of mine in Donegal who is doing a very good job there, and we are assessing that submission at the moment. There are issues with regard to the size of homes and various other things.

I encourage people to engage with the scheme. It is important. At this stage, we have 378

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stage 1 applications, 308 of which relate to Donegal and 70 to Mayo. Nearly 60% have been approved. It is important that people continue to engage with the scheme. It is in its infancy and when I was in Donegal I told people that it will be a multi-annual scheme. It will take a number of years to fix the problem we have in Donegal and Mayo. I have also heard reports of the issue in another county in the north west and we are investigating that at the moment. I only received the submission from the group very recently. Other Members and my party colleagues have raised other issues with me as well.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: As the Minister knows, the Mica Action Group campaigned for many years. The Minister referred to the pyrite scheme for families in Dublin and north Leinster. That scheme was 100% funded. We in Donegal have always felt let down in that our scheme was 90% funded. We were, however, relieved to have some type of a scheme. The difficulty right now is that the limits for a complete rebuild of one's home meant that it is just not economic. The families not only have to make up the remaining 10%, but pay VAT. Why is that? This is the second time they have had to build their homes. Why would they also pay VAT? Construction costs are increasing. The Minister talked about the role of the banks. His colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, who introduced this scheme, recently asked where the banks are. We are now nearly a year on. Where are the banks in assisting these families? These are the questions people are asking.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not being confrontational on this in any way, shape or form. I have engaged extensively with the group and with homeowners in the area. To put this in context regarding the cost of remediation, the Deputy referenced the pyrite remediation scheme. The average cost of remediation under this scheme was between €60,000 and €80,000 per home. The average cost in respect of the defective blocks scheme is significantly higher than that, as the Deputy will know. The maximum approved cost is €275,000. Apples and oranges are being compared here. We have to be honest with people. At the request of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, and Deputy McHugh, I met the group a number of months ago and asked for additional information to be sent to me, which I received on 29 April. I will assess it and be happy to keep all Deputies and other representatives in Donegal and Mayo apprised. My colleague, Deputy Calleary, has raised issues concerning the 10% contribution and how we might be able to bridge that gap, for example, with other State agencies. I am open to considering the matter, but I encourage people to continue engaging with the scheme in its current form. We will work with them as best we can.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: VAT is a sore point, but there is also the replacement issue. The Minister talked about keeping the original windows and doors in the houses. Why can these people not avail of a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant? They are building new homes, but the Minister wants to build them to standards from 20 years ago. The scheme is not fit for purpose, which we have been telling him for the past year. He needs to start listening to the large number of families involved. I could send him two emails I received in the past 24 hours. Every day, I receive emails from families highlighting point after point. Whatever about the Minister's comment on the amount of State funding, I cannot understand why he has not sat down with the banks, told them that they are not stepping up to their responsibilities and asked them why, since the State is restoring assets over which they have control to full market value from zero, they will not help these families and get them to the point where they can make their homes safe. Why can he not at least sort that out?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister and his staff for their engagement over recent months. The scheme is falling short. I cannot begin to describe the mental and physical

stress that families are under. Deputy Conway-Walsh and I are working together closely on the scheme. The requirement of a 10% contribution will prevent people from accessing it because they do not have that money. Regarding the requirement to replace like for like in terms of energy issues, we are setting up a meeting with the SEAI. I have met the Banking and Payments Federation Ireland, BPF, about trying to get banks to engage with the scheme. We are engaging with the federation. We have also been considering the need for capacity in local authorities to deal with the volume of potential applications. I am not one for drama, but I estimate that multiple hundreds of applications are coming. We need more support to be able to provide information on the scheme and to manage the applications.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Calleary for his constructive engagement. Many Members have engaged in a constructive way. I would have expected them to do so because we are not trying to be confrontational. Rather, we are trying to work through these issues. If people want to set up a campaign about the situation, that is fine, but I am interested in solutions. Deputy Calleary has engaged with us in that regard. We are looking at measures in connection with other State agencies as well.

I do not control the banks. Deputy Mac Lochlainn knows that, but it might not suit his sound bite. I have written to the banks and the Minister for Finance. I have also written to the BPF. I have engaged with the residents directly in an open and extensive way. Most reasonable people would understand that, if we receive a detailed submission on 29 April, we need to be afforded time to examine it, but that might not be good enough for Deputy Mac Lochlainn either. I am interested in delivering solutions for people. I have extensive experience with remediation programmes. I will revert to my colleague, Deputy Calleary, in that regard.

