



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	708
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	718
Housing (Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability) Bill 2021: First Stage.	726
Freedom of Information (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage.	728
Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to instruct Legal Representatives: Motion	729
Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion	730
Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Statement of Estimates: Motion	730
Report of Committee of Selection: Motion	730
Electoral (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members].	731
Ceisteanna - Questions	731
Cabinet Committees	731
Cabinet Committees	736
Cabinet Committees	741
Housing for All: Statements	746
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	779
Hospital Waiting Lists: Motion [Private Members]	780
Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed).	811
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	811
Rental Sector	811
Wastewater Treatment	813
Defective Building Materials	815
Approved Housing Bodies	817
Housing Provision	819
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	822
Local Authorities	822
Vacant Properties	824
Housing Provision	827
Housing Policy	829
Housing Provision	832
Departmental Reviews.	834
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	837
Postal Services.	837
Medicinal Products.	840
Hospital Services	842
Road Network	846

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 28 Meán Fómhair 2021

Tuesday, 28 September 2021

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hospital waiting lists have spiralled out of control. We have more than 900,000 people waiting for vital medical care as we speak. I want to focus on just one of the very alarming aspects of this crisis and that is the more than 100,000 children who today go without the treatment they need. I am talking about children in need of a disability diagnosis, an autism assessment or access to mental health services; I am talking about children who desperately need early intervention but yet face a two-year wait and cannot get access to therapies; and I am also talking about children with scoliosis, who lives their days and nights in agony, waiting for a life-changing procedure. There should not be one child or family left in such an awful situation, let alone thousands upon thousands.

Yesterday, we heard what the lack of capacity in our health service actually means for children. Speaking on radio, Dr. Gabrielle Colleran summed up just how dire things have become. She said: "I had another doctor write to me last week saying they have a child with neurological symptoms and the appointment they had been offered was for 2035." That is 14 years away, a wait so long that the child will no longer be a child when the appointment comes around. The human toll of all of this is devastating. I personally know of parents of children who miss school regularly because of chronic pain, children so traumatised by their wait that they are on anti-depressants, and children and parents who see no light at the end of the tunnel. At the root of this, of course, is decades of bad Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy - 40 years of pushing private interests, weakening public healthcare, slashing capacity in our hospitals and creating nightmarish working conditions for nurses and doctors. We see this failed agenda again in the problems that have arisen with the delivery of Sláintecare, in the Taoiseach's failure to fill on a permanent basis 720 vital consultant positions and in the fact that so many of our young nurses and midwives do not see their future here. The problem is that the Government is wedded to a two-tier system that has failed people time and again, and that is why we continue to have a system that does not work for everyone. It certainly is not working for those 100,000 children.

Teastaíonn athrú uainn. Tá Rialtas ag teastáil uainn a thógfaidh seirbhís sláinte a oibreoidh

do gach duine. Tá gníomh práinneach ag teastáil chun dul i ngleic le líon ollmhór na bpáistí atá ar liostaí feithimh. This has to change. We need a Government that will build a health service that will work for everyone. Urgent action is needed to tackle the colossal number of children on waiting lists. There can be no plámásing or hiding behind alibis of complexity. The Taoiseach's job is to do right by these kids. There are things he could start today that would make a difference. I have two specific asks. Will he commit to filling those 720 consultant positions urgently and on a permanent basis? Will he target that investment to the areas that most affect children, such as orthopaedics, ear, nose and throat medicine, ENT, and neurology? Will he invest to increase dramatically diagnostic capacity to the level required to get children off these waiting lists and into care?

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, tá athrú ar siúl. Tá sé ag teacht. Tá an tseirbhís sláinte ag éirí níos treise lá i ndiaidh lae. Tá 6,000 níos mó duine ag obair sa tseirbhís i mbliana ná mar a bhí ag an am céanna anuraidh. Is léir go bhfuil géarchéim ann. Tá a fhios ag cách go bhfuil géarchéim ann de bharr na paindéime, go bhfuil a lán dochar déanta do chúrsaí sláinte ag an gcoróinvíreas agus gur chuir an víreas a lán brú ar na cúrsaí sin. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil na liostaí i bhfad níos faide anois ná mar a bhí siad roimh theacht an choróinvíris.

Change is happening and will continue to happen with regard to our health services. Fianna Fáil has not been in government for more than ten years. This Government, of which Fianna Fáil is a member, has dramatically increased health spending over the past 12 months. Notwithstanding the extraordinary pressure the pandemic has put on our health services and the fact that it has frustrated and impeded our attempts to get waiting lists down, bed capacity has increased, as have ICU capacity and diagnostic capacity. Up to €25 million in funding has been granted to improve GPs access to diagnostics, which has resulted in up to 70,000 additional scans taking place.

I take the Deputy's point regarding children. We do not want children to remain on any waiting list for too long. In previous eras, we had got waiting lists for children down to three months. It our objective to get waiting times for children right across the board, including those for mental health, disabilities, acute issues and the various specialties, reduced considerably. For example, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has allocated €4 million for the period, September and December 2021, to reduce primary care waiting lists for psychology services. This is a targeted approach that involves the utilisation of public and private capacity, locum professionals, Saturday clinics and so forth to get the waiting times for the thousands of children who had been waiting for access to primary care psychology prior to this initiative reduced significantly. Likewise, on the special needs front, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has moved very strongly and allocated substantial funding to get the waiting lists for childhood assessments reduced.

The Minister for Health is preparing an action plan for dealing with waiting lists more generally. He secured approximately €240 million this year but, because of Covid and the two lockdowns, we had reduced capacity to do the work on that waiting list initiative that we wanted to get done. The funding will be allocated again for 2022. The waiting list plan, which aims to tackle these large and unacceptable numbers, will be announced by the Minister shortly. Critically, it will set out the timelines. The Deputy should be under no illusion, however. Substantial change has occurred. There is no question but that targeting the significant waiting lists, which have also increased significantly because of the pandemic, will be a key priority over the coming weeks, now that we are emerging from the pandemic, and into the early part of 2022, to get those waiting lists and waiting times reduced for all involved.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Níl rudaí ag athrú. Tá an córas sláinte faoi bhrú agus tá 100,000 páiste ar liostaí feithimh. Is é seo an fhírinne. They are the facts. There are 100,000 children on these waiting lists. The Taoiseach speaks of the additional €1.2 billion that has been committed but one third of that money has not even been spent. I asked him specifically about those consultant posts that need to be filled on a permanent basis. I also asked him specifically about increasing diagnostic capacity. Saying “mar dhea” or that there is not a problem or that the Government has risen to the challenge simply does not tally with the facts. By the way, this is not a Covid overhang. The facts tell us that, in January 2020, long before we heard of Covid on our island, there were 824,000 people on waiting lists. This is a long-running problem and at the heart of it is capacity. It is about staffing, beds, theatre space and diagnostics. I challenge the Taoiseach again and ask him to give reassurance to those children and families that the resources will be invested and that, when the Government’s plan is produced, it will not fall short again.

The Taoiseach: Getting children off waiting lists will not be a question of resources. Resources will be allocated to do that. We will need the Deputy’s support and that of the entire Oireachtas when it comes to public-sector-only consultant contracts.

It is interesting that 720 consultant vacancies have arisen in the last week. I do not think that is disconnected from the ongoing-----

Deputy David Cullinane: They are waiting for years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Some are waiting for years.

The Taoiseach: -----negotiations regarding public-sector-only contracts. There is no issue. We provided substantial funding last year to recruit and recruit. Some 6,000 more people work in the health service this July than last July, including 4,000 additional since January.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There were to be 15,000.

The Taoiseach: The point being there is no problem in resourcing this. I have some experience of recruitment and I think the HR side needs to improve dramatically. From the consultants’ perspective, there is an issue on the table because it is a key part of Sláintecare.

Let us be clear that the Deputy’s support will be required, rather than playing politics with it. There will be all sorts of smokescreens and diversions put up but there will be one fundamental issue to be dealt with, and that will be a contract that fully aligns with the Sláintecare principle and relates to appointing public-sector-only consultants.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We are way over time.

The Taoiseach: That will be the key issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are not problematic about this. This side of the House supports public medicine.

The Taoiseach: Regarding diagnostics, the money has been allocated for that and we will continue to improve that.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: For decades we have been known as a low-tax economy. Our 12.5% corporate tax rate has been the most identifiable thing about our industrial policy, the

one constant that multinationals could rely on and a rate that was retained when the country went bust and had to be bailed out. However, the OECD will turn our 12.5% north star into a supernova.

We all know change is coming with the global minimum corporate tax rate. There is an inevitability about this. The evolving language of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Finance on the issue suggests they accept change is coming. What will that change look like? What will our unique selling point be then? Some countries attract foreign direct investment, FDI, not only through a skilled workforce, but through excellent public services and an affordable cost of living. Ireland will not attract companies on that basis. Our dysfunctional housing market means housing costs are the most expensive in the EU. According to a EURO-STAT survey, housing costs in Ireland are a whopping 78% above the EU average. Are wages 78% above the EU average? They are not. We have the third highest proportion of low-paid workers in the EU.

When it comes to healthcare costs, Ireland is the only country in western Europe that does not have free universal coverage for primary care, which makes the Government failure to implement Sláintecare all the more deplorable. Our roads are clogged with traffic and our public transport is at capacity and will soon be oversubscribed, with vital infrastructural projects such as MetroLink and DART+ seemingly delayed to 2034.

Our energy costs are the fourth highest in the EU, and that was before the current explosion in prices, which will put huge strain on families and households this winter. The energy crisis goes deeper than this. The *Business Post* reported an €80 billion investment by Intel is in jeopardy because of antiquated energy and water infrastructure, while the IDA has warned serious reputational damage could be done if these issues are not addressed urgently.

We have a highly educated workforce but when the corporate tax is changed and the global playing field is levelled, the cost-of-living crisis in this country will factor much higher in the calculations of companies considering setting up or investing here. Why would they go to a country where workers cannot afford a home and it is not guaranteed that the lights will stay on, when they can go elsewhere and not suffer a tax penalty for doing so?

What will our industrial policy look like when the 12.5% tax rate is gone? From this side of the House, it does not look like there is much of a plan or policy in place. Will the Government announce new measures in the national development plan, NDP, to address the serious infrastructural deficits in the context of that new industrial environment?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important question. I was not quite clear on her position on whether corporate tax should stay at 12.5% or increase.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: There is an inevitability. It will not-----

The Taoiseach: I am questioning whether the Deputy agrees that the rate should stay at 12.5%. It would be interesting to get a clear statement.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is Leaders' Questions.

The Taoiseach: I know that, but one can ask questions rhetorically in response as well, surely, and articulate a view.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is Leaders' Questions. The Taoiseach could also answer.

The Taoiseach: I am just seeking clarity; that is all. The first point is that the corporation tax rate is not the unique selling point in attracting foreign direct investment into the country. One of the most important decisions made by modern Ireland was to join the EU. That has been critical to the continued economic transformation of our country. The party of which I am a member was the party that led that, with other parties that supported our entry into the Union. Others opposed it at the time. Some opposed it for approximately 30 years until they saw the light, but it was and is a very important policy in terms of our economic well-being and development and still represents that. Even earlier this week, when I was in New York talking to companies that are going to locate in Ireland, I made the point to them that if there are questions about our skills base and so on, our membership of the EU has been a huge buffer. We are the only English-speaking member state now, which is important.

Second, I point to the decision in the 1960s to bring in free second level education and to open outwards. The Lemass leadership of opening outwards was a key turning point in modern Ireland. Investment in third level education over successive generations is also a key selling point for Ireland. It is important because, repeatedly and consistently, companies that have located here, from the Intels to the Eli Lillys to companies all over the country, will say that the quality of the workforce here is second to none and very strong. That is a tribute to the education system right throughout. More latterly, our recent investment in research from the late 1990s onwards is paying dividends in the form of a higher quality of research and development investment that comes in, but we have to do more there into the future.

The tax system has been important; I do not understate that at all. That is why we have entered reservations in the OECD's position. We have not signed up to the OECD consensus, and the reason we have not done so is the lack of certainty in what has been proposed so far. The key issue for those who invest in Ireland is that they want certainty over the overall industrial policy framework, including tax. They do not want a situation in which the base rate will change every two to three years. There is also far more detail in this consensus on which companies will be covered and the threshold around turnover. Certain sectors such as financial services have been carved out. The negotiations are not complete at all, and we have made it clear that certainty and continuity, which have always been the hallmark-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----of our taxation policy, must be maintained.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: There is an inevitability about the OECD and a minimum rate, and I noted the Taoiseach's comments last week. I am very aware of Intel's investment in Ireland because I live in the town where Intel is located. That was in the late 1980s and early 1990s before the facility was up and running. There was not the housing crisis there is now.

The Taoiseach: It was far worse.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: There were not some of the cost-of-living issues that there are now. It would be short-sighted not to look at a unique selling point that factors in some of the issues, for example, the deficit in energy. Data centres are an issue in that regard. We tend to have quite a short-sighted approach to crises. We are very good at crisis management when we get there, but planning to make sure we do not have those crises is where we are not good. I want to know what alternative industrial policy is being considered-----

28 September 2021

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: -----that would be a unique selling point other than the corporation tax rate.

The Taoiseach: The point I am making is that the tax rate on its own is no longer a unique selling point. It never was, actually. It was very important, but the other two points I referenced, in terms of investment in education and our joining the European Union, were also key, fundamental pillars of the economic transformation of this country over 50 years, as well as our consistent industrial policy, which has been pro-enterprise. It is important to be pro-enterprise. Not everybody in this House has always been pro-enterprise but it is important, and it also important that people get that sense of the country when they arrive here.

The Deputy correctly referenced Intel, which is a very interesting example. We are now a centre of manufacturing excellence globally because of our experience over 30 or 40 years. We have benefited human capital-wise and in respect of processes in terms of how to manufacture. We are reliable partners in terms of being a country where manufacturing excellence is so evident. I was down at the Intel site recently and it is quite stunning, not least to see all the construction companies there.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I understand there were 4,500 workers on site engaged in construction alone, including those of Banagher Precast Concrete, which is first in the world at what it is doing in respect of that plant and Intel sites all over the world.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: We can knock ourselves a lot. We need to recognise the challenges but, sometimes, we also need to acknowledge and appreciate the good stuff that is happening in the country.

Deputy Seán Canney: My question relates to Intel and its shortlisting of Oranmore in Galway as a possible location for a multimillion euro manufacturing facility. I am envious of Leixlip in County Kildare when the Taoiseach talks about the number of construction workers alone operating there. The proposal for a facility in Oranmore would create 10,000 jobs in the region. It has also highlighted the potential and attractiveness we have in the west and north and how we can make sure we are prepared to take on this opportunity infrastructure-wise.

The EU recently categorised the north and west of this country as a region in transition, a lagging industrial region and a moderate innovator. This was done on the basis of measuring our performance in that area. There are eight counties involved, including Cavan, which is the county represented by the Minister sitting beside the Taoiseach, as well as Monaghan, Donegal and the five counties in Connacht. A project of the size proposed by Intel will demand that we have support coming into that site in Oranmore, if it comes, and, if it does not come, some other company will come and do it. We need to have the supports in place to deliver the services, construction and workforce to make sure this project, if it comes or there is another of the same scale, will be transformative for the west of Ireland.

With the national development plan being looked at currently - I understand the process is called Review to Renew - it is important we take into account where we are in that region and

the infrastructure we need to make sure it can reach its full potential. It has the attractiveness but it needs a lot more than that. We need to provide the infrastructure and the wastewater facilities in the east of County Galway that are required and being promoted by Galway County Council. We need to provide the outer ring road in Galway city to make sure people can move around the city and get into it. We must ensure all the workers coming from the east of the county, where my constituency is, can get into work. More importantly, we also have to look at what other infrastructure is required. Phases 1 and 2 of the western rail corridor are waiting to be done. They would link in Castlebar, Ballina and Westport, as well as Limerick, to support a project such as the one that is proposed. I ask the Taoiseach to consider all of that.

The last point I raise is that we need to create that attractiveness for people to come, live, work and enjoy life in the region. We also must put in place a proper, structured cancer care centre for the region. We need to make sure it has a full research and innovation structure within it. It is important that Ireland be at the heart of the European Beating Cancer Plan.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The first point I would like to make is the Government is very committed to regional development and to reorientating the economic development of the country, rebalancing it and making sure we get greater activity across the regions generally and particularly the west and north west. The Deputy referenced one plant. That is an ongoing issue the company itself will determine but it is interesting from an industrial policy point of view that we are saying to a lot of companies that are investing in Ireland to consider the regions and that we can help to assemble land banks to facilitate significant industrial development.

The Deputy referenced the Minister seated beside me, Deputy Humphreys. More than €42 million has been allocated from the Department of Rural and Community Development. Under the rural regeneration development fund, Portumna received approximately €2.5 million in funding for a project that will redevelop the historic courthouse building and courtyard in the town. In the context of the national development plan, we are very conscious of the issues that have been raised, especially relating to the western rail corridor. All of the Deputies in the House, cross-party, have been in touch in respect of this and, obviously, the Ministers from the region have also. I know the Minister, Deputy McGrath, is fully aware of the desire of all Oireachtas representatives to have that developed.

As the Deputy is aware, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, has launched a strategic rail review that will examine all aspects of interurban and interregional rail and will be conducted on an all-island basis in full co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland. It will provide a strategic backdrop to investment in our rail network for the next 20 years and more, and it will consider the potential of currently lightly used lines like Limerick to Waterford, disused lines like the western rail corridor, and the potential for new alignments. The review has just commenced and will be completed within 12 months. As I say, there is considerable advocacy on behalf of this corridor from all of the Ministers and Deputies representing the western region and we will, obviously, continue to pursue that in the context of the national development plan.

I point out the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, is spearheading the development of a new west regional enterprise plan. It is a bottom-up plan that was developed by regional stakeholders, including the local authorities, enterprise agencies, local enterprise offices, regional skills forums and education and training institutes in each region. Under the regional enterprise development fund and the Border enterprise development fund, about €16.7 million has now been

allocated to approximately nine enterprise-focused projects for the region. We will continue, in the context of all the various initiatives under different Departments, to advance the economic development of the west and we fully take on board the points raised in respect of the necessity to do that and the importance of the western rail corridor in that context.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Taoiseach. We need a bit more in the west than just a desire to do something. We need a commitment on it. It is very important that a commitment is made. As the Taoiseach stated, politically, everybody wants to do the rail network. It is actually part of our climate action plan to make sure transportation and production within plants are all done in a way that saves on CO2 emissions. The most important and pertinent point, however, is that when a global company such as Intel puts out a finger and states that, out of ten places worldwide, it is looking at Galway and the west of Ireland, we should consider what it would mean if it did come to the region. We must consider what needs to be done to make sure that if it does come, we are ready to support it and make sure it is viable. If it does not come, we have to make sure that we are ready for the next global organisation to look at the region. We have already had the case of Apple, which was attracted to Athenry and still is. There are a significant number of medical technology companies in Galway, but what is happening is that every one of those workers coming in from the east of the county has to travel to work by road. We are talking about taking cars and lorries off the roads. We have an ideal opportunity with the western rail corridor to make sure we deliver the goods and services to Intel in a way that meets our climate action plan as well. It is ready to be done. No planning permission or anything else is needed. It would be a good stamp for this Government to put desire into action and to get it going.

The Taoiseach: First of all, as I said earlier, it is not by accident that they are looking at the west. There is a strong proactive Government approach to encouraging investment into the regions where that is possible and where we can facilitate it. That is a very important point. I take the Deputy's point in terms of railways more generally. In the context of climate action, the climate change agenda and the necessity to decarbonise, railways will have a much more important role now and into the future. In that context, the Minister has commissioned the all-island strategic rail review, which will set out the map, as it were, and the plans, followed by the allocation of resources to get such projects under way.

As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Rural and Community Development is funding the Western Development Commission in respect of regional remote working hubs, which are important in building up the human capital skills base to facilitate smaller enterprises as well as creating the overall capacity so that the requisite skill sets are there when bigger players come into the region. For us now, it is about getting these projects delivered. The resources are being allocated to do so.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I wish to focus on the issue of delays to craft apprenticeships, such as plumbing and electrical apprenticeships, throughout the country. The Government recently announced an ambitious Housing for All plan, but its success is predicated, among other things, on being able to attract new construction workers. Around 27,000 are required, according to some estimates. On top of that, the Taoiseach's colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, has stated that we need 27,000 new construction workers to carry out retrofitting across the State. Where are they all going to come from?

At the moment, 3,500 apprenticeships are delayed because of backlogs caused by Covid.

I do not doubt the difficulties Covid caused for the vocational side of the training they do in education and training boards, ETBs, and colleges across the State. However, I do not believe that difficulties are a sufficient excuse. We need these workers to be trained and to enter the workforce. We also need to ensure they realise how valued they are, because 5,500 trainees left apprenticeships over the past five years. I do not know why this happened. I am not saying all of it was because of delays or even any of it was necessarily because of delays. However, I know many of my young constituents in County Clare are very frustrated by the delays because they cannot move on to the next level, which has repercussions for how much they can earn, when they are going to earn properly and, they hope, get a house and support a family.

SOLAS announced funding recently and stated that the backlog would be cleared. What does it mean that the backlog will be cleared? Does it mean the backlog of getting new apprentices into the system will be cleared? Currently, there are apprentices who started a four-year apprenticeship and are now being told it will take them six years to complete it. Medical, dental or other students across the State are not being told that instead of their degrees taking four years, they will now take six years, nor should they be. Apprentices should not be treated any differently. The State should do whatever it takes to ensure these apprentices get the training they signed up for in full and on time so that they can enter the workforce. That is, of course, if the Housing for All plan is to actually take off. There are many other problems. Construction materials are costing a lot of money and very little is being done in terms of granting felling licences to get timber in. However, I wish to focus on apprenticeships today. What is the Government going to do on apprenticeships? Will it provide a guarantee to existing apprentices and those who are hoping to start apprenticeships that they will finish their apprenticeships on time and the ETBs and colleges will be providing the training that is an essential part of their apprenticeship to enable them to finish on time?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for raising the question. It is a very pertinent question that goes to heart of the challenges that face us in terms of Housing for All and having the requisite skill sets, but also across the broader economy. There is a waiting list for craft apprentice off-the-job training in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and joinery. The Deputy is correct on that. Covid and the measures that happened as a result in terms of lockdowns have been a factor in backlogs, but there has also been a doubling of the apprentice population over the past four years. In addition to that, there was the closure of face-to-face training in 2020 and 2021 and reduced capacity due to Covid-19 distancing requirements. Programmes were running at a capacity of 40% to 50% to allow for appropriate distancing. SOLAS, as recently as last Thursday, announced the actions being taken to address this so apprentices whose training has been affected by the impact of Covid will be offered places for phases 2, 4 and 6 of their programmes, which consist of off-the-job training. More than 4,800 apprentices currently on a waiting list for off-the-job or workshop-based training are now on track to commence their training by the end of 2021. This represents 40% of those currently waiting. One hundred percent will be returned to workshop-based training in 2022. We fully accept the vital importance of getting these apprentices back into their programmes as quickly as possible. Those who are waiting the longest will be prioritised.

Twenty million euro in capital has been allocated to SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority, HEA, to provide up to an additional 4,000 off-the-job training places for craft apprentices to address the current backlogs. From September 2021, course provision returned to full capacity. Places created from the capital investment of €20 million are now beginning to come on stream. This expansion is planned to continue throughout 2022 as new facilities become

available for learner use. A restructuring of phase 2 programmes in the three main apprenticeship areas — plumbing; electrical; and carpentry and joinery — will allow for blended learning over the coming period, reducing the time spent on site and providing for an additional intake off premises at phase 2.

The Deputy will know that the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme will continue to operate until the end of this year. We will review that. Employers approved by SOLAS to employ apprentices are eligible for a €3,000 grant for each new apprentice registered. Between March 2020 and August 2021, in excess of €10 million was sanctioned for payment under this initiative, supporting almost 2,000 employers to employ more than 3,500 apprentices. Phase 2 training continued throughout the summer, with 780 apprentices starting their training in July and August. Phase 2 is scheduled on an ongoing basis. Therefore, more classes are being scheduled at present.

At the end of August, there were about 18,733 registered craft apprentices, with 9,743 waiting for a period in respect phases 2, 4 or 6 of their seven-phase apprenticeships.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: Basically, SOLAS and the HEA have been working with the training providers. The resources have been provided to get back up to speed, but also to increase and expand.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I do not doubt the difficulties caused by Covid, nor do I doubt any of the measures the Taoiseach has outlined. I greatly welcome them all. My question is simple: will these apprentices finish their apprenticeships when they are scheduled to do so? No doubt, they have made plans for their lives, including to buy a van and get working, and ultimately to buy a house as they are building houses. Will they be able to commence as fully qualified electricians, carpenters, plumbers etc. as scheduled?

To draw an analogy, the members of the Government have a slightly unusual relationship in that the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, was told he would be Taoiseach again in December 2022. If the Taoiseach turned around to the Tánaiste and said that since there have been a lot of difficulties over Covid, he was not going to be Taoiseach for another year at least-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He might yet.

Deputy Michael McNamara: -----I am not sure how it would play out for the stability of the Government. The Taoiseach might reflect on that and how apprentices who have made life plans must feel. Will they be able to finish their apprenticeships on time?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is tempting me. Obviously, on-the-job training, off-site training and so forth are important. The blended programme I referred to should make up time, and there is a desire to get people back on track in terms of the timeline so they can complete their apprenticeship programme within the timeline identified at the outset. I cannot give guarantees in respect of that but I would like to believe that SOLAS and the HEA will be flexible and sensible enough in terms of the design of the programmes and using that blended approach to facilitate the individuals concerned.

Overall, what is clear from this is that there has been a step change. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is leaving its mark in respect

of further education and apprenticeship training, but it is also bringing together and co-ordinating much more effectively than heretofore SOLAS, the education and training boards, and the Higher Education Authority. This is extremely important if we are to achieve the best value for the resources that are allocated and more targeted approaches. We need more skilled apprentices available to the economy right across the board. We have a retrofitting programme to do, and, again, we will require specific skill sets for that in addition to the housebuilding. There is a whole programme on direct provision. A whole programme will be required right across the board. It is going to be very challenging on the skills front.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move straight on to the Order of Business. The report of the Business Committee will be taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed. This morning, we heard very harrowing news about an investigation being carried out at Cork University Maternity Hospital after it emerged that the organs of 18 babies were transported abroad and disposed of by incineration without the consent or knowledge of their parents. I am sure we can only imagine the extreme hurt and distress that those families are now experiencing. This is not the first scandal and upset around organ retention and matters arising from this, however. It is beyond belief that we are at this point again.

As the Taoiseach will know, what happened in Cork University Maternity Hospital is in breach of HSE guidelines that go back to 2012 arising from a previous scandal. We need answers. We need to know why this happened. As a matter of urgency, time needs to be made available for the Minister for Health to appear before the House to make a statement, take questions and give answers to the Dáil, but, more importantly, to start to give answers and assurances to those families, in particular, and to the wider community.

Deputy Mick Barry: We want to add our support to this call. How was this allowed to happen? It happened under the pressure of the pandemic, which bore down on every Irish hospital. Did anything similar happen in any other Irish hospital as the pandemic loomed? We want time to be made available this week for statements on this issue, and, in particular, for questions and answers with the Minister.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is the same issue. We need a debate on this. It is truly shocking. It actually did not happen during the pandemic. It happened in the November before the pandemic arrived on our shores so we cannot blame the pandemic for everything. It is truly outrageous that this could go on, but, of course, the Government ushered in abortion here so can we expect anything better?

The Taoiseach: First, I appreciate the issue that Deputies McDonald, Barry and McGrath have raised. It is very difficult to comprehend how this occurred because this was the subject of a very exhaustive and comprehensive inquiry in the past across every single hospital in the country. The Dunne inquiry would have been involved in that.

That this was done without the consent or knowledge of the bereaved parents is cruel and unacceptable. I would certainly be anxious to facilitate a debate in the House and for ques-

tions to be asked. I believe the Minister is seeking assurances from every other site across the country that this did not occur. There are two inquiries and I understand that a review is under way within the HSE at the moment. With that said, I understand fully the desire of the House to have some debate and the issue raised in respect of the parents concerned. We will certainly facilitate that on this side of the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We will make arrangements immediately after the Order of Business to consult the Business Committee and to make time available in light of what has been said. Can I take it, therefore, that the proposed arrangements for the week are now agreed? Agreed. I call Deputy McDonald on promised legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last week, the Taoiseach's colleague, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, enraged hard-pressed renters when he said that "one person's rent is another person's income". Not to be outdone by him, this week the Taoiseach's man, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, told reporters the property market is not "out of control".

On what planet are these men living? Rents are way above the Celtic tiger peak, house prices are getting there too, homelessness is endemic and families are on council housing waiting lists for an eternity, some for 14 years and more. Even so, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Taoiseach's man, the man charged with fixing housing, does not believe the property market is out of control. It is this kind of clueless, out-of-touch thinking behind the Minister's housing plan that means we again have a plan that puts developers and investors first. Will the Taoiseach get a grip on this crisis, drop his recycled, failed policies and deliver a plan that works for people?

The Taoiseach: The Minister has produced Housing for All, an unprecedented, comprehensive strategy backed, in an unprecedented way, by resources to make a far greater number of houses available to enable people to buy houses and afford them. More than 90,000 social houses will be delivered over the period of the plan, along with thousands of cost rental and so forth. I have always stated that housing is the number one social crisis of our time and it needs everyone in this House on board. The Deputy and her party need to get a grip with it and not just in a knee-jerk way oppose every application that comes before them because it will get them votes in particular constituencies. That is not getting a grip on it either-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: Eleven hundred apartment units were planned in the area. I do not know what the individual case-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Stop bluffing; it is beneath you.

The Taoiseach: The point is that the Deputy keeps opposing it all, and that is a problematic issue-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The problem is the policy failed.

The Taoiseach: What has been announced in Housing for All is unprecedented. The investment is unprecedented.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: It will be the largest number of social houses built in the history of the State. It needs delivery, but to get delivery we need to ensure all of us in this House show leadership in respect of the housing applications that come before us from here on. Otherwise, there is no point in having this kind of across-the-aisle stuff about how one group should get a grip on the issue when the Deputy does not play her part either.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Members play their part by adhering to the time limits?

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Minister for Transport, who also has responsibility for environmental issues, delivered what can only be described as a punch in the gut to the people of Swords and the north side of Dublin by deferring and delaying the delivery of MetroLink to 2034. Many people believe it is the indefinite deferral and delay of MetroLink. The programme for Government not only mentions MetroLink but states, “the Government will prioritise plans for the delivery of Metrolink”. Deputy Micheál Martin is the Taoiseach, the chief, the boss. Will he assure the House and the people of Swords and north Dublin that the Government is still committed to Metrolink; that once the railway order goes through and planning permission is given, work will begin as soon as possible; and that the Government will deliver MetroLink as close as possible to 2027 and not push it out to 2034, as the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has said? Will the Taoiseach give that commitment today?

The Taoiseach: The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is the one Minister in this House who wants that to happen. That is what he wants. He has not delayed anything; he just gave a realistic assessment of where things are and are likely to be, given the planning issues and so on. Be under no illusion, it is a priority and the national development plan will deal with that issue as well. One has to be honest and realistic, and the realistic and honest comments of the Minister were translated into a suggestion he is delaying the project. That is a completely wrong interpretation.

Deputy Holly Cairns: People with disabilities in Ireland vastly and disproportionately experience greater poverty and social exclusion. Disgracefully, it took Ireland more than ten years to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and we are still awaiting the ratification of the optional protocol, which crucially enables people to enforce their rights acknowledged in the convention. The programme for Government commits to ratifying the optional protocol after the first reporting cycle, but it is now very likely this schedule will delay the ratification by several years. People with disabilities cannot wait that long to be able to guarantee their rights. Human rights and legal experts have told the Joint Committee on Disability Matters we can ratify the optional protocol immediately if the political will is there. There is no reason for any further delay. Will the Government please prioritise the ratification of the optional protocol immediately?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is working on the ratification process. In the meantime, we are allocating substantial resources across the board in respect of children with special needs, both in education and in the healthcare area. More critically, we must work on facilitating people with disabilities to work in the workplace as well-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: When the Taoiseach says she is working, is there a timeframe for that work?

The Taoiseach: -----which is an important point. We are not doing enough either in the public service or more generally to facilitate people with disabilities to work.

Deputy Holly Cairns: When will we ratify the optional protocol?

The Taoiseach: As I have said, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will work on that. If the Deputy wants my honest perspective on things, one can ratify conventions, but we need the system and we need people to work and deliver. That is the most pressing issue for me right now.

Deputy Mick Barry: Does the Taoiseach honestly believe that a measly once-off bank holiday and a few other crumbs from the table will satisfy the demand of front-line workers for a Covid bonus? These workers risked their lives and their health and suffered fatigue, stress and all types of mental health pressures to help to pull this society through the worst of the crisis. Workers in the public and private sectors alike deserve proper compensation. Does the Taoiseach accept that our society includes so-called high net worth individuals and some corporations that benefitted financially from the Covid-19 pandemic in a massively disproportionate way? Why would he not introduce a special one-off Covid wealth tax in the forthcoming budget and pay Covid bonuses from the revenues raised?

The Taoiseach: I thought the Deputy was against wealth taxes given that he votes against most of the taxes on wealth when they are introduced in the House. However, to be serious for a moment, the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, are working on the recognition of front-line healthcare workers-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are too many in the economy.

The Taoiseach: -----and will come back to the Cabinet in respect of that issue, and then will bring it before the House.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I very much welcome the proposal being floated at present to establish a specific task force to tackle the ever-growing hospital waiting lists in Naas General Hospital and every hospital in the country. If the vaccine task force under Professor Brian Mac-Craith has taught us anything, it is that if one assembles the right people with the right skills and the right resources, one can achieve world-class outcomes. I am greatly supportive of the concept and the principle. My concern is always about the implementation. Can the Taoiseach indicate when this task force is likely to be established and when it will be up and running?

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy that the vaccine task force did an exceptional job. It was multidisciplinary and involved different aspects of the public sector and some of the private sector. Our vaccination record of 93.5% of adults is an extraordinary achievement for the country and reflects very well on all concerned. The waiting list initiative is now key. As we emerge from Covid-19 we simply must reduce the times that people are waiting to get procedures. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, will develop proposals for the establishment of a task force. That is imminent as we expect to have the proposals outlined within the next week or two.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have a question for the Taoiseach about a reply I received today to a parliamentary question regarding the winter plan. The winter plan promises 23.62 million home support hours, but the HSE is currently only delivering 11.4 million. This is chronic. To refer to the last question, the hospitals will be full while people cannot get home support. As it faces into the winter plan, at what point is the HSE going to be upfront and deliver this? There are 2,156 people across the country waiting for new or additional home help hours, and 894 are in County Tipperary. Families and carers are getting sick and if that is not dealt with,

the hospitals crisis will be much worse. Hospitals are already overcrowded, so what is the point of producing figures if the HSE is not going to deliver? It is very frustrating for people trying to ring and beg and scrounge to get home help hours. Then they are getting sick when they do not have any supports.

The Taoiseach: I am surprised the Deputy is raising that issue. I am informed that nobody in south Tipperary is waiting for home help hours as of the end of August. If the Deputy talks to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Who is giving that information?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, let the Taoiseach respond.

The Taoiseach: Last year about 7,000 people were waiting and that has been reduced to 1,300 now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: These figures came from the HSE this morning.

The Taoiseach: One of the issues facing the sector is getting enough skilled workers into the home care sector. That is our biggest challenge now. More than €5 million was allocated last year which has had a dramatic impact on reducing the waiting times and also had an impact on the flow through hospitals. The issue will be getting personnel to work in the sector.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: In 1984, Patrick Nugent died at Bunratty from injuries sustained. The following year the jury at his inquest stated that it was far from satisfied as to the circumstances under which Patrick Nugent sustained the injuries which caused his death and called on the Minister for Justice to investigate the matter further. It took until 2017 for an inquiry to be established by Judge Clyne. He reported to the Department of Justice on 31 October last year. Since then I have asked the Department numerous times what is happening and have been told that it is being reviewed by the Attorney General. While the Department is hiding behind the Attorney General, the only person answerable to this House for the Attorney General is the Taoiseach. He is reputed to be a very hard-working Attorney General. What is the delay? This family has waited long enough for a report into what happened to their son and brother in 1984.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. We have received the advice of the Attorney General and having considered that advice the Department of Justice has invited the Nugent family to a meeting to explain the next steps regarding Judge Clyne's final report. This meeting is due to take place in person next week. I appreciate that Mr. Nugent's family are most anxious to receive the outcome of Judge Clyne's investigation.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I want to ascertain the Government's intentions regarding the position of directly elected mayor for Limerick city and county. As the Taoiseach will be aware, this election has already been postponed once this year and now according to newspaper reports it will be postponed again. What is the reason for these postponements? What are the Government's intentions when and if the election takes place?

Deputy Michael McNamara: What about the Deputy's own intentions?

28 September 2021

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I do not have any vested interest, but I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to reiterate that.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Or twist his arm maybe.

The Taoiseach: Obviously, it is the Government’s intention to get the legislation passed through the House and that will affect the timeline for the subsequent election to take place. It really depends on getting the legislation through.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Could the Taoiseach give a possible timeline?

The Taoiseach: I cannot give that right now.

Deputy Steven Matthews: The programme for Government commits to a Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment to prioritise insurance reform. The survival of an outdoor business in Bray is threatened by high insurance costs as are many community groups, sporting groups and businesses. I look forward to meeting the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, later to discuss what we can do for Squirrel’s Scramble in Bray and the others affected. We need to reduce the cost of insurance, the number of cases and the number of awards made. I ask the Taoiseach to give me a progress update on insurance reform.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. Tomorrow I am meeting the organisation the Deputy mentioned along with Deputies from the constituency. The Government has issued an action plan for insurance. A key element has been the introduction of the new personal injury guidelines which came into effect before the summer. The Minister for Justice will produce a report on their implementation at the end of this year. I am chairing the office that is promoting competition in the insurance area. I have met IDA Ireland to encourage new businesses to come into Ireland. Most of the actions in the action plan are already in place. On two occasions I have met the chief executives of all the insurance companies to ensure that they pass on these reductions. I will meet representatives of Brokers Ireland immediately after this session.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Earlier the Taoiseach said he was very committed to regional development, particularly in the west and north west. Towns like Ballyhaunis are leading the way in driving the recovery after the challenging time rural areas have had and indeed after the collapse of the banking system.

3 o’clock

The excellent work done by the Ballyhaunis Chamber of Commerce, Ballyhaunis Community Council and other voluntary groups and individuals in the town is widely acknowledged. This work makes Ballyhaunis an attractive town to live and work in and these organisations and individuals are to the forefront of inclusiveness in rural development. For months, the threatened closure of the Bank of Ireland branch in Ballyhaunis has cast a shadow over this town and surrounding area. For a financial institution to be allowed to turn its back and withdraw these vital services runs contrary to the programme for Government aim of revitalising small towns. If he has not done so, can the Taoiseach and his Minister for Finance meet the banking executives and ask them to reconsider their decision to close this branch and to engage with the chamber of commerce and community council in the town in this regard?

The Taoiseach: Bank of Ireland is a private institution and it makes its own decisions. The

Government has decided to focus its work through An Post and through other initiatives such as the remote working hubs and enterprise centres, plus the Housing for All and Town Centre First strategies. We are using our mechanisms on a number of fronts to revitalise towns and to get investment back into towns. When we have met the banks, we have repeatedly stressed the need for them to retain and maintain their regional and rural footprints as well as the importance of that to the commercial viability of towns. Where the Government itself has control of the levers, it is anxious to put investment into towns such as Ballyhaunis.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: A constituent of mine, Patricia, recently applied for a passport for her four-year old daughter, which is a common undertaking for a parent. What should have been a routine task has been anything but that. Patricia and her wife went to court to be recognised as their daughter's legal parents. They waited for parental recognition of same-sex couples by the Oireachtas and they waited for section 21 to be signed into law. To be then told that she cannot apply for a passport because she is not the birth parent adds insult to injury with a trowel. This is not good enough. For how much longer will children such as Patricia's daughters be discriminated against because of the gender of their parents?

The Taoiseach: This issue is not acceptable but it will need change. That is being pursued on a number of fronts, not just in the context of the case the Deputy has identified but it has wider implications for other cases as well and that has to be corrected.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: When?

Deputy Richard Bruton: We will soon see the NDP. Will it address the serious issues in early childhood provision, where we have a massive scarcity of childcare places? Most of these places provide less than 20 hours per week. We have a lot of public assets through which childcare opportunities are not being opened. Could we see the start of a strategy for capital and development planning in the early childhood sector in the NDP?

The Taoiseach: The NDP is fundamentally about the allocation of capital funding, which dovetails and aligns with current policies and programmes that individual Departments and the Government collectively have identified and prioritised. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in particular, has identified the requirements for childcare into the future in terms of the funding that will be required over the lifetime of the plan and in terms of the Estimates on a multi-annual basis. That is the context in which childcare policy will evolve. One of the challenges facing childcare policy has been how it has evolved historically, unlike other educational provision. From age zero to six, we have a multiplicity of different groups and providers from State actors to the private and community sectors. It is not easy to get a single solution to it if we are honest about it. That is the problem with the challenge we face.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: With regard to work permits, there is a severe shortage of labour in virtually all sectors across the country. The same is happening in Northern Ireland. It came to a head in recent weeks when a meat processing plant in Northern Ireland, which takes a lot of pigs from the South, was forced to close because of a shortage of labour. This had a huge impact on pig prices in the South. There is a major shortage of labour at the moment in all sectors, whether it is in hospitality, tourism or agrifood. We need to urgently revisit the issue of work permits. This needs to be speeded up and streamlined as quickly as possible.

The Taoiseach: I accept the Deputy's point. There is without question an issue with work

permits, visas and ensuring we have an adequate labour supply in the market right now. One dimension of it was discussed earlier in terms of upskilling and providing a range of skills, which is being done to an unprecedented degree. The other aspect we have to urgently review, and this is now under way in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, under the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, is the work permit system, to facilitate a faster and more flexible approach to get people into sectors where there are considerable shortages right now.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tom McHugh worked as an assistant chief officer, ACO, in Portlaoise Prison. In October 2018, a prisoner came to the governor of that prison and said that other officers were constantly coming to his cell and, in his words, wanting him to cut up Tom McHugh. This is just one of example of what an ACO in our prisons has experienced. He was vindicated by the Naughton report. There was a Garda investigation and a “Prime Time” investigation into this matter. I have raised this with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the current and previous Ministers for Justice and the Minister of State in that Department, yet, 18 months later, this public servant has still not been able to go back to work because the same conditions pertain in that prison.

We have a situation this week where four officers are being investigated for going on the beer while they were bringing a gangland criminal from prison to court. I spoke to a senior person in the Irish Prison Service, IPS, today who said the crisis is so severe in the service that someone will be found dead soon. After all that has been said to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice, when will this matter be dealt with?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I will get him an update on it and will have it sent to him. I do not have it off the top of my head, but I will provide it to him.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: During the previous Dáil, I raised the plight of Clonkeen College in Dún Laoghaire on multiple occasions. It is a non-fee paying, publicly funded school run by the Christian Brothers, who have decided to sell off the school playing fields to a private property developer. Since the previous Government would not listen, I ask the current Government to intervene to stop the sale of school pitches that have had heavy amounts of public investment, where there is an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit that depends on those playing areas and where there is a local sports clubs with a chronic shortage of playing pitch space throughout the area. These will all lose out to essentially benefit a private property developer. If it is not acceptable for most people that a religious charity should decide the future of the national maternity hospital, it is equally unacceptable that publicly funded schools run by religious charities should flog off school facilities to property developers. Will the Taoiseach do something about it?

The Taoiseach: The Christian Brothers should not be selling off those playing fields. They should be made available to the people, clubs and young people in the area. That is the proper thing to do. Do I have the legal power to enforce that? I do not believe I do. I will certainly follow this matter up with the Minister for Education to see what persuasion can be applied but in situations like that, given the scarcity of amenity and recreational land in such locations, it should be retained for the purposes of recreation and sport for the local community.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Do something about it then.

The Taoiseach: I cannot. We do not run a dictatorship.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Where there is a will there is a way.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Patricia Ryan.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I am not on the list today.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Once again we are struck by the spectre of the British Government playing games with the Northern Ireland protocol. Unionist politicians are doing it down once again today and Article 16 is being discussed as a political plaything in the lead-up to domestic political conferences. What is the Government doing with our partners in the EU to ensure the British Government meet its legally binding commitments?

The Taoiseach: The Government remains focused, calm, flexible and in solution mode on the protocol and on the relationship between the EU and UK. There must be political will on all sides. There cannot be unilateralism, which is the opposite perspective to that of the Good Friday Agreement. Unilateralism is the opposite type of impulse than that represented by the Good Friday Agreement. My sense, until recently, was that the British Government was anxious to work with the EU to get a resolution. European Commission Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič, went to Northern Ireland and met all the parties and had good engagement with them. That was acknowledged by those parties. I had quite a lengthy meeting with him the previous evening. There is a route to getting this issue resolved. It is extremely important that people do not do anything that would further destabilise the situation in Northern Ireland. In my view, the institutions and their stability are paramount.

Housing (Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Pauline Tully: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision for ease of access to a housing adaptation grant for people with a disability for those applicants qualifying for same and to provide for related matters.

The purpose of the Bill is to ensure local authorities administering the housing adaptation grant for people with a disability shall, as far as is practicable, process applications for a grant within a period of not more than four weeks from the date of receipt of the application. By “application”, I mean the date on which an application form plus all relevant documentation is received by the local authority, which would include an occupation therapist’s report recommending the works and the estimates of cost from certified contractors, in conjunction with required medical documentation. If it is necessary, which will depend on the nature of the proposed work, an architect’s or engineer’s report should also be submitted. All information should be gathered by the applicant and submitted together so that it can be checked and approved within the shortest time and I propose that should be a period of four weeks.

The reason I am bringing this Bill forward is that I have been made aware that many disabled people and older people require adaptations to their homes as a result of an accident or illness. They are often unable to live in their own homes until the required works are carried out. That regularly requires an extended stay in hospital or having to relocate to a nursing home for a period, which can be costly for the person concerned and their families, but also costly for the State as the additional stay in hospital adds an extra cost to the State and takes up hospital

beds for which other people are waiting. Some 200,000 bed days were lost in 2019 due to delayed discharge. While all of those lost days may not have been due to unsuitable accommodation, some certainly were. I know many people who have made an application for this grant and have been forced to wait months for approval. I am aware of one woman who is unable to use the bath in her house as a result of knee problems and is required to wash herself at a sink. Another lady is petrified of getting into the bath because she has an issue with balance and eyesight. She has fallen and hit her head getting out of the bath in the past and, therefore, requires a level-access shower, which would be life-changing. She has been waiting months for approval.

The Covid-19 pandemic has substantially increased waiting times. That is unacceptable because it is having an unfair and disproportionate impact on older people and disabled people, and needs to be addressed urgently. Many people are struggling on a day-to-day basis and something like a stairlift or level-access shower could make a big difference. As an aside to the Bill, I am aware that the lack of contractors and the additional cost of construction material is having an additional and adverse impact on this grant. I hope budget 2022 will address this and the grant will be increased to meet these additional costs.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I thank my colleague, Teachta Tully, for her assistance with the Bill, which is timely. We had a recent discussion about response times from county councils to various representations from elected members. Indeed, there is currently a ten- to 12-week waiting period to get on the housing list in Kildare. Let me be clear: I do not blame the staff or the officials. They are being let down by the Government too. Yesterday, at the monthly meeting of Kildare County Council, a number of councillors received unfavourable reports from officials in response to their motions. It was not that the officials disagreed with the motions themselves. Their answers were due to a lack of resources and, in particular, staff. We need to invest in local government if we are to have true local democracy. We have a form of local administration at the moment and not local government.

As the Sinn Féin spokesperson for older people, I have been contacted by many people from all over the country who have experienced delays of many months in receiving a reply to their applications. I recently helped to bring to a successful conclusion to two applications that were ongoing for more than two years. These kinds of delays are unacceptable. At yesterday's council meeting in Kildare, a motion was tabled by Councillor Nuala Killeen, which sought an increased budget for housing adaptation grants. The report from the directors of housing and finance stated that the additional costs associated with the councillor's request would take €200,000 from other areas of expenditure. It went on to state that without additional funding from central government, it is not expected that Kildare County Council can achieve this without cutting front-line services. The reality is that people are waiting far too long, with priority 2 and 3 applicants not even receiving a reply, in some cases after months of waiting. They deserve a better quality of life and this Bill is the first step to achieving it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Deputy Jack Chambers: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Freedom of Information (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and to provide for related matters.

Tá an-áthas orm labhairt faoin mBille seo. I am delighted to be introducing, alongside my colleague, Deputy Clarke, our Bill. This is the fruit of a year's work and as today is International Access to Information Day, I feel it is the perfect day to introduce this amending Bill.

Since being elected I, alongside my colleague, Deputy Clarke, have been making the case that our freedom of information, FOI, regime is in crisis. This is something that transparency campaigners and investigative journalists have been highlighting for some time. At times it felt as though we were ploughing a lonely furrow and calls for reform were falling on deaf ears. However, recent events brought into sharp focus the crisis we had been describing. To be clear, we knew prior to these events that urgent action was needed. This was as a result of a year's work conducted by Deputy Clarke and I and as a result of a survey we conducted. The Bill seeks to strengthen the Act and I hope we will receive Government support.

The Bill would enhance the powers of the Office of the Information Commissioner to allow it to refer complaints under FOI legislation to the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, for investigation where it is believed that the relevant person has failed in their obligations under the FOI Act. It would ensure all public bodies established under the Companies Act are immediately brought under the remit of FOI legislation upon establishment. This would prevent bodies, including, for example, the Land Development Agency, being exempt from FOI for the first six months of their existence. That is an important amendment. It would also empower the Minister to conduct an annual review of all bodies to which FOI legislation applies, including any bodies to which a partial exclusion currently applies and whether this is consistent with the Act's principles of oversight, transparency and accountability. This is to ensure that we are adhering to best practice and transparency at all times. It would also bring back information on pension payments related to former taoisigh, Ministers, Presidents and office holders within the remit of the FOI legislation. I am delighted to move this Bill, alongside my colleague, Deputy Clarke.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I am delighted to introduce this important legislation, alongside my colleague, Deputy Mairéad Farrell. The Bill seeks to strengthen the FOI regime, which has been eroded in recent years, and to ensure that what we have, going forward, is fit for purpose. It is most timely, given recent events, and because it is International Access to Information Day. However, long before those events, freedom of information was under attack and legitimate concerns were being raised by those who should not have been encountering barriers to access information, including journalists, researchers and victims of institutional abuse. Instead of building on the 1997 introduction of FOI and ensuring a complete and robust mechanism to access information, what has emerged is a flawed system that feeds directly into a lack of transparency and accountability. That needs to be addressed urgently. Instead of shortcomings being exploited in a manner that is simply wrong and leading to a perception of a culture of loophole-seeking to block the provision of information, the fundamental principle that the

28 September 2021

public has a right to know must be put back at the centre of freedom of information because the public has a right to know. The public has a right to know when their tax payments are being used for pension entitlements for former taoisigh, Ministers and the President under current expenditure. There is not, nor can there ever be, justification for any period of exemption under FOI legislation when a private company becomes a public body, as happened, for example, with the Land Development Agency. The powers of the Information Commissioner need to be enhanced to ensure that a body is able to refer complaints under FOI to the Standards in Public Office Commission where a Minister or relevant person has intentionally or recklessly failed in his or her obligations. As a democracy, we need an FOI regime that is consistent with the principles of oversight, transparency and accountability. It is also vital that, where policies are introduced or put in place, a method to monitor compliance is also put in place. Where non-compliance is identified, it must be rectified and appropriate steps taken within a reasonable period to ensure non-compliance does not recur. We spoke about freedom of information in the House quite recently. The Bill Deputy Farrell and I have laid here today is somewhat compatible with what the Minister said that evening. I very much look forward to future debates on this issue because it is of vital interest to both Members of this House and the public.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tairgim: "Go dtógfár an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to instruct Legal Representatives: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f) (iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2018, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to defend proceedings initiated against Dáil Éireann and to instruct legal counsel in that regard in the matter of *Jonathan Dowdall v. The Director of Public Prosecutions, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Dáil Éireann, Ireland and the Attorney General (High Court: 2021/657/JR)*.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

The Taoiseach: I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out

the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Rural and Community Development

Minister for Health

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Minister for Justice

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Statement of Estimates: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann take note of the Statement of Estimates of moneys required in respect of ongoing expenditure for the period beginning on 1st January, 2022 and ending on 31st December, 2022, prepared and published by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in accordance with the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2018 which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 27th September, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Report of Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the Tenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 24th September, 2021, and discharges a member and appoints a member to a Committee accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Electoral (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage pursuant to Standing Order 180.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education last met; and when it will next meet. [43261/21]

2. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education last met; and when it will next meet. [43759/21]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [43762/21]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee dealing with education last met. [43780/21]

5. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [43828/21]

6. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [44742/21]

7. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education met last; and when it is next due to meet. [44817/21]

8. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [45152/21]

9. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will meet next. [45990/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 9, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on education oversees implementation of the programme for Government commitments in the area of education, including preparing for post-Covid education. The Cabinet committee last met on 13 May and discussed topics including special education policy in schools and increased demand for places at third level in 2021 and 2022. I have regular engagement with Ministers at Cabinet and individually to discuss priority issues relating to their Departments. In addition, a number of meetings have been held between my officials and officials from relevant Departments since the establishment of the Cabinet committee in July 2020.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Labour Party and I want to work with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Education on the issue of back-to-school costs. The Taoiseach will agree that this topic comes up every September and then goes away again. I am concerned that the book publisher, Folens, has now acquired the teacher training institution, Hibernia College. An educational book entity, which exists for commercial interests, is now effectively the largest

provider of teachers for the education system. In Northern Ireland, schoolbooks are free; in the Republic, they are not. In fairness, two budgets ago the Taoiseach's Department introduced a scheme to provide 50 schools with free schoolbooks. This was then extended to 100 schools. Working with the Opposition, and with the best of goodwill, we could, for €20 million, which is not a large sum in the overall budget to be presented shortly, provide free schoolbooks for every child in the Republic, just as they are provided in Northern Ireland. Can we take away the conversations about money at the school gates and replace them with conversations about education? The Taoiseach will appreciate that far too many of the conversations teachers and principals have with parents are about money rather than education. I ask him to prioritise that issue in the budgetary cycle.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have to limit questioners to one minute each given the number of questioners.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am sorry.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Last week, I raised the issue of education with the Taoiseach under Questions on Promised Legislation and he assured me that his Government had moved heaven and earth to keep our schools open. I do not doubt his intention but we differ substantially with regard to our preferred approach, particularly in respect of mitigation. On Monday, close contact tracing for asymptomatic close contacts in primary schools ended. A clear explanation for this approach has not yet been given. I would like the Taoiseach to clearly state why that approach was taken now, as we approach winter. I will once again ask him to elaborate on the issue of air monitors in our schools. At the moment, a school with nine to 12 classrooms has seven air monitors while a school with 13 to 16 classrooms has nine. There are substantial issues regarding air filtration. In the absence of the antigen testing used in other European countries, will the Taoiseach elaborate on the end of contact tracing and the absence of mitigation actions that would have enhanced this measure?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will return to the question I asked the Taoiseach earlier about Clonkeen College and the plan of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust and the Christian Brothers to sell off its playing pitches. He agreed with me that this is wrong and that it will deprive the school, the ASD unit, local community sports organisations and others who use these fields but he said that there was nothing he can do. I would like to point out that this issue was raised multiple times during the term of the previous Government and we had the same hand-wringing. The point is that there is much bigger precedent involved. These religious organisations own a vast number of our schools and hospitals. They are publicly funded, yet the Government says that it is completely powerless when they decide to flog off lands to property developers at the cost of local community and school facilities when there is a chronic shortage of land for schools in our area. There is a queue of schools looking for permanent sites and there is a chronic shortage of sports facilities in the area. There has to be something the Taoiseach can do.

Deputy Mick Barry: In August, the Minister for Education provided a subject by subject breakdown of the changes she intended to make to leaving certificate 2022 by way of compensation to students for classroom teaching time lost as a result of the pandemic. A survey conducted by my office has since found that 82% of leaving certificate students who replied expressed the view that the proposed changes are insufficient. These students lost months of classroom teaching time as a result of the closure of their schools. The changes I would most like to see are the abolition of the leaving certificate alongside the introduction of a policy of

open access to third level. The examination is unnecessarily stressful, it is out of date and it discriminates against students who are not neurotypical or who come from homes that cannot afford grinds. At the very least, these students should be given a far greater concession than that made by the Minister. They will be very interested to hear the Taoiseach's views on the matter.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: As we speak, the independent economic evaluation carried out on behalf of the European Commission into the Cassells report is sitting on the desk of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Cassells report was completed five years ago and laid out three options to address the chronic underfunding in third level. Earlier, the Taoiseach said third level investment was a key factor in attracting FDI and economic development, and I agree. Since the report, successive governments have avoided addressing the issue of underfunding at third level. In real terms, colleges get 50% less per student than in 2008 and, at the same time, fees have increased from €850 to €3,000. We have spent less on research and development as a percentage of GDP and of public expenditure every year since 2011. The Cassells report made clear in 2016 what action was needed and presented three options for how this could be funded.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The programme for Government states that, "A strong education system is the cornerstone of a thriving language", and commits to providing Gael-scoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí. This and successive governments have failed the parents, the children, more particularly, and the staff of Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire on Parnell Square East. These have been waiting for a permanent school building since the late 1990s. I can only describe what they have been through as an ongoing saga. The children and staff find themselves in completely inadequate accommodation.

The Department of Education and the State have played a game of blink and bluff with this school community. It is outrageous. There is provision for a new school build in Dominick Street. This has dragged on and on. The Department of Education tried to convince the school community and others that the fault for such delays lies with a neighbour, which is not the case. I appeal to the Taoiseach in the name of reason and fairness to intervene in respect of Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I raise the issue of capacity for secondary school students in Shannon town. The Taoiseach visited one of the secondary schools there with me two years ago, namely, St. Caimin's Community School. The other school is Shannon comprehensive.

As we come out of Covid, there is a need for the post-primary buildings unit to take a comprehensive look at both schools. St. Caimin's was built with an enrolment capacity of 600. It is far exceeding that, yet Department officials fail to recognise the growth of the town and the wide hinterland it encompasses.

Shannon comprehensive is a much older school dating to the 1960s or 1970s, but some of the buildings are crumbling. I fear some of the concrete work may have pyrite in it. The buildings unit will urgently have to come to the town and look at the capacity it has and at the deficient buildings. There needs to be a comprehensive look at how this town, Ireland's newest town in the 1960s but now ageing, can meet its current needs. It needs an urgent re-examination.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I raise the issue of special education provision in Cork. The Taoiseach has a long history of delivering for special education provision as a previous Minister with responsibility for education. Cork City Council has identified a site in the Glanmire area

that is suitable for a school for special education provision. I urge the Taoiseach, given we have such challenges in Cork, to look upon that site favourably and progress it as expeditiously as possible.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why is the Government taking risks with children's health in our schools? Why is there no decision to have a CO2 monitor in every classroom? Why is there no decision to have high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters in classrooms? Why has the Government made the decision, which makes no sense to me whatsoever, to say something magical happens in a classroom which means the regular rules of contacts for Covid do not apply? If a child goes to a birthday party for half an hour with another child who has Covid, they count as a close contact and have to get tested. However, if they sit in a classroom in the same pod for a week with that same child, they do not count as a close contact. How does that make any sense?

The Taoiseach: There are a lot of questions there.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes. Some of them would be more appropriate, I would have thought, to the Minister for Education.

The Taoiseach: Sure, I am multitasking all the time. Deputy Ó Ríordáin raised the issue of free schoolbooks. I would need to talk more about this, to be honest. Targeting of resources is still very important in terms of children who need additional supports in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. It is the old argument about universality of provision versus targeted provision to those who need it most and those on the lowest incomes. Given the multiple needs in our education system, I have no issue with increasing the number of schools but there is value in staying around the thresholds and looking after children on other fronts in terms of the variety of supports required, from therapies right across. I am open to engagement on it.

Deputy Gannon raised contact tracing, as did Deputy Paul Murphy. Public health advice is saying this; Government is not making this up. The clear explanation relates to the testing that has been done. There are relatively low levels in terms of schoolchildren, at around 6%. Public health has advised and the Minister and Department of Education have adhered to public health advice all along in respect of classrooms of children. We are not risking children's health in any actions we take.

On air monitors, that arose from a special advisory group that advised the Department of Education on ventilation in schools and the use of air monitors. They are not static; they are mobile. It is about having up to 25,000 air monitors provided to the system, which is significant, as part of the broader return to school protocols.

To Deputy Boyd Barrett, I have given my views already on Clonkeen College. The Government has a lien on properties and physical buildings in respect of investments made in voluntary secondary schools.

Deputy Barry raised the issue of the abolition of the leaving certificate. I do not agree with abolishing it overnight. I believe in reform of it. There has been ongoing reform which has dramatically changed it. The leaving cert we sat 20 years ago bears no comparison with the leaving cert today.

Deputy John Lahart: Forty years ago. Excuse me, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I was just testing Deputy Lahart. He is alert.

An Ceann Comhairle: Did you do honours maths?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Conway-Walsh spoke on open access to college. She needs to think that through. I do not agree with it. It would create mayhem overnight. We do not have the capacity to do that, nor is it necessarily the right thing to do. We need to have a wide provision over time so people can access courses, modules and so on to take the urgency out of the leaving cert and to remove the idea that it is the be-all and end-all. We need to create a roadmap for young people so there is a route to where they want to go, through a variety of colleges of further and higher education and modular-based education. That is the approach we need.

I met with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recently on the Cassells report. It has been given active consideration by the Minister and he is engaging with other Ministers on how we roll that out and deal with it. There are Estimates and budgetary contexts to that.

On Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire, I do not believe it is because of the Government or the Department of Education over the past 20-odd years. Twenty is on my mind today. It is not all blink and bluff. There were genuine issues there. I will ask for the report on that from the Department's building unit and come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Two decades for kids in those communities.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Crowe's point, I am not sure whether the schools have applied to the Department, but he should engage with the Minister for Education. He has made a fair point on the broader issue in the town and the two schools needing expansion or a new plan for post-primary provision in Shannon.

I will work with Deputy O'Sullivan. We have already opened two new special schools this year, one in Cork and one in, I think, Dublin West. Sites are crucial. The city council has made a site available and we should push hard with the Minister for Education to acquire that site for another special school.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to move on.

Cabinet Committees

10. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met; and when it will next meet. [43262/21]

11. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met. [43652/21]

12. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach the role his Department will play in monitoring and implementing the Housing for All plan. [43653/21]

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [43761/21]

14. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [43764/21]

15. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [43767/21]

16. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met. [43782/21]

17. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met; and when it is next due to meet. [43816/21]

18. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the unit to be established in his Department with responsibility for ongoing monitoring and oversight of implementation of the Housing for All plan. [44741/21]

19. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met; and when it will next meet. [44854/21]

20. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will meet next. [44857/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 20, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on housing has met seven times to date in 2021, most recently on Monday, 30 August. The next Cabinet committee on housing is yet to be scheduled. The committee works to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of programme for Government commitments regarding housing and related matters.

The focus of recent meetings has been on the completion of the Housing for All plan, which the Government published on 2 September. Housing for All builds on much progress and hard work in recent years, despite the setbacks due to Covid-19. It is the most ambitious housing plan in the history of our State and contains a range of actions and measures to ensure more than 300,000 new homes will be built by 2030. This figure includes 90,000 social, 36,000 affordable purchase and 18,000 cost rental homes.

Crucially, the actions outlined in the plan are backed by more than €4 billion in annual guaranteed State investment in housing over the coming years, including through Exchequer funding and Land Development Agency and Housing Finance Agency investment. The plan includes measures to support availability of the land, workforce, funding and capacity to enable both the public and private sectors to meet the targets.

Through Housing for All, we will also continue to support our most vulnerable, including those experiencing homelessness and those who have more complex housing needs. The plan will provide the basis for a long-term sustainable housing system for this and future generations and supports the ambitions of the forthcoming climate action plan through measures on retrofitting and waste reduction.

There will be a strong focus on implementation of the Housing for All plan. A delivery group of Secretaries General will oversee delivery, and a unit in my Department will prepare quarterly progress reports on implementation of the plan. This will set out performance against the targets and actions in the plan in a clear and comprehensible way.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: We need a moratorium on evictions and a three-year rent freeze. Last week the Government did not oppose the Labour Party's renters' rights Bill, pro-

posed by Senator Moynihan and Deputy Bacik, but there does not seem to be any enthusiasm to change quickly the Government's policy or the law. We know from statistics that the main reasons for terminating a tenancy are the sale of the property, which accounts for 51% of reasons given, or the use of the home for a relative, which accounts for 24%. Our Bill would restrict evictions for these reasons and ensure families are protected. Will the Taoiseach work with the Opposition to bring forward to fruition and to enact the Labour Party's Bill? Will he commit to a three-year rent freeze?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In the previous election Fianna Fáil promised to build 10,000 affordable homes each year it is in office. These homes are nowhere to be seen. Since the Government has taken office, house prices have increased by more than 10%. In Housing for All the Government commits to giving about €1 billion in subsidies to developers. The Central Bank and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, have both warned against these subsidies, which will push up house prices. Will the Government scrap these subsidies for developers, which will turbocharge house price increases, and instead use this funding to build affordable homes?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The people of Berlin have shown the sort of imagination that both the German Government and successive Irish governments distinctly lack when it comes to dealing with the housing crisis. Fed up with and sick of the lack of tenants' rights and completely extortionate rents, the people of Berlin, driven by a campaign from below, have made exactly the right call, which is to expropriate the big corporate landlords and the big investment funds and to take into public ownership the big portfolios of residential apartment and housing property to deliver controlled rents. That is a measure we should take here. We were alone in saying that pinning rent increases to the consumer price index, CPI, for example, would not be good enough and that we need actual rent controls. The people of Berlin are saying they need rent controls-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up. Please leave some time for your colleagues.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----to the extent that the state should actually take control. Why do we not follow the lead-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, will you leave time for your colleagues?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----the people in Berlin have given in a referendum?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government has said the strategic housing development, SHD, regime will be closed from February. The question is what the Government will do for those living with the consequences of that regime, a regime which effectively allowed the profits of the developers to be expedited and allowed the developers to bypass the regular planning process and the communities that have to live with the consequences of that. I will give the Taoiseach the example of Citywest, which has seen huge-scale development of largely build-to-rent apartments in a very short space of time with no investment in necessary community infrastructure - no library, no community centre, no investment in parks. What will be done to ensure those people in Citywest and in similar communities throughout the country have the community facilities that are needed to live quality lives, given the scale of development that has taken place in the context of SHDs being used?

Deputy Mick Barry: The average price of a house rose by €24,000 last year - good news

for those who own four homes but bad news for young workers. That is more than a year's salary for very many of them. The average price of a house in Cork city is now €307,000 - in other words, more than 12 times the annual salary of those young workers. Throughout the State, 42,600 mortgage approvals were granted in the year to June, yet only 31,300 drawdowns were made in the same period. These statistics seem to suggest that more than a quarter of those approved for mortgages were priced out of the housing market. Does the Taoiseach accept the housing market is treating young people in a viciously unfair fashion? Does he accept his Government will lose a hell of a lot of support among young people if these issues are not resolved very quickly?

Deputy John Lahart: I congratulate the Taoiseach on the Bloomberg report today which states Ireland is the best place to be at this stage in the pandemic. That is down to a significant degree to his stewardship of the Government during this period, and that should be acknowledged.

We are familiar with social housing lists. Every county or administrative area in the country has them. In the context of the Cabinet subcommittee on housing, will the Taoiseach consider establishing some kind of affordable housing list structure in order that the younger end of the population in particular can get a visual over time as to what sites will produce affordable housing, where they will be available, in what number and by what date, giving a tangible picture of the affordable housing roll-out that is coming downstream?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Following a meeting last April with the developer Hammerson, the Taoiseach took the extraordinary step of providing an endorsement quote for Hammerson's press statement when that developer announced submission of its Moore Street planning application to Dublin City Council. The Taoiseach may have welcomed its plan; however, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage did not. In fact, officials were and are deeply critical of Hammerson's planning application in their observations submitted to the council. In addition to their criticism of the extent of the demolition of the two terraces, they have described the demolition of No. 38 Henry Street as unnecessary and pushed for the retention of the historically important post-1916 buildings on Moore Street and Henry Street. Critically, the Department recommends that the council should consider whether an alternative design for the redevelopment of this site would allow for the retention and sensitive adaptation for use of these existing structures. Such an alternative design exists. The 1916 relatives' master plan for Moore Street-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----meets the historical, social, economic and sustainability thresholds set by the Department and the elected Members of this House and of Dublin City Council. I ask the Taoiseach to make a commitment today that he will meet with the relatives and their architect to hear and see at first hand the remarkable, appropriate plans they have developed for this site.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I wish to bring to the Taoiseach's attention the Rebuilding Ireland home loan and the anomaly in the scheme for people who have been divorced or separated or who are with long-term partners. They need to be considered in any reform. Under the current Rebuilding Ireland home loan there are technical exemptions from the first-time buyer clause for people who have gone through a separation. However, this information is not being shared properly with people making applications. People are being refused despite actually

qualifying in some local authority areas. A separated person who has enough for a deposit from the sale of the family home but is refused a mortgage from financial institutions is then being refused assistance by the local authority and has nowhere to go. People in that situation, who often have children, are being driven into the private rental sector, where they are at the mercy of landlords and real estate investment funds. Families are often left in this very difficult situation with nowhere to go. Will the Taoiseach discuss this with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage with a view to including people who have suffered family breakdown in the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I imagine the housing subcommittee will have an opportunity to examine the some 20 public housing sites in Ballymun that will avail of Housing for All finally to deliver public housing on public land for people who want to rent affordably or purchase or otherwise avail of social housing. Key to housing is infrastructure and, unfortunately, there has been significant doubt around the metro project in recent weeks. Last week, I asked the Tánaiste whether the Government had made a decision strategically to delay the project. I ask the Taoiseach to state again that the Government has not made, and will not make, a decision strategically to delay the project and that, if project delays have arisen with the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, they will be identified and minimised where possible.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who put questions to me in respect of housing issues. I will first deal with rents generally, which covers a number of the questions. On the issue of a rent freeze, the Government has been advised in the strongest possible manner that it is unconstitutional to introduce a three-year freeze. I remember years ago, before an election, Opposition Members put forward a proposal for a commercial freeze. Subsequently, when people got into government, they could not do it because they were told it was unconstitutional. That was a previous government. It is easy to say things in opposition but, in this case, we are being told it is not possible.

The Minister is very committed to controlling rent price increases. There was the outgoing situation in July, at which time rent pressure zones, RPZs, were extended until the end of 2024 to prohibit any rent increase in an RPZ from exceeding general inflation, as recorded by the harmonised index of consumer prices, HICP. That measure significantly reduces the level of permissible rent increases for the estimated 74% of all tenancies that are in RPZs. In addition, until 2025, rent reviews outside RPZs may occur no more frequently than biannually and it remains the position that increases in RPZs can occur no more frequently than annually.

Housing for All commits to strengthening security of tenure, which was raised by Deputies, subject to legal advice, by legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration. Work in this area is under way. There has been increased funding for the housing assistance payment, HAP, to support new tenancies. An additional €2 million has been provided on top of what was there for the operational costs of the Residential Tenancies Board, bringing its funding to €11 million. A total of €10 million was allocated for the rental inspections programme for 2021 to assist local authorities to achieve inspection targets in respect of private rented accommodation. Since 16 July, the previous cap of 4% on annual rent increases was replaced, and rents on RPZs can only go up if necessary and in line with general inflation. As part of rent reform legislation due to be brought before the Oireachtas this session, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will seek to ensure effective rent controls are legally enforced in RPZs by introducing a cap.

As I said, rents in RPZs will only go up, if necessary, in line with the general inflation as

recorded in the harmonised index of consumer prices to a maximum cap that is yet to be determined. In essence, we want to do everything we possibly can to keep rents down to the lowest level possible. When the Minister brought in the harmonised index element, it was done in good faith. Obviously, international commodity prices have gone through the roof since then and there is a general global inflation drive that now means the provision has to be reviewed to see whether we can get a realistic cap to keep the levels of rent increases down. Prices are very high - too high for people - in cities. Ultimately, it is a matter of supply. We have to get building supply up. We must build more houses, including affordable houses, houses for rent and social housing, to take pressure off the HAP system and the private sector system and give people proper security of tenure in social housing. Progress has been made this year, notwithstanding the lockdown. The sector is coming back strongly in terms of commencements and so forth, but we will wait and see until the end of the year to get the figures in respect of that.

Deputy Lahart made a very good suggestion in respect of the need for a transparent, tangible picture of the affordability landscape for people who wish to buy a house, so that they have some sense of what is happening over time. That is a very fair point.

In terms of strategic development zones, which Deputy Murphy raised, the Minister is moving on the issue of their expiration and making sure the right amenities are put in place in largely built-up areas. That is ongoing work and significant capital funding has been allocated to local authorities to facilitate the provision of such amenities in large housing conurbations. The money is there.

In terms of the Hammerson development on O'Connell Street, the problem in that regard has been going on for decades. At the moment, it is terrible in terms of the dereliction that is there. The Government moved to secure the national monument by buying it. There is always a balance to be struck in these situations. I have no interest in going back ten or 20 years. We need to transform O'Connell Street and make it a modern, thriving street in a modern city like Dublin and give opportunities for people while also bringing to the fore as part of that, which has never really happened, the incredible heritage the 1916 site represents. There are opportunities now but we cannot keep putting it on the long finger. I regret to say this to Deputy McDonald but I get the sense there is a huge element of politics in this. I get the terrible sense that here is another campaign to undermine what is being done. Many people were involved in this-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are being completely paranoid about it.

The Taoiseach: I am not paranoid at all about it. What I will say is that a lot of people across this House were involved in trying to bring this to a conclusion, along with a lot of people, across the party divides, in the council.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It has not been brought to a conclusion.

The Taoiseach: Many people worked to get the project to where it is at now. If we go back again, there is no guarantee of a conclusion. It could take another ten to 15 years. That is a realistic perspective on it.

The key issue Deputy Conway-Walsh raised in terms of the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme is provided for, as I understand it, in terms of people who are divorced or separated. I will come back to the Deputy on it but my understanding is that they will have access, as they should, to the loans.

28 September 2021

Deputy McAuliffe raised a key issue regarding the metro project. I think the Minister, Deputy Ryan, was misinterpreted in what he said. He was trying to give a realistic timeline as to what will happen with the metro given what we know about large infrastructural projects in terms of planning, compulsory purchase orders and all the rest of it.

An Ceann Comhairle: We need to move on.

The Taoiseach: There is a commitment to doing it.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have used up two minutes of the time allocated for the next group of questions, leaving 13 minutes.

Cabinet Committees

21. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health last met; and when it will next meet. [43263/21]

22. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [43523/21]

23. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health last met; and when it is next due to meet. [43815/21]

24. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [44818/21]

25. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [44872/21]

26. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [45087/21]

27. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [45090/21]

28. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [46416/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 21 to 28, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on health oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments in regard to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas, and considers the implementation of health reforms, including Sláintecare. The committee last met on Monday, 14 December and is expected to meet again shortly. Since then, there have been 13 meetings of the Cabinet committee on Covid-19.

In addition to the meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I meet with Ministers individually to focus on different issues. I meet regularly with the Minister for Health and his Secretary General to discuss priorities in the area of health, including Sláintecare and, in particular, our management of and response to Covid-19.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am delighted to get an opportunity to ask about an issue that

falls under the remit of the Taoiseach's Department. The programme for Government includes a commitment to a citizens' assembly on the issue of drugs. As he knows, many people are working on a campaign for the decriminalisation of the drug user. I do not want the word "decriminalisation" in this context to be confused with the idea of decriminalisation or legalisation of drugs. We are talking about the decriminalisation of drug users. The objective is that people who use drugs or have an addiction should not be pushed through the criminal justice system and should be helped, supported and empowered purely through the health system. When is the promised citizens' assembly on drugs, which falls under the Taoiseach's Department, going to happen?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Earlier this year, the Taoiseach confirmed with Carmona School in Glenageary that its dedicated on-site therapy supports would be retained. The school has 37 children with profound or severe intellectual disabilities.

4 o'clock

In May, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, informed the HSE that services at Carmona were to remain at pre-Covid levels, provided by clinicians of the same grade and skill set specialisations, and, specifically, that the clinicians were to be based on site. That was confirmed in June during a meeting with parents at the school. It had been accepted by the Minister and the Taoiseach that the HSE's reconfiguration of children's disability services into children's disability network teams under the progressing disability services programme had to include the retention of on-site clinicians where needed but, despite these commitments and the specific instructions of the Minister of State to the HSE regarding Carmona, the HSE has now withdrawn all on-site therapists from the school. This decision has profound implications for the children in question. None of the children have been seen by a physiotherapist since June. The occupational therapist is no longer based on site and there is no speech and language therapist. The clinicians who attend are based out of the HSE office in Leopardstown.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I urge the Taoiseach to engage with the Minister for Health and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, as a matter of urgency and to rectify this situation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am hesitant to interrupt Deputies-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is desperate that one has to gallop through the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----but there are a large number of contributors to get through.

Deputy John Lahart: I point out to the Deputy opposite that we are all desperate for answers. Nobody has a monopoly on desperation or the need for information.

Does the Taoiseach have any news for the House regarding extra hospital beds coming into the system, assessments of needs of teenagers and young children in particular under the Disability Act, or home help waiting lists, which are, obviously, very much always on our radar on this side of the House? If he has an update for the House on any of those issues, I would appreciate it.

Deputy Mick Barry: This morning, we got the horrific news that Cork University Maternity Hospital sent organs and tissue of 18 deceased babies to Belgium for incineration without

the knowledge or consent of the parents of the babies. The State has an ugly history on this issue but we thought that chapter had ended. Twelve years ago, the Willis report recommended and the State accepted that the incineration of babies' organs and tissue should cease but here we are again. We have learned that senior management apparently disagreed with senior medical staff and argued that this was not a serious matter. The backdrop to this decision was the spectre of the pandemic but that does not excuse the inexcusable. The pandemic loomed over every Irish hospital. The Taoiseach indicated earlier that all hospitals have been written to in order to ascertain whether something similar happened on those sites. When are replies to those queries expected? I hope the investigation is thorough and concludes reasonably quickly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mick Barry: I hope the senior managers who let this happen are made to understand that it is a very serious matter. It might be necessary for some powerful people to pay a price in order to ensure this never happens again.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to raise an urgent matter. This Friday, several hundred patients will lose their GP in the Monkstown Farm area of Dún Laoghaire because there is a rule, of which I was previously unaware, that GPs are compulsorily retired when they reach the age of 72, even if that retirement is against their will, as it is in this case. They wish to continue serving their patients but are no longer allowed to do so. Many of these patients who have mobility problems, chronic illnesses and so on will now have to travel long distances and most of them have not even been told what new GP service will be available. The doctor in question can continue in private practice but can no longer provide for his General Medical Service, GMS, medical card patients. I have appealed to the Department of Health to provide an extension for this doctor, which is what he wants. His patients want him to have an extension. The Department is just saying "No" because the rule is that GPs have to retire at 72 even though there is no rationale for it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Apparently, at least six exceptions to this rule have been made around the country, as I found out from the reply to a parliamentary question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have two more speakers.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Can the Taoiseach intervene to ensure that hundreds of people do not lose their GP because of this ridiculous and arbitrary rule?

Deputy Paul Murphy: More than four years ago, Sláintecare promised "a universal single tier service where patients are treated on the basis of health need rather than on ability to pay". Where are we today? We have a further embedded and deeply unequal two-tier system, the weaknesses of which were badly exposed by the pandemic. There are almost 1 million people on hospital waiting lists. Hospital staff are overworked and underpaid and significant amounts of public money are ending up in the private healthcare system through, for example, the National Treatment Purchase Fund. There were the resignations of Laura Magahy and Tom Keane from the Sláintecare implementation advisory council and that of Professor Geraldine McCarthy, chair of the board of the South/Southwest Hospital Group. In her resignation letter, she wrote:

I have waited for a long time for developments led by successive ministers for health

and government. However, recent information and my own experiences tell me we are no nearer to the required reform than we were six years ago.

Is the Government actually committed to what is in Sláintecare or is it just politically expedient to say it agrees with it?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The University of Limerick offers a fabulous paramedic degree course and has done so for several years. The course has many positive attributes but one of the negatives is that the students need to go to Liverpool to complete part of their training. In many cases, that leads to brain drain, with people qualifying from the University of Limerick and remaining in Britain to work out their professional lives. Covid has taught us that we need to increase our capacity in all forms of front-line healthcare. I ask the Taoiseach to consider the brand new Civil Defence facility in Ennis which has fabulous lecture halls and the capacity to deliver this form of training in Ireland. I ask him to push for a partnership between the University of Limerick and Ennis. Limerick Institute of Technology will gain technological university status on Friday. Ennis could have a very positive link with the University of Limerick and solve the brain drain problem of paramedics leaving the country.

The Taoiseach: On the final point, I do not know what the circumstances are that necessitate the travel from Limerick. It must be regulatory or relate to a particular aspect of the education programme. We are open to any submissions from the University of Limerick in respect of having that completed here or a liaison with the technological university. That is something we are open to having pursued.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised the issue of health needs and Sláintecare. I will simply say that a lot of progress has been made. Deputy Lahart raised the issue of extra hospital beds, for example. In the context of the generality of debate that has ensued, there are approximately 800 additional hospital beds this year. That is the largest number of new hospital beds opened in a single year for many decades. That is the level of State investment in the State system that is now occurring.

On the issue of home helps, approximately 5 million additional hours were provided for in the budget. The waiting list last year was approximately 7,250 people. Now there are approximately 1,307 people waiting for home helps. The next stage has to be to try to get more people into that workforce. We have to look at work permits and facilitating people coming into the country to work in our health sector, as well as training up and skilling up people in the home care health sector, which is growing and will continue to grow. We do not want waiting lists in that area because it is very connected to the acute hospital system. The Minister will be establishing a task force shortly and announcing a waiting list initiative which will again concentrate on a further level of expansion of acute hospital beds, including intensive care beds, but also the whole area of elective care facilities and ambulatory care facilities. The Minister is close to bringing proposals to the Government in respect of ambulatory care in Cork, Galway and Dublin and additional electives that will be required as part of the Sláintecare programme. That is more medium term in terms of obviously giving us the capacity to do the electives. That relates to the waiting lists.

I met with Tom Keane and Laura Magahy yesterday. Deputy Murphy raised that issue. Their issues relate more to structural factors. In fact, they would acknowledge that a significant amount of progress has been made on many fronts in terms of activity levels, but there is a fundamental structural issue from their perspective in terms of the role of the office within the

28 September 2021

Department of Health *vis-à-vis* the HSE. That is something the Government and I will reflect on in terms of the structural approach to implementing Sláintecare but the Government remains very committed to the implementation of the principles of Sláintecare right across the board and in all aspects.

Deputy Barry raised the issue of the Willis report. I dealt with that earlier in terms of organ retention. With regard to reviews on the way within the hospital that are required, the practice was not in accordance with the guidelines, rules and regulations laid out by the HSE itself in respect of the retention of organs, and particularly in respect of post mortems and the need to have the full consent of the parents in terms of what happens after the post mortem and the return of the organs to the parents for burial or cremation. That did not happen on this occasion. As I said earlier, the Minister is seeking assurances that this was not a practice across other hospital sites during the pandemic. He has not received a response yet, but is hoping to receive one.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of the Monkstown situation. I will talk to the Minister for Health in relation to that. It could be a medical council issue or a regulatory issue. That would be my own observation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is just arbitrary.

The Taoiseach: My view is that if there is no alternative and the 72-year-old is hale and hearty, then common sense should prevail and provision should be made for it.

In terms of a citizens' assembly on drugs, I will come back to the Deputy on that, because now that we are coming out of Covid, we might be in a position to accelerate that. We said we would identify three areas for citizens' assemblies. One was the mayoral situation in Dublin and another was drugs. I take the Deputy's point about the decriminalisation of drug users. It is well made. The point that this is fundamentally a health issue as opposed to a justice issue is also well made.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to the Deputy on the timelines around that.

On Deputy McDonald's point about the progressing disability services programme, I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, about what is essentially a real difficulty in the context of the programme. Resources are being taken out of existing special schools and then they are told that they should access those resources through a central provision. That is causing undue stresses and strains. It is not something I agree with.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are well over time.

The Taoiseach: I have made that clear to the HSE.

Housing for All: Statements

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to the House today about Housing for All. This Government and I are keenly aware of the housing challenges facing people right across this island. We know that the impact of the housing crisis is felt in every family right across our country.

It ranges from hard-pressed tenants stuck in a rent trap and wondering if they will ever own their own home to those at the sharpest edge of the crisis, who will spend tonight sleeping in emergency accommodation, or worse, sleeping rough on one of our city streets. To tackle the roots of the crisis, our central goal in Housing for All, as set out in the programme for Government, is:

Everyone in the State should have access to a home to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and in the right place, offering a high quality of life.

Is í tithíocht an phríomh-eisiúint in Éirinn inniu. Tuigeann an Rialtas é sin. Ní mór dúinn feabhsú, ar mhaithe lenár ndaoine, agus táimid in ann é a dhéanamh. Is é seo an plean tithíochta is tábhachtaí inniu. Táimid ag infheistiú níos mó airgid ná riamh ar son ár ndaoine; beagnach €50 billiún sna cúig bliana amach romhainn. Cuirfimid úinéireacht tí i lár an bheartais chun tithíocht a cheannach ar phraghas réasúnta agus, don chéad uair, tithíocht a fháil ar cíós ar phraghas réasúnta freisin. Feicfimid níos mó tithíochta sóisialta tógtha ná riamh. Ba mhaith liom go mbeadh a dtithe féin ag daoine. Oibreoidh an plean seo.

Quarterly progress reports will be submitted to the Cabinet committee and to the Government setting out performance against the targets and actions set out in the plan, prepared by a dedicated unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, assisted by the programme management office within my own Department. To keep us on track, the actions in Housing for All will be updated on an annual basis, including timelines, to sustain momentum on delivery during the lifetime of the plan.

Housing for All is the most ambitious housing plan in the history of our State. It sets out, over four pathways, a series of bold actions that rise to the challenge we face. Through pathway 1, it will support home ownership and increase affordability. Pathway 2 will deal with eradicating homelessness, increasing social housing delivery and supporting social inclusion. Pathway 3 is about increasing new housing supply across the board, and importantly, pathway 4 will address vacancy and efficient use of existing stock. Crucially, however, this plan is backed by historic levels of investment, with in excess of €20 billion available through the Exchequer, the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, over the next five years alone. This amounts to over €4 billion in capital per annum. It is the first time we have had a multi-annual plan such as this fully funded. This will provide the sector with the stability and certainty it needs.

Over 300,000 new homes will be built by the end of 2030, including a projected 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes. It is the largest State-led building programme in our history, eclipsing even the programmes of de Valera in the 1930s. Of course, the simplicity of that statement belies the complexity of executing the plan. I do not underestimate the challenge ahead but I do believe Housing for All will transform our housing system by removing the constraints that lead to delays and blockages in the provision of quality, affordable housing to buy or rent.

Housing for All puts forward a new vision that places homeownership back in the hands of ordinary working people. The first home scheme will see people buy their home with the help of the Government by bridging the gap between the finance they have and the cost of the home they want. The local authority-led affordable purchase scheme will see homes at an average of €250,000 right across the country. A reformed local authority home loan will see more single people eligible for State-backed mortgages, with much-improved terms. I have already imple-

28 September 2021

mented a reduction of the mortgage interest rate by 0.25% for new borrowers under the existing Rebuilding Ireland home loan, RIHL. This lower rate will also apply to loans issued under the reformed local authority home loan.

The affordability measures provided for in this plan will set us on a path to reversing the current trend, which has seen homeownership rates fall to historic lows. I believe in homeownership. Housing for All supports it. It is an honest and just aspiration that should be and is supported by the State. It is supported in this plan.

I recognise that it is cheaper to buy a home than to rent one in several Irish cities. That is how broken our system is right now. Affordability is increasingly challenging for renters who aspire to purchase and who must save a significant deposit while simultaneously paying relatively high rents.

Housing for All lays the foundation for an entirely new housing tenure in Ireland, cost rental, which will be a game changer for rent affordability. Some 10,000 new cost rental homes will be delivered in the period to 2026, with at least 18,000 in total over the course of the plan. The LDA will have a key role in delivery, with targets of rents being at least 25% below market level. The delivery of cost rental at scale will have a stabilising effect on the wider rental market. We have started this already. Our first cost rental tenants are in their homes now.

Leasing is being phased out, and we are empowering local authorities to get back building again. With their approved housing body, AHB, partners, they will deliver an average of 10,000 social homes each year. Local authorities are being funded to acquire land so that they can deliver social and affordable homes at scale. I have already made changes to the reimbursement process for our local authorities. Meath County Council was the first to avail of the new procedural change.

I have assured local authority chief executives and directors of services at the recent housing summits that I hosted that the resources and supports they need, both human and financial, will be provided, particularly to bolster their housing and planning teams to deliver on this ambitious programme.

To ensure a sufficient supply of homes across the country, each local authority has been given housing supply targets. These, together with updated planning guidance, will ensure sufficient land is zoned for housing. The Government will support this by providing additional State lands to the LDA, capable of delivering a further 15,000 homes under Housing for All. In addition, Housing for All tasks the LDA, through Project Tosaigh, with intervening in slow or stalled developments on non-State lands, through an open and transparent process designed to ascertain the potential for it to enter into strategic partnerships with landowners to unlock and accelerate the delivery of affordable homes.

Under Housing for All, the strategic housing development process will be replaced – I am winding it up early – with new planning arrangements for large-scale residential developments. Planning arrangements will go back to the local authorities. Such reforms will make decision-making on these developments more efficient.

The plan also includes modern Kenny report-style powers to ensure the State gets a fairer share of the increase in the value of land resulting from rezoning decisions, and that the community benefits as a result. This will reduce the speculative value of land, which is badly needed. The judicial review process will also be reformed, and planning legislation will be reviewed to

ensure the planning system is plan led, has greater public acceptance and reflects the needs of existing and new populations.

In the shorter term, I want to see non-activated planning permissions activated where possible. The estimated “uncommenced” figure in Dublin is around 40,000, representing about four years’ housing supply in the capital. That is untenable. I am establishing the Croí Cónaithe cities fund to tackle the affordability and viability barriers to stimulate such activation for apartment developments of four floors or more, above certain densities. These apartments will be for sale to owner-occupiers in our cities at lower price points.

Rural communities will be given greater certainty over building homes in their areas. The measures are targeted, radical and necessary to respond to the challenges we have.

At a time of high housing need, when people are homeless and living in unsuitable accommodation, it is vital that existing vacant homes be brought back into productive use. Housing for All sets out several key actions in this regard, including the establishment of the Croí Cónaithe towns fund for servicing sites to attract people to build their own homes in towns and villages and also to refurbish vacant properties in regional towns and villages. The Government is firmly committed to a town-centre-first approach, which will build upon the ambition set out in Our Rural Future, to support the regeneration, repopulation and development of rural towns and villages across the country. While programmes such as the urban regeneration development fund, URDF, and the rural regeneration development fund, RRDF, are primarily intended to support wider town regeneration, they also facilitate the optimal use and reuse of existing properties.

Only yesterday I was in Navan visiting the Flower Hill quarter, which has received funding just short of €8 million to regenerate it. The funding is part of the €1.3 billion the Government is investing in regional towns and cities, in addition to inner-city Dublin, to generate growth and to bring about redevelopment and regeneration. In this regard, Housing for All commits that further calls for the urban and rural regeneration and development funds will include specific criteria to encourage activation, particularly in respect of vacant properties, and bring stock back into use. This funding will be integrated with proposals on retrofitting and existing supports, such as the Better Energy Homes grant, to ensure the architectural heritage of towns is preserved.

I will also review and extend regulations that exempt certain vacant property premises, such as over-the-shop-type spaces, from requiring planning permission for a change of use for residential purposes right up to 2025. Many areas of towns and villages of all sizes have vacant residential and commercial properties that could and, indeed, should be used. If brought back into use, these properties could provide much-needed homes and add vibrancy to our towns and villages. Promoting residential occupancy in our rural towns and villages is at the heart of our town-centre-first approach and Housing for All.

The delivery of 33,000 homes per year, on average, requires an expansion of the current workforce. Through the actions laid out in Housing for All, the industry will be supported in returning existing workers to full employment, and there will be proactive engagement with international labour where a supply is unavailable locally. There will be a ramp-up in education and training opportunities, including commitments regarding programmes on apprenticeships and the delivery of new courses.

28 September 2021

Housing for All focuses on supply-side solutions by freeing up State lands for the delivery of affordable homes, by removing barriers and intervening in slow or stalled developments on non-State lands to unlock and accelerate delivery via the LDA, and by making the construction sector more productive through the construction sector group and the Construction Technology Centre to drive innovation and productivity and reduce residential construction costs.

Despite the pandemic, Government has been focused on progressing major reforms that will accelerate and increase the supply of public, affordable and private housing. We got to work straight away last year, while at the same time developing this plan. We passed the first ever comprehensive Affordable Housing Act and reformed the LDA, giving it a legislative backing and adding to its powers. Just recently, we opened Ireland's first cost-rental homes. We reformed Part V and increased the contribution by developers from 10% to 20% to include affordable housing and cost rental housing; signed the Lisbon Declaration, committing to ending homelessness by 2030; increased grant funding to assist older people and people with disabilities; extended rent pressure zones, RPZs, and limited rent increases to general inflation; introduced five separate tenancy Bills to protect renters through the pandemic; brought 3,600 vacant social homes back into productive use; increased Irish Water funding by more than €100 million; and banned co-living. These actions demonstrate the Government's commitment to fixing our housing system. Housing for All takes that commitment a step further on the pathway to a sustainable housing system by clearly setting out how we plan to address the serious short-, medium- and long-term challenges to 2030.

The good news is that the sector is already responding positively. Commencement notices show that in month of August 2021, we had 2,162 dwellings under way, which is a 38% increase on the same month in 2020. For the 12 months to August 2021, the number of dwellings commenced was 29,565, which was a year-on-year increase of 34%. We need to build on that momentum.

We need to use all tools at our disposal to get to grips with the housing crisis. This means using both public and private sector to deliver homes. Some in the Opposition, however, seem intent on tying one hand behind our back in the biggest fight the State faces. In reality, we need to use every weapon we have. It is too easy to just oppose for opposition's sake but that is what we have. Sinn Féin opposed the LDA and the help-to-buy incentive. It opposes any private land initiatives and has opposed more than 5,000 homes in Dublin city alone. I cannot particularly think of anything the Social Democrats have not opposed in this period.

We need to be ambitious, honest and committed to delivery. That is at the heart of Housing for All. We cannot let one party's perfect be the enemy of the common good or put ideology above pragmatism. We will not get out of the housing crisis by driving into an ideological cul-de-sac. That approach would suffocate building and will only see sites lay idle, waiting lists grow and dreams of ownership die.

This is a plan for the squeezed middle, to give those people the opportunity to buy their own home, while ensuring we have the kind of society that helps those who need it. The breadth of ambition in the plan will help to stop and reverse the decline in homeownership and break the rent trap in which so many people are caught. It will ramp up State building of social homes to help eliminate homelessness and address waiting lists.

The housing system is complex. The scale of the crisis is international. There is no silver bullet and I cannot tell Members that it will be fixed overnight. We have the solutions, abil-

ity, drive and determination to make a real impact, however, and we have a plan that is fully financed. The Opposition parties need to reflect on what they are offering beyond sound bites, hypocrisy and ideological dead-ends. As I said, now we have a radical plan that is fully financed, and we need to get on and deliver it. The plan will make a real difference for our people and we are determined, as a Government, to make it work. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I had a terrible sense of déjà vu when listening to the Minister's speech. So many of the rhetorical flourishes of what he said were used by the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, when he stood in this Chamber and told us it was the most ambitious and radical State-backed plan in the history of the State, and again, when former Minister, Eoghan Murphy, stood in the Chamber saying the same thing. What has become a feature of this Government is the ever-growing gap between the rhetoric of Ministers, and, particularly, the Minister with responsibility for housing and the reality for working people on the ground trying to secure appropriate and affordable accommodation.

The Minister used three words to describe this Government's housing plan: "ambitious", "honest" and "committed". I cannot think of three less appropriate words for this heavily-padded document. It is not ambitious and I will explain why shortly. I do not believe it is honest, certainly not if it is claiming to tackle the decades of failed Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael housing policy. I do not believe for one second that this Government is committed to the kind of fundamental policy change that would be required to meet the housing needs of working families.

I noted with great interest the Minister's quote in *The Irish Times* today. He was asked whether he believed the housing market is out of control, and, if the quote is correct, the Minister said, "I don't accept it's out of control". Rents are now higher than they were at the peak of the Celtic tiger. House prices are not far behind that peak. More than 100,000 households are dependent on rent subsidies. Homelessness is rising again, and, in many parts of the State, waiting times for social housing are between ten and 14 years. I do not know what indicators of "out of control" this Minister needs, but, on all of those indicators, from what I am seeing, it is very clearly out of control.

The really interesting comment made by the Minister was that this problem is "not unique to Ireland", not unlike the comments he made thereanent. The Minister is correct as there is a housing crisis, particularly in most large urban centres in the world. Let us consider the most recently published data from EUROSTAT, however. Housing costs in this State are the most expensive anywhere in the EU. We are at top of the housing cost table. In fact, the only country in the European free-trade area with higher housing costs than us is Switzerland. While there is a crisis, therefore, there is something much worse here that we need to understand.

The Minister is absolutely wrong. The crisis of house price inflation is not, in the first instance, caused by Covid-19 restrictions. They have made an already bad situation much worse but what is the actual cause of the housing crisis that has been escalating over the past ten-plus years? It is decades of bad housing policy by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In fact, if anybody can be accused of carrying ideological baggage, it is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which simply cannot break away from the failures of their ideological past.

If we look at the plan and the few pages of the lavish 160-page document that contain hard facts, we begin to see that what is in it is not that ambitious at all. Let us consider social housing. On average, there are 9,000 social housing units provided for per year over the lifetime

of the plan. That is 1,000 social housing units less than what had previously been promised by Fine Gael under the national development plan, NDP. I accept that last year and this year, Covid-19 has reduced the overall output. What the Minister should have done in this plan, however, is accelerate beyond the original NDP targets. Instead, he has cut them. We are worse off because of this plan than we would have been if Fine Gael had stayed in charge and led housing over the next five years.

The Government is also saying that it will deliver 4,000 affordable homes this year, 5,000 the year after and 6,500 the year after that. That is not true. The Government should be honest with people because 2,000 of those homes annually are unaffordable, open-market priced homes that will be purchased with the shared equity loan scheme and, therefore, affordable housing provision next year will, at the very best, be 2,100 units. It might go up to 3,000 the year after and somewhere close to 4,000 the year after that, and that is if the Government meets the targets. The number of affordable homes to be delivered through the cost-rental equity loan and affordable housing fund this year is so low that I do not see how the Government is going to deliver 2,000 affordable homes through those schemes next year. I would be appreciative if the Minister could provide detail on that.

He said the Government has changed Part V, which, I suppose, it has, if he means it has changed it post 2026 because of the sweetheart deal or get-out clause for landowners who have yet to apply for planning permission. Thankfully, we have the Housing Agency's report, which is a good piece of work numbering more than 70 pages. The agency gave a variety of options, however. Of course, the Minister chose the most pro-developer option available, which is that any landowner who has not secured planning permission has until 2026 and only the 10% applies. That is not reform; that is giving developers everything they have asked for on a plate to the detriment of the delivery of affordable homes for working people. At the same time, house prices will be pushed up because help-to-buy pushes up house prices. Despite the fact 60% of the people who had availed of the scheme did not need it, given that they had a deposit and mortgage finance, the Minister then increased it last year in a move that was criticised by the ESRI and other bodies. The Government is then going to combine that with the shared equity loan scheme and, if it gets its way, that will be again doubled with the participation of the mainstream banks. All of this, along with the excessive tax breaks the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, will continue for real estate investment trusts, REITs, and others, will increase the level of credit in the market, push up prices and make home ownership even more difficult for working people.

There is nothing meaningful for renters in the plan. I wish the Minister would stop telling people he is going to introduce tenancies of indefinite duration because that is not his plan. Unless the section 34 grounds for notices to quit, namely, sale of the property, use by the landlord or his or her family member and substantial renovation, are removed, tenancies of indefinite duration will not exist. Until that is changed, renters will still live in precarious and, unfortunately, unaffordable accommodation. We can talk later during oral questions about what the Minister will do about spiralling rents, given that the previous legislation he introduced in that regard did not work.

Croí Cónaithe seems to be a reheated local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, although the Minister might convince us otherwise, and the targets in respect of vacant properties are just as weak as they were under the previous Government. Nothing in the plan resembles the Kenny report recommendations on land. On the contrary, Mr. Justice Kenny was against the kind of measure the Government has outlined in the plan because it will do nothing

to tackle land price inflation, but why let the facts get in the way of a good sound bite? I note with interest there is no date for the referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution because, of course, while the Minister says he is in favour of it, he has not convinced his Fine Gael colleagues who are against it, and until that is resolved, the referendum is out of reach.

When I read this plan, what struck me most was that it is a sign of a Government out of touch and out of ideas. Increasingly, that is how the public sees this. Time after time, the Government puts the needs of big developers, large landowners and international institutional investors over those of regular working people. It is clear the Government does not have what it takes to make the types of policy changes required to tackle this housing crisis. I do not for a second believe there will be over the coming years a significant increase in the supply of genuinely affordable homes, anything that will be close to the level of social housing required to tackle lengthening waiting lists and rising homelessness, or anything that will deal with the significant burden of sky-high rents, let alone the insecurity of security of tenure, all because the Minister is wedded to the past. He is wedded to a particular view of housing policy that believes the private sector can meet the overwhelming majority of social and affordable housing need.

To contradict him, I want private builders to build as many homes as possible and private developers to develop as many homes as possible, but I also want there to be a level of direct investment in public housing on public land that will not be contained in this plan. The €4 billion figure is a fiction. Come budget day, when the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform announce the capital interest in direct voted expenditure, it will be so far below what the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is claiming that he will be found out. At the very most, he will secure a couple of hundred million euro for the cost rental equity loan, CREL, scheme and the affordable housing fund, and any additional capital will be spent on more subsidies and grant aid for developers. We know that because the Government's targets are so low for affordable housing and it is cutting 1,000 social homes from what would otherwise be delivered.

I have no faith or confidence in the Minister, the Government or the housing plan. That is why, more than ever, if we are to tackle the ever-deepening housing crisis for social housing applicants, renters and people who want to buy, we need a change of Government, not more bluff and bluster from the Minister.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am sharing time with an Teachta Mac Lochlainn.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak to the Government's new housing plan. I say "new" but, as we have heard, there is little new in it. It is called Housing for All but, as we know, this could not be further from the truth. The Minister's plan is just more of the *status quo*. He stated he recognises it is cheaper to buy a home than rent one in several cities and added that this is how broken the system is. He talks as though the system broke itself, and as though we have suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a housing crisis. He washes his hands of it and asks who did it. We are here because of the failed policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that have created the housing crisis, yet the Minister and his Government expect us to believe that the people who caused the crisis are somehow the same people we should entrust to fix it. Do they live in the real world at all?

It is clear from the plan there will be little, if any, increase in direct capital investment in social and affordable homes between now and 2025, over and above what was in the pipeline. This means rents and high prices will continue to increase and supply will continue to lag be-

hind. If someone is paying €2,000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, or cannot access a mortgage and fears he or she will never own a home, or has been ten years or more on a council waiting list, or is in his or her 30s and is living back with his or her parents, or sleeps in a homeless hostel, or had to emigrate because of the cost and lack of housing, there is no need to worry. The Minister is telling people there is no crisis and the market is not out of control.

What happening is out of control. If he does not acknowledge that, we are wasting our time and he is wasting his. Somehow, he expects us to believe that the people who brought us here will be the same people to fix the problem, with the same policies and ideology. He is wedded to his market-driven ideology. That is what has brought us here and it will not get us out of this situation.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: As the Minister will be aware, on 15 June last, thousands of families from Donegal, Mayo, Clare and other counties gathered outside the convention centre and walked to Government Buildings. On the same day, this House passed a motion, which no Deputy opposed, calling for 100% redress for families who have been devastated by defective concrete blocks. The scheme that is in place was supposed to provide 90%, with the banks making a large contribution towards the remaining 10%. Of course, the banks ran away and were nowhere to be seen, and the figure is anything but 90%.

The Minister's working group has been established but the families did not have a good experience with that group. His departmental officials, as is in the DNA of departmental officials, are focused on limiting the exposure of the State. That is their mindset in these discussions. The families, meanwhile, have been focused on solutions. They have made their final submission to the Minister. They have put a great deal of work into it and it is based on a costing per square metre by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland. The Government has asked what 100% redress would mean and the families have demonstrated what can be done based on real-world prices, but they have also demonstrated the need for a State guarantee. If we are saying to families that, in many instances, they are not required to demolish their homes and that removing the outer leaf would be a safe option, as is the view of the engineers who put together the protocol for the National Standards Authority of Ireland, the State needs to guarantee that work. People will embrace that if there is a guarantee and an assurance is in place.

They are the two big calls, namely, for 100% redress and a State guarantee in respect of any works that take place. The families who stayed with the process, even though they were not happy at all, have made the submission and presented it to Members in the Houses in the past week, as the Minister will be aware. They have done tremendous work and I am hopeful he will back their report and deliver the solution so many families badly need.

Deputy Duncan Smith: There is no doubt this policy document, Housing for All, will be the Minister's political legacy, whether it is delivered. His reputation and success will rest on it, as I am sure he recognises. That is how important this document is and, as the Minister said, how important it is for this Government. I have a different view. I have no doubt the Minister is going to build houses. Fianna Fáil builds houses. It has the relationships with the people to build houses. Our concerns are how affordable they will be, the reliance on the private sector and what the Minister will do for renters. These are issues we and our spokesperson on housing, Senator Moynihan, have raised numerous times with the Minister since his appointment, under the legislation he already brought forward in advance of Housing for All in respect of the Land Development Agency and the affordable housing scheme.

I will outline the areas where we have issues. We believe a fundamental flaw in Housing for All is that there is no definition of affordability. It will not come as a surprise to the Minister that we have this issue, as we have articulated it for well over a year now. It has not been included in the Affordable Housing Act and there is no indication from the Minister that it is something the Government is willing to confront. The advice of experts appearing before the housing committee is that affordability be specifically defined as a third of a person's income. Senator Moynihan put forward amendments in this respect for previous legislation but they were not accepted. Housing for All provides for a variety of different affordable purchase schemes, together with cost rental, but does not provide an underpinning legal definition of what constitutes a so-called affordable home for the success of these schemes.

The success of these schemes is not whether the roof is built over somebody's head, but how affordable it will be for the people who will be under it. There are people who will scrimp and save and get into the home, but who will then struggle month on month and if another economic crash hits, and it does not have to be as severe as the last one, they will lose everything. That is where the success of an affordable housing scheme will be truly measured. That is a key concern, and it is not a political point-scoring concern. This is a fundamental concern for the Labour Party. The market cannot be allowed to dictate what it means for something to be affordable. It is in the interests of the market not to care for people. The market does not care for people; it cares for the bottom line. The market is not going to find a natural affordable rate. It is always going to pursue profit, and that is never going to change.

There is a reliance on the private sector to deliver. The reality is that there are developers who are sitting on land. The Minister knows from the constituency both of us share that in the past ten years developers have been sitting on large tracts of land waiting for the value to increase. If they decide to develop on the land, they develop it piece by piece. The first phase will be released at a particular price. The second phase will be released €25,000 dearer. In the next year, the third phase will be released with another €25,000 or €30,000 on top of that. That is what the private sector does. There is nothing in this document that is going to mitigate that practice. They have the State by the proverbials on this, given the amount of land banks they own in key areas such as Fingal that will be needed to solve the housing crisis. Fingal is the youngest county in the State, with young people, older people seeking to downsize and people who have separated needing to buy homes. They are looking at these land banks and waiting for the developers to deliver. The developers are not going to do it until it is profitable for them to do so. There is nothing in this document that assuages our concerns in that regard.

There are 400,000 people renting in this country. That is a huge number of people who really need support. There remains a massive imbalance of power between renters and landlords. The Minister spoke favourably last week about our tenant rights Bill in the name of Deputy Bacik, but he appeared to focus on issues relating to the quality of rental accommodation and not the security of tenure, which is ultimately the bedrock on which renters' rights are based. That is something the Minister has to address, and we do not have confidence it is addressed in the Housing for All document.

The Minister mentioned that housing is the first priority for this Government, and it should be. However, where housing and big infrastructure projects intersect, will the infrastructure projects fall aside? I refer to MetroLink and the example of the Fosterstown lands in Swords. Thousands of units will be developed in Fosterstown. When I was a councillor, I, the Fianna Fáil councillors and other councillors engaged with our constituents and told them this plan had to go through because MetroLink was going to be delivered on the back of it. Those units

28 September 2021

are going to be built, but MetroLink is going to be delayed. Optimistically, it is going to be delayed but most people now believe it will never happen. The Minister is aware of the traffic congestion. What happens then? We need transport. There are many parts of this city and of other cities and parts of the country that have no transport infrastructure. To build and deliver houses on already zoned lands without the promised ambitious, much-needed, climate-friendly transport infrastructure is a betrayal. We are still suffering from the lack of that development when Fianna Fáil was last in power and built a rake of houses.

As I said, I believe houses will be built. The Government has the relationships to build those houses, and many people may end up with a roof over their heads. However, it may not be affordable and may be a struggle for many. I believe it will be. We are back to where we were previously, whereby a few people will get very wealthy and will profit from housing development in this country while the very many who fund that profit and those riches will be struggling each week, month and year to ensure the roof remains above their heads and that they are not sunk again by another economic or housing crisis. I hope that does not happen, but our concern is that it will.

Deputy Richard Bruton: First, I congratulate the Minister on the production of this strategy. I listened to Sinn Féin Members with bemusement. They are always trying to create a caricature and then attack it. The latest caricature is that this plan is all about private developers. The reality is that building of social housing in this country increased tenfold between 2016 and 2019.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Nothing was built.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Under this plan it will double again. Some 48% of all housing built in the next decade will be either social or affordable. That is in the plan. This is not relying on the private sector. This is driving a housing sector, both private and public, to deliver for ordinary people. To try to portray it as some type of attempt to get into cahoots with private developers to hoodwink people is simply not the case.

I looked at the housing pipeline in my constituency. It will be of interest to people that 11,500 homes are in the pipeline in the constituency, just one part of Dublin. That will be a 20% increase in the number of homes in the constituency, if they are developed. One can ask how many of them are coming from a Sinn Féin controlled council. It is only 10%. The reality is that 32% of the private ones are on-site, which is not enough, but only 15% of the public ones are on-site. On top of that, Sinn Féin and others blocked an 853-unit housing project----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Stop, stop.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----which would have almost doubled the social and affordable output from the council. It blocked that, despite it being in the pipeline for four years and approved by Sinn Féin members of that council at that stage. Let us get real about where housing strategy is coming from and what we are trying to achieve here.

This is a very innovative policy proposal. Not only does it plan to deliver 48% social and affordable housing, which is unprecedented in the history of the State, but it also brings in a State developer, not a private developer, for the first time. It is the first time we have a State developer, the Land Development Agency. The agency already has access to sites for 26,000 homes, which it will deliver as affordable. Along with others, I want the Minister to drive forward that and ensure there is absolutely no delay with those. Some of those are getting stalled private

sector sites moving forward. The reality is that our councils have not been up to this challenge. They have not been able to deliver at scale or at affordability. Now we have a system where a State developer will have access to State land and get that at discount prices so it can deliver affordable prices to people who need them. That is innovation in my book.

In addition, we have land value sharing so in future rezonings we will see a recovery of that for the State and for communities. There is a cities fund to reach out to young families who are now living in high-density areas, which is very expensive, and to make it affordable for them. CPOs on vacant premises will be supported with a State fund. There will be a tax on vacant homes. There will be a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to drive forward this, so we will not see Departments scattered around the State blocking the capacity of this plan to deliver. I believe this should be welcomed. I also welcome the move in the fair deal scheme.

5 o'clock

The fair deal scheme has locked down homes because of the rules of that scheme. Now they are being changed.

Deputy Thomas Gould: They are the Government's rules.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy should have a bit of respect.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I know many people in this House do not want the Minister to succeed. I want this to succeed. I want us to fix the housing problem by looking pragmatically at every solution, not standing on our little territories and refusing to allow private building on public lands. That sort of approach has stalled the delivery of homes and makes our local authorities unable to step up to this challenge. I welcome what the Minister is trying to do here. It is the right direction. We need to make it work. I hope there will be more co-operation when we get into committees and down into the councils to see this work at ground level.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister, his advisers and the departmental officials for producing this Housing for All strategy. I acknowledge the collaborative approach we had in preparing this document. It is a long-term plan, incorporating many green objectives that started off as discussions with the Minister and his advisers. We improved those ideas and now we see them in a strategy and in legislation.

Cost rental has been the core of the Green Party housing policy for a long time. We met our Green colleagues in Vienna to look at its world-class cost-rental model. I do not believe anyone in this House could argue with the cost-rental model. We have introduced it into Irish legislation for the first time. I expect the numbers will increase over the time as the Land Development Agency, LDA, scales up and as we attract investors into that space with those limited returns that would suit those ethical long-term investors or pension funds. I expect that number to scale up, because when representatives of the LDA appeared before our committee, they said cost rental would be a focus of their work and I believe they will deliver on that.

I listened to the Minister's opening speech in which he referred to cost rental as being a game changer, which is exactly how I described it to people on doorsteps during the previous general election campaign. I am proud we are legislating for this and that we are delivering this in government.

Urban regeneration and addressing the vacancy and dereliction that exists on many of our

streets is a core part of this plan. There are thousands of opportunities to take an existing building, renovate it, refurbish it and then rejuvenate it, to bring life and living back into the town and above shops or, in limited cases, instead of a shop. Croí Cónaithe is putting the life and the heart back into those towns.

We need to put in place supports to assist people who want to take a derelict or vacant building because it is difficult to get the loans in certain circumstances. It is awkward to build in town centres. There can be traffic management issues, live streets, neighbours and all those kinds of difficulties. Often it is so much easier to go with a greenfield development and I can see the attraction of that. With those buildings we have in our town centres, I firmly believe the greenest building is one that is already built that we can invest in, adapt, repurpose, change its use and upgrade it to live in it.

When that life and living and vibrancy is put back into a town centre, it generates an economic return to that town. It also generates a societal return for that town and rebuilds that community. It is hard to put into tangible economics what that can generate for a town. It is an incredibly important part of the Housing for All strategy.

The target of producing 33,000 homes annually is grounded in the ESRI analysis on population growth, persons per dwelling, demographic changes etc. It is a realistic figure. It is challenging but deliverable over the course of this strategy. I listened to the Opposition Members who are highly critical of this figure. They have claimed it should be higher, quicker etc. If we had said 40,000, they would have said 50,000. They do not deal in facts or detail.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Steven Matthews: They are really good at heckling, but even their heckling does not stand up to scrutiny. They do not need to deal in detail and facts. They deal in sound bites, populism-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: We do not.

Deputy Steven Matthews: -----headlines and criticism. None of that has ever produced a house. None of them has ever produced a house.

The target we need to produce is large but doable. It also creates another problem in that it leads to significant carbon emissions if these are all to be new builds, which I do not believe they will be. Concrete production is an enormous carbon emitter. If we take the existing stock of derelict and vacant buildings, and stock that is going into obsolescence, and provide the resources for people to refurbish them, it will also be a game changer. There are hundreds of kilometres of commercial streets with two or three storeys above them where no one is living. That brings life and vibrancy back into a town after 5 p.m. When the shutters come down, there is still life and light on the streets, which is important for a sense of security in local communities.

We need to match that town centre living with commensurate investment in the public realm in the creation of those nice public amenity places with good wide footpaths, safe walking routes to school and all the matching infrastructure that goes with living in a town centre. For the bigger projects we can do much of that through the town and village renewal, the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, and the rural regeneration and development fund,

RRDF, funding. However, for the smaller projects we need to ensure our local authorities are well enough resourced and have the capacity to carry out the audits in our town centres to see where we need those small interventions and small bits of work that would make living over the shops or in the town centre attractive for residents and draw people into it.

Carrying out the health checks and audits for our towns is a vital part of deciding where and how we should direct public funds to generate the best return for the economic and societal benefits and to create towns that are attractive to live in. It all takes resources at local level as well as national level. Our local authority resources and staff are under pressure all the time. I welcome giving local authorities better powers to compulsorily purchase vacant and derelict buildings, to regenerate them and bring them back into use for society, but we need to resource them to do the extra work the compulsory purchase order, CPO, scheme demands.

It is important to audit our towns, identifying sites where there is no impediment to development and liaising with owners to encourage them or show them how they can change the use of these properties. Even trying to find the owners can be difficult in certain circumstances. Staff who are already under pressure do not always have the luxury of being able to do that.

There will be challenges with upskilling the construction sector for apprentices for professional services to deal with the new build, refurbishment and repurposing of buildings. The retrofitting of 500,000 units of our existing housing stock will be another challenge. However, it will create thousands of long-term, well-paid professional and trade jobs. I acknowledge the work done by the Minister, Deputy Harris, and others to encourage the uptake of apprenticeships.

This plan is costed, realistic, deliverable and funded. It will provide certainty for people who want to buy, build or rent at affordable costs. It commits to ending homelessness. It is the largest ever State intervention in a public building programme. It is State led and plan led. It will take time to get there but the route is clear. The legislation has been passed and more is on the way to ensure we deliver on housing, which is the most immediate critical issue we face.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am sharing time with Deputy Gould. I support what my colleague, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, said about 100% redress and the guarantee needed for households who opt for the outer layer option. I commend all the people who gathered to demonstrate in Ballina. I hope these people will get their lives back very soon.

This plan will not deliver housing for all. Apart from the many weaknesses and shortcomings highlighted by my colleagues and other Members of the Opposition, the plan has nothing of substance to address the accommodation crisis students are facing. Despite having the highest college fees in the EU, accommodation is the biggest barrier for many working students and families on low and medium incomes. This particularly disadvantages students from rural areas. Families are running themselves into financial ruin just to educate their children - that is if they can even afford to send them to college. Students were really angry when they heard the Taoiseach say he would keep a close eye on third level colleges to ensure they do not charge exorbitant rents. That is a bewildering comment for students who are in this situation. They have heard the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage admit he has no plan to address the crisis in student accommodation-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not true.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: -----in the short term. This is for all the students who are in

hostels, in hotel rooms or who are sleeping on floors as we speak. The Government's housing plan states that universities have developed a significant amount of student accommodation in recent years, another statement that is divorced from reality and shows how out of touch is the Government. Since 2017, the year the student accommodation strategy was published, only 679 on-campus student accommodation places have been added, with the increase in student numbers and the ever-increasing share of student accommodation going to attract high-fee international students. The reality is more students are competing for comparatively fewer on-campus beds. The only other initiative for this policy is around the technological universities, and I welcome and support that. The Minister has left students behind in the housing plan so I ask him to address the crisis and emergency that is there.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister calls this policy Housing for All. It will provide housing for some but not for ordinary people. It will provide housing for developers, landowners, speculators, investment and vulture funds, and greedy landlords but not for ordinary people who are trying to put a roof over their heads and pay a rent or mortgage that is sustainable. The Minister is there with his partners in government in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. Listening to the contributions of Deputies Bruton and Matthews you would think the housing crisis happened yesterday. The housing crisis happened over the past 20 years because of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy, which was supported during that time by the Green Party. For members of those parties to come in here and say that Housing for All will solve the problems and is the answer shows how little they understand the crisis people are facing. We are not talking about delivering houses in five or ten years' time. Houses need to be delivered now.

In Cork alone, there are 9,000 vacant and derelict houses. Last weekend, a group in Cork did a derelict tour of Cork city and it took them two and half hours to walk one portion of it. I thank the Community Action Tenants Union, CATU, Frank O'Connor, Jude Sherry and everyone who walked with them for what they did to highlight this dereliction. This was caused by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Do the Government Deputies not understand that or do they deny they are responsible? Will the Minister come to Cork city with me to meet Cork City Council officials? I will walk him around the city and show him the dereliction that is destroying Cork.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have been there.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will he come with me because he must not have been looking at where the dereliction was.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If Sinn Féin stops objecting to housing, I will go with the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister is sitting there in his ivory tower with his Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and speculator buddies while we are on the ground with ordinary people who are suffering. That is the difference. The Minister spoke about ideology, and there is a problem with it because the Government believes in looking after the well-to-do and the wealthy developers. People do not have homes, they are worried about how they will pay their rents and mortgages and there is nothing in Housing for All for them.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I acknowledge the Minister and his officials in the Department put a lot of work into this plan and would have spent a lot of time on it. Let us be clear about what is happening in terms of the comments made earlier by the Minister and in the media. There is an attempt to normalise our housing crisis by saying it is a problem internationally and

by pointing to what is going on in other European countries to make it acceptable somehow. This was tried by the previous Government and the now Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, when he commented on homelessness. He tried to normalise it by saying it is an international problem. People saw through that and the public did not accept it and the public will not accept this now.

The reality and truth are that we have some of the highest rents in the European Union in this city and that we have some of the highest housing costs in the European Union. Those are facts and this is not normal. The reason for that is we have a high-risk, high-cost and highly speculative method of delivering housing. I have no issue with private development and I want to see more of it but the problem we have is we do not have enough not-for-profit, affordable or cost rental development taking place. That is the missing piece.

On cost rental, something unusual is happening in Ireland in that we are defining cost rental on a basis on which it is not defined anywhere else in the world that I am aware of. Cost rental is understood to provide rented accommodation at the cost of providing it, that is, on a not-for-profit basis. What the Government has done in the Affordable Housing Act is allow for cost rental on a for-profit basis. That is not done anywhere else in the world that I am aware of. It is not done in Austria. Any surplus from cost rental in Austria is reinvested into cost rental. That is part of the sustainability of the system. It is simply not true to state otherwise.

We have a Minister who likes to state otherwise. He came into this House on 24 June and told me the Central Bank had passed and approved his shared equity scheme. Does the Minister stand over those comments he made to me on 24 June?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not Question Time.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: It is not but the Minister was heckling me, as he likes to, and I was referring to those comments and bringing them to his attention, which I am correct to do.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I was not. Deputy O’Callaghan is very sensitive.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: The Minister has said this is an honest plan. There has been a lot of spin on this plan. The first bit of spin was during the launch, where there was a lot of talk about increasing home ownership levels. If this plan is implemented and meets its targets, home ownership levels will continue to decrease in Ireland. That is a fact. Incidentally, that is not for the worst of reasons; it is because the plan sets out the construction of more cost rental and social homes. However, at the launch speaker after speaker said that this plan will increase home ownership. The plan sets out to continue to decrease our home ownership levels, albeit for honourable reasons as I said, but that was the first bit of spin on this.

The second bit of spin was the constant reference to the increase in funding and the €4 billion per annum that would be spent. The ESRI has been strong and clear in saying we need to go from €2 billion in Exchequer capital funding on housing to about €4 billion, but that is not the way that €4 billion figure has been arrived at. There was €3 billion of Exchequer funding allocated in the 2021 budget for housing with €2 billion on the capital side and about €1 billion in Housing Finance Agency loans. That is where we arrive at our €4 billion. There is no additional capital funding in this plan. We will see some increase on the capital side in the budget but it will not bring us from €2 billion in Exchequer funding up to €4 billion, as a lot of people are now expecting from the spin that was brought out at the time of the launch.

On the land value sharing measures in this report, let us be very clear this does not amount

28 September 2021

to the implementation of the Kenny report. It is better than doing nothing and we should be trying to capture land value in terms of funding infrastructure, but that will not bring land on stream at affordable costs to ensure more affordable housing. It will mean more funding for infrastructure from the Exchequer. How that works out with development levies being taken away as a balancing measure to that remains to be seen.

There is far too little emphasis in Housing for All on the serious skills deficit we have. In terms of our wet trades in construction apprenticeships, we are only at about 10% of our 2004 peak, particularly in areas such as bricklaying and plastering. There is an over-reliance in the Housing for All strategy on the idea that this will all be sorted with international labour.

Climate action and dealing with matters such as cement and carbon from housing and the need to have a circular use of materials are weak in the plan. I hope the climate action plan will address those matters.

The plan allows for at least €1 billion in subsidies for developers from shared equity and other measures. All it gives people who are homeless, in emergency accommodation or sleeping on the street is a mere 20 additional new Housing First tenancies, increasing from 220 a year to 240 a year. That is far too few and we could do much better. I ask the Government to re-examine that and to look to at least double the number of Housing First tenancies a year from the current 220 so we can make proper headway on that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McAuliffe is sharing time with Deputy Leddin.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I have six minutes. I was working it out because, like the Taoiseach, I did not do honours maths. This is a very important document for the Minister, for those Deputies who support the Government and for the thousands of people who want this housing crisis to end. Something substantial happened in February 2020. We were told through the democratic mandate that things needed to change on housing. That is why we all had the responsibility to try to put together a Government that did that. Some people led that job of putting a Government together, while others did not. They will be judged on that as much as we will be judged by this plan.

I want to talk to people about how this plan will help them, but the difficulty is that all the debate so far has sought to refight the general election of 2020, pretending the plan prior to that election is the same as this current plan. It is not. The rhetoric from the Opposition that this Government believes the private sector should be the builder of the majority of housing is not true. We do not agree with that and it is wrong. They say this Government is out of touch and out of ideas. They are wrong; this document is packed with ideas. They say we do not live in the real world. Every day, the Minister, like all of us in our clinics, hears problems relating to the housing crisis. We are anything but out of touch with it. They say we do not understand it, that we have speculator buddies, that we are leaning into the market, that we have the same policies and the same ideas and that we are wedded to market-driven priorities. They are wrong. Why are they wrong? Because Housing for All specifically outlines how they are wrong.

Let us compare Rebuilding Ireland with the Housing for All option. Rebuilding Ireland was a €6 billion plan over six years. This is a €20 billion plan over five years. Rebuilding Ireland was very much focused on social housing. Housing for All delivers housing for all - cost rental, affordable purchase and social housing, because we need mixed income and well-planned estates everywhere. I and many Deputies represent constituencies where that was not done and it

is a key deliverable in Housing for All. This Government has brought in cost rental legislation, something Rebuilding Ireland did not do. The Labour Party talks about cost rental over and over again, but it was in government for five years and there was no legislation on cost rental. None. It had its chance. We did it in the space of 12 months. The previous Government limited the role of the Land Development Agency, LDA, while this Government has expanded it because, as the Minister said, we want every tool in the box. The previous Government reduced Part V by 10%; this Government doubled the obligation on developers to 20%. The previous Government introduced co-housing; we abolished it. How can the Opposition say these are the same policies all over again? It is just not true.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That was confidence and supply.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Let me look at what Housing for All does. I will not talk to the Opposition but to the members of the public who want this problem solved. What does Housing for All do? First, if you do not qualify for social housing at the moment, Housing for All has solutions for you. If you do not qualify for social housing, you will now qualify for cost rental. If there are empty public sites beside you, in Dublin, Cork and other places where affordability is an issue, 100% of those will be used for public housing on public land, as provided for in the LDA Bill. The Minister has capped both deposits and rents. Housing for All provides councils with the ability to build public housing and affordable purchase homes on their sites, costing between €160,000 and €250,000 per unit. The budget is €20 billion, which is real money that will deliver real homes. As I said, the strategic housing development, SHD, process, which was essentially one that enabled developers to flip their sites, has been ended by this Minister. We have restored local democracy and local powers to local authorities.

There are so many things in sight that will all have local application on the ground. In my constituency, there will be affordable purchase and senior citizen homes on Parkview, senior citizen homes on Jamestown Road, all three different housing models on lands at Kildonan, a site at Whitehall car park and further sites at Oscar Traynor, the Dublin Port tunnel, Coultry Gardens, Sillogue, Balbutcher Lane, Finglas West Church and Belclare Drive. None of these is under construction but all of them will be built using the tools in Housing for All, tools that were not available in Rebuilding Ireland.

All of us will be judged, including the Minister, me and everyone in this House, both the Opposition and the Government, on whether we have delivered for the people with this plan. I hope we will do so, but the focus now shifts to implementation, to the local authorities, to the approved housing bodies and to every other provider and partner we can work with. The job did not end when we passed this legislation or when we passed the budget. It will only end when keys are turned in doors and more people get more homes.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I support much of what my colleague, Deputy Matthews, said in his contribution. In particular, I support his tributes to the Minister. Housing for All is a very good document and a very good plan. There was lots of evidence on the day it was launched that the Minister had taken on advice and suggestions from his colleagues in government, from colleagues across the Oireachtas, from NGOs that are working hard in the area of housing, particularly homelessness, and, most important, from people throughout the country who are worried they will never be able to settle down in a home where their status is secure.

The Taoiseach has spoken previously about the three big priorities for Government being health, housing and climate. These areas are linked in many ways, not least in the need to de-

liver compact growth leading to sustainable and healthy communities. In addition, they are all extremely challenging areas requiring a whole-of-government approach and political leadership. They necessitate doing things in a different way and they are all very difficult problems to solve.

Every year in this Chamber we talk about housing, and every time we discuss the issue someone mentions the Kenny report. It was often Green Party Deputies who raised the issue of housing as that report gathered another layer of dust on the shelf. I am very pleased this Government will introduce measures similar to those recommended by Judge Kenny in 1973 to capture some of the uplift in value for the State when land is rezoned. The measures are not perfect, but it will go on record that the Minister was the one who started to implement the recommendations of this report after so many decades.

Housing for All will also introduce penalties for owners of zoned land who fail to develop it. Again, this took far too long to introduce. I believe this is because it was too politically difficult and I am glad this Government has taken some politically difficult decisions not taken previously, because we need to take difficult decisions to deliver on housing. In addition to taxing undeveloped zoned lands, I also support the introduction of the Croí Cónaithe fund to support the delivery of housing in cities where planning permission has already been received and, importantly, to give financial support for the refurbishment of vacant homes.

Housing for All is bringing a new direction to the URDF, one I welcome. From my experience in my city of Limerick, despite the best of intentions in our applications for funding, we have not managed to deliver the best for Limerick. We tried to apply for flagship projects that did not necessarily deliver a more liveable Limerick city. I welcome the fact the URDF will in future be much more focused on delivery of housing, in particular on bringing vacant housing back into use. Revitalising our urban centres requires a multifaceted approach and it was remiss up to this point that vacant housing was not a primary focus of the URDF.

I am passionate about the issue of housing vacancy. It is morally wrong that we have so many empty homes throughout our State, and I have been working with my colleagues to try to push for a wide range of measures to tackle the issue of housing vacancy. I am glad to see that Housing for All delivers many of these measures. I will continue to push for comprehensive measures to address housing vacancy and vacant sites because we must restore the fabric of our cities, towns and villages, getting people to live in them again and to do so in a sustainable manner. There is often a lot of lip service paid in this House to the concept of balanced regional development but I believe that the town centres first approach is the way of actually delivering it. I know that the Minister's Department is working hard with the Department of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, to deliver the town centres first policy. I know from my party colleagues, the Ministers of State, Deputies Joe O'Brien and Malcolm Noonan, that this town centres first approach is receiving high priority in both Departments.

There are many other welcome aspects to Housing for All but I want to conclude by saying that when faced with difficult problems, there can be a temptation to flee to the safety of ideological purity, to focus more on being right than on getting things done. I do not think that my constituents, many of whom have contacted me to share their difficulties in getting a place they can call home, would thank me or anyone else for not urging you to focus now, as you have committed to doing, on getting things done and delivering this plan. We have the blueprint for action, and now we must deliver.

Deputy Réada Cronin: With Housing for All, we are being taken for a spin on a magic carpet, only there is a massive hole in it and many of my constituents in north Kildare are falling through. Let me tell the House about the housing situation in north Kildare because I noticed that the Minister was quite amused by the whole thing. My office is out the door with men and women in every age group desperate for a home. There is a mother of three who is expecting her fourth child. She is just out of a refuge for women experiencing domestic violence and has been living with her mum. Kildare County Council suggested that she goes back to her abusive partner because the council would have to get on to Tusla if she presents as homeless. It is unimaginable. This State is never not at it when it comes to women. A woman in her 50s pays €700 a month for a single room in a house share. A working man in his 60s lost a home in a marriage break-up and never imagined he would be renting into his pension years and beyond. He cannot even find a place to rent at the moment. With added cruelty, some people are dumping or giving away their furniture. They have been evicted because a house is to be sold and they cannot afford to store their treasured possessions. They cannot find a place to rent in time so all the things they have collected throughout their lives and that furnished their lives, not only physically but also emotionally, are just gone. It is as if the system is telling the renters of north Kildare they cannot even have basic comfort because profit rules and profit decides they do not deserve it. All of this degradation and brutalising of people has become normal in the Government's eyes. The Government wants it to appear normal for all. We are facing outright slaughter in terms of housing for people who will be renting until they die and depending on the old age pension, which does not include accommodation costs. We need radical change and actual housing for all, not this sham. A major investment in social and affordable housing is needed and it is too long overdue because people in north Kildare and everywhere are not affected by this crisis as much as they are afflicted by it. That affliction of good, ordinary people must stop. The pretence must stop.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There is a plethora of actions from this Government that I find truly jaw-dropping, but none more than the Government representatives' consistent appearances in this House and in the media promoting a delayed and postponed policy that so many experts have said simply will not work. This plan is good for big developers and investment funds but it is bad for working people looking to buy, for renters, or for those in need of social housing. It will push up house prices and rents while failing to deliver affordable housing that is badly needed in areas such as mine in Longford-Westmeath. The number of people whose lives, families, futures, hopes and dreams are being crushed by policies that this Government is wedded to inflicting on them is simply sickening. People arrive to my office doors with the dreaded notice to quit in their hands. That notice to quit might as well read "nine minutes" instead of "nine months" for all the hope these people have of finding an alternative home to live in. Those people experience anxiety and stress as that clock ticks down. They could not care less what is happening internationally as they pack their belongings into plastic bags.

Affordable housing needs to be exactly that: affordable. The question that begs to be asked when we see price caps of €225,000 in Longford and €300,000 in Westmeath relates to what planet the Minister is living on. That is completely unaffordable to somebody who is working in Dunnes Stores and married to a member of the Defence Forces. It is not going to happen. Where is the all in that arithmetic? A housing policy that focuses exclusively on supply must ensure supply in the right location and at the right price. We all know that it needs to be the right policy delivered by the right Minister and the right Government because otherwise it is simply going to fail. That is not what the people voted for in the most recent election. They did not vote for more failure and a lack of change.

28 September 2021

It has been reported that at a recent meeting of Longford municipal district, the director of services expressed his fears as written correspondence received by his department returned not very encouraging insights as to where Longford fits into the Government's plan. His department of housing officials had devised seven criteria for the counties, one of which Longford will fail on immediately. If that does not raise alarm bells, I am not too sure what else would. That official believed that only 14 counties nationwide would meet the terms set down in the plan.

This housing plan will not fix the housing crisis. It will push up prices and rents. The social housing delivery will completely fail. We will have an increase in homelessness. When the Minister has a chance, I encourage him to look up the *Longford Leader* on Google. I point him in the direction of an article that is headlined "Government bosses told to wake the hell up". I strongly suggest this Government takes that advice on board.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked the Business Committee for this debate, which has once again highlighted the sickening injustice of the way the Government manipulates the speaking arrangements. The people who asked for this debate get six and a half minutes after the contributions of five or six Government speakers and the Minister, who does not want to hang around to hear from the rest of the parties. This party has been ringing alarm bells about the housing crisis since I entered the Dáil in 2011. It makes me sick but it is typical of what is going on in here.

We have heard the nonsense and rhetoric about Housing for All and €4 billion a year. I ask the Government to tell the truth. I asked a parliamentary question on this matter. What is actually being delivered in terms of investment is €12 billion in direct Exchequer funding, €3.5 billion through the Land Development Agency and another €5 billion. That totals €18.5 billion over nine years. That is just over €2 billion a year. That is the amount the Government is actually putting in and the rest is coming from the private sector, or the Government is hoping it will come through the private sector. A big chunk of even the public investment is through the housing assistance payment, HAP, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and leasing money that is being put into the pockets of the private sector. The Government claims that the State is now going to be the biggest deliverer of housing, but it is not. Look at the figures. Some 57% of the plan the Government is proposing is going to come from the private sector. One just needs to add up the numbers for each of the years. There will be €142.3 million in public and affordable housing and the rest is coming from the private sector. The dependence on the private sector, which has led us to the crisis we are now in, is continued in this policy. That is the truth.

The affordable and social housing plans can be broken down further. How much is the Government going to get through Part V, that is, from the private sector? The Government's answer to a parliamentary question to that effect is that it cannot tell us. How much of the affordable housing is actually going to be affordable? How much is the Government hoping to source through Part V, that is, from the private sector? It cannot tell us. This is more of the nonsense we have had for the past number of years.

The Minister talked about protecting tenants. The test of whether this Government is going to protect tenants is if the tenants in St. Helen's Court, about whom I have been talking for four years and who are threatened with mass eviction by a vulture fund, will be protected from eviction. They are not so protected now. I told this Government and its predecessor that this is an example of how vulture funds are unjustly mass evicting tenants who have done nothing wrong and I asked what they are going to do about it. The answer is zero. The Government does not

want to stand up to the vulture funds. That is the truth. The funds were invited in and given tax breaks. I do not have time because our time allocation is pathetic and I have to hand over to Deputy Barry, but if the Government wants an example of what actual radical, emergency action on housing might look like, it should look at what 57% of the population of Berlin said over the past week. They said to expropriate the vulture landlords. If such action is justified in Berlin to deal with unaffordable rents and a lack of tenants' rights, it is doubly justified here because all of those vultures, cuckoos and corporate landlords got their property from us via NAMA. What had a nominal value of €40 billion is probably worth approximately €100 billion now. They also get tax breaks and day-to-day money through HAP, RAS and leasing. We are paying at every level but we own nothing. They charge unaffordable rents and can evict people. We pay for it, they run away with the profits and tenants are screwed. That is the reality of what is going on. I have been asking the Government to raise the income eligibility thresholds for social housing for five years so that people would not be whacked off the list. Nothing has been done. A review has been promised for five years. It goes on. There is talk, talk and talk but there is no action to deliver affordable public housing, tenants' rights or the security people need because the Government is still dancing to the tune of the big money people who get rich from property.

Deputy Mick Barry: It gives me no pleasure to say that the Housing for All plan will not work. The housing crisis created by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the capitalist housing market will not be solved by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the capitalist housing market, even if the Green Party is now included in the mix by way of decoration. The plan relies on the private sector to deliver 156,000 houses between now and 2030 but you cannot control what you do not own and the State has no control over whether these houses will ever be built, or over the price at which those that are actually built will be sold. We need an end to market madness. The business of housing delivery needs to be taken out of the hands of the profiteers and put into the hands of society by way of the nationalisation of the building industry under democratic control.

The people of Berlin have voted overwhelmingly in favour of taking 250,000 apartments owned and controlled by for-profit corporations into public ownership. They realise the importance of nationalisation as a tool for tackling their housing crisis. It is disappointing that both Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats spurned the opportunity this morning to support similar measures in this country. Sinn Féin told *The Journal* that it was not necessarily the answer to Ireland's housing woes while the Social Democrats dodged the question altogether. Market madness will never solve Ireland's housing crisis and nationalisation is key to tackling it, alongside a policy of building public housing on public land. I refer to both council housing and genuinely affordable cost-price housing. The sooner all who oppose the Government's strategy see that, the better.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome today's discussion. At times, it has felt like a debate on the Housing for All programme. On that issue, when this legislation was being discussed in the summer, there were many debates in this House, although we were in the convention centre at the time. The issue had a very good airing. Obviously, some Deputies chose not to support it but ultimately all of us are coming from a good place on this. We all acknowledge that rents are too high. First-time buyers cannot access affordable housing and people are waiting years for social housing. It is clear the market-led system has failed. Everyone should have access to sustainable, good quality housing to rent or buy at an affordable price.

Housing for All is a massive State intervention in the housing market that will deliver social and affordable housing. It will transform how we deliver housing across Ireland. Housing for

28 September 2021

All is a plan that will assist the squeezed middle in buying their first homes and ensure that families on lower incomes have access to social housing. It will transform communities.

Housing for All will also facilitate a massive increase in the supply of housing. We often hear about the lack of supply in this Chamber. The plan commits to the delivery of 300,000 homes over its lifetime. These will include 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes, 18,000 cost rental homes and 156,000 new private homes to rent or buy. The State is taking responsibility for delivering 50% of all housing over the next decade. People talked about radical change earlier on. This is a radical step. It involves a €20 billion investment over the next five years. By any measure, that is a massive intervention in the market and is unprecedented in the history of the State.

Housing for All looks beyond housing output and includes commitments to increase rental protections, to eradicate homelessness, to introduce Kenny report-style powers with regard to land value and to establish a commission on housing.

Housing for All provides a number of pathways to accessing housing. For first-time buyers, the plan will increase the supply of affordable housing to purchase. We have seen pilot schemes deliver these homes at €250,000 or under. The plan will deliver 36,000 new affordable homes, including thousands in Dún Laoghaire, where we are seeing the first homes being built in Shanganagh. The first house scheme gives first-time buyers a chance to bridge the funding gap, with the State taking an equity stake in homes.

For renters, Housing for All creates an entire new affordable cost-rental system whereby people will be able to rent at rates at least 25% below local rents. We have seen the first of these units let in Enniskerry Road in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and 200 more are planned in Shanganagh, in Shankill, County Dublin. It will also improve tenants' rights, place caps on deposits, cap rent increases and introduce tenancies of indefinite duration which will give people certainty in their homes. For people who need to access social housing, the plan will deliver 90,000 new social homes. Local authorities will again start building homes, supported by approved housing bodies like Tuath and Respond.

Housing for All is an ambitious plan, as is recognised across the Chamber, but there will be challenges. The cost of construction needs to be addressed. We need to see reductions in input costs such as the €7,500 Irish Water levy; the equivalent is a mere €1,278 in the UK. We also need to see action on felling licences for timber. We need to address labour shortages. I welcome the plan to ramp up apprenticeships that is being pursued by the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. There are also plans for a national centre of excellence to advance construction technology and methods.

However, what is perhaps the biggest challenge is in this Chamber. I call on Deputies to get behind the plan. As one Opposition Deputy said earlier, we need houses now. We have a plan. Let us get behind it. The public will not thank Deputies who continue to play politics with their future.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will use my time to discuss the most urgent issue, that of activating consented land, but, listening in my office to the speakers from Sinn Féin discussing how rubbish the Government's Housing for All plan is, I was minded to again pick up that party's submission to the Housing for All document from June of this year. It is a few short pages long. There are seven pages of text with just one dollar or euro figure in it. Meanwhile,

the Housing for All plan is comprehensive, fully costed and extremely detailed, as other Deputies have set out. There are links to two other Sinn Féin documents at the back but they are even shorter so one should not go looking for too much detail.

I will talk about the issue of consented land in particular. This specific and detailed issue is contained in Housing for All, as is a response to it. Consented land is land that has been zoned and for which planning permission for residential development has been sought and given but on which no homes have been delivered. Officials from An Bord Pleanála, local authorities around the country and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are breaking their backs trying to get land activated. This is particularly so in the eastern and midlands region. On page 102 of the Office of the Planning Regulator's annual report for 2020, it is shown that the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, EMRA, area continues to dominate in 2020, having significantly increased its share of residential units permitted, which rose to 74%. This represents close to 33,000 units, an increase from 25,000 in 2019. Further analysis shows that 89% of all apartment units permitted in 2020 were in the same region. Of that, 64% were in the four Dublin local authority areas.

The point the office is making is that this suggests that the basis for achieving more compact and sustainable patterns of urban development is there, particularly if the many permissions for higher density development within cities and towns and public transport corridors are activated. These are the principles of climate-friendly development and the permissions have been granted. What is going on? Why are they not either built or in the process of being built? Let me be clear; I do not buy the financial viability argument for a moment. We have heard it for some time. Who would not, at this time, operate a business which pre-sells build-to-sell homes and funds its work on the basis of those sales? The only reason that we give zoning is to give permission to build homes and any entity that is not in the active business of home delivery, but rather makes efforts to acquire land value, needs to get a grip now or get taxed out of the market.

This is a case of tax first, ask later. There need not be delay. Chief executives need to get really aggressive about this locally, with no exemptions. Let us accept that developers are on notice, that liability immediately arises where zoning and consents have been given by State entities, and that there is an immediate implicit notification that the clock is running. Let us shorten those assessment notice periods and refund excess taxes if and when we are proved wrong and home delivery is actively occurring. Our population now exceeds 5 million, up 1 million in 20 years. They need places to live and different ways to live in different stages of their lives and the consented land needs to be activated. Thankfully, the LDA has, in this detailed Housing for All plan, been established and put on a statutory footing, notwithstanding Sinn Féin objecting to it and voting against it. It has the capacity to get in and activate and underwrite some of those sites at value to the State and a discount to the State and get that stock into affordable homes as quickly as possible.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Ireland's housing system to date has failed its people. Houses are not affordable for most and waiting lists are too long. This document, put together by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and his Department, is our first real chance to address and solve that. I urge Deputies to get behind it because it is ambitious and financed and has measures that will bring housing affordability within people's reach and solve the social housing waiting lists. These measures have been outlined by Deputies Carroll MacNeill and Devlin. I urge people to get behind it and commend the Minister, Department and staff on the extraordinary work they have put into this document.

28 September 2021

It is a long-term plan. It is financed to the tune of €4 billion per year for the next five years, but there are urgent measures I want to highlight. One urgent measure is around disability. There is good policy and text in this document around provision of housing for people with disabilities and the building of accessible housing. In the short term, there are people with disabilities, wheelchair users in particular, who do not have access to accessible housing. These are people on social housing lists, in particular. We need interim measures to ensure local authorities are given finance and backing to source houses and units they can upgrade, finance and make accessible. That is incredibly important because it is happening throughout the country. People with disabilities are not able to get accessible housing. I would like to see that addressed in the short term.

There is an infrastructural deficit impeding the building of housing. In west Cork right now, there are applications for 50 to 100 houses being refused because of the lack of infrastructure. This is addressed in the Housing for All plan, but we need short-term measures to ensure these applications can proceed and be successful. To ensure that, we need investment in wastewater and drinking water. Otherwise, we will not see results as fast as we need to see them.

Over-the-shop premises and on-street premises that have been vacant for years are contained in the Housing for All plan. They provide a housing provision solution and could be a cornerstone to ensuring we bring vibrancy back to our high streets and main streets in rural towns and villages so we get people living there. Incentives for landlords and local authorities to take on and refurbish these premises are needed in the short term.

I commend the Minister, the Department and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, on the work and effort they put into producing this document.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mairéad Farrell is proposing to share with Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Táimid i lár géarchéime tithíochta faoi láthair, géarchéim atá ann mar gheall ar pholasaithe an Rialtais le blianta anuas agus mar gheall go raibh buiséad i ndiadh buiséid le cúig bliain anuas nár ndeachaigh i ngleic leis an ngéarchéim seo, buiséid de bhunú Fhine Gael ach le tacaíocht ó Fhianna Fáil. Níl sa phlean seo ach polasaithe Rebuilding Ireland. B'fhéidir go bhfuil ainm eile air ach sin atá i gceist.

An rud a dteastaíonn ná 20,000 teach gach uile bliain; tithe shóisialta, tithe ar phraghas réasúnta agus tithe atá ar chíos ar phraghas réasúnta, ach ní sin atá ann. Táthar ag úsáid figiúirí a bhaineann le deich mbliana ach caithfidh muid a bheith réalaióch faoi céard atá i gceist gach uile bhliain. Tá laghdú de 10,000 teach i gceist nuair a bhreathnaímid go 2030; 90,000 teach a bheas i gceist seachas 100,000 teach mar a dúradh linn ón tús.

Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil ganntanas ann, mar a dúradh níos luaithe, i dtéarmaí infreast-ruchtúir. Ní hé muidne díreach atá á rá sin ach is léir go bhfuil na Teachtaí ar an taobh eile á rá freisin. Chomh maith leis sin, tá an ESRI, an OECD agus an IMF fiú á rá. Teastaíonn infheistíocht cuí mar gheall air sin. Teastaíonn 20,000 teach in aghaidh na bliana ach níl i gceist don bhliain seo chugainn ach 11,000 teach