Wind Energy Guidelines

39. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the timeframe for the publication of the revised wind energy development guidelines; the reason for the significant delay in publishing same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13265/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What is the timeframe for the publication of the revised wind energy development guidelines, what is the reason for the significant delay in their publication and will the Minister of State make a statement on the matter? The 2006 guidelines have been under review for a considerable period.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his question. My Department is focused on a review of the 2006 wind energy development guidelines. The review is addressing a number of key aspects, including sound or noise, visual amenity setback distances, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections.

Almost 500 submissions were received in response to a public consultation undertaken as part of a strategic environmental assessment, SEA, of the draft guidelines, many of which were very detailed and technical in nature. My Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications have analysed the submissions received in conjunction with the contracted SEA and noise consultants, and are in the process of preparing finalised guidelines, having undertaken a detailed consideration and analysis of all the submissions received.

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Prior to the conclusion of the SEA process, a number of changes are being made to the noise sections of the guidelines. This work is being led by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and is being completed in conjunction with its external noise consultant and my Department. Work is ongoing in respect of the outstanding issues and is being advanced by our Department. In conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, we are endeavouring to finalise and publish the revised guidelines as quickly as possible.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am interested in knowing what he understands "as quickly as possible" to mean. He will appreciate that there is considerable interest in these guidelines and many people are waiting on them. Over recent weeks, the Joint Committee on Climate Action heard from the planning regulator, who said that the guidelines were needed urgently, and Wind Energy Ireland, which is eager to see them. The Minister of State will know from Longford and Westmeath that many local authorities have been dealing with applications for years. The planning regulator raised this as an issue. We need to see the new guidelines because the technology has moved on so significantly that the current guidelines are outdated, creating a planning vacuum that is ripe for confrontation between communities and developers.

Deputy Peter Burke: As the Deputy articulated, significant changes have occurred in recent years. Working in conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, our Department has been trying to arrive at a response that is fair to communities. We are clear on the need for communities to have protection, but we must ensure a balance so that we also meet our renewable energy targets. The work is still ongoing, but it is very technical. The changes in respect of the noise issue comprise the last major piece of the jigsaw that we are trying to connect. External consultants are giving advice to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in that regard. I hope that we will arrive at a finalised document later this year.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I commend my colleague, Deputy Stanley, who introduced the Wind Turbine Regulation Bills 2016 and 2020. The latter is on the Order Paper and might provide a helpful template for the Departments.

In the planning regulator's contribution to the Joint Committee on Climate Action, he raised the possibility of developing a renewable energy roadmap with county-specific targets. From my experience as a county councillor in Meath, I know of the discussions that happened over the border in Westmeath about the possibility of ruling out renewable energy for large swathes of the county. In terms of county-specific targets, is designating areas for renewable energy an option?

Deputy Peter Burke: It is clear in the first instance that, through the climate action plan and the national planning framework, counties should provide clarity in terms of where they will achieve their targets in order to meet our national climate action obligations. Those targets can be achieved through a large number of renewable energy options, for example, biomass, solar farms and wind energy. It is up to counties to be specific. The Office of the Planning Regulator is an independent office. The planning regulator's job is to examine national plans - the climate action plan and the national planning framework - and regional strategies and determine whether there is a shared vision running through them right down to the county development plans. The new regulations, when they are updated, will provide our councillors and citizens with protection and enhanced guidelines on how we can achieve our renewable energy targets

in a safe way that respects the will of our communities.

Local Authority Housing

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If Deputy Durkan wishes to avail of a one-minute question and a one-minute response, I will facilitate him.

40. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to an emergency public housing programme in which the private sector, on contract to local authorities, might provide direct build housing on public lands with a view to dramatically increase the availability of housing at affordable prices or on income qualification grounds by county given the interruption of the construction industry due to Covid-19 and the continuing increase in the cost of housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3393/21]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to focus attention on the urgent need to provide affordable and local authority housing to respond to the kind of situation that has arisen in Maynooth and a number of other towns throughout Leinster where the population is growing.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank Deputy Durkan for the question. The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that affordable, quality housing solutions are available to everyone in society and this is reflected in the programme for Government.

More than €3.3 billion has been made available in 2021 for housing, the largest budget in the history of the State. This year alone, we are providing capital funding of €468 million specifically to cover affordability measures. This includes €110 million for a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme and a new equity loan facility to deliver cost rental homes; €50 million in services sites funding to deliver affordable purchase homes on local authority lands; €38 million in local infrastructure housing activation funding which will support the delivery of homes on private lands, including many discounted prices; €210 million for lending under the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme; and €205 million to be spent by the Land Development Agency in its progression of housing, including affordable homes. In addition, the help-to-buy scheme is also available via the Department of Finance.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.32 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 6 May 2021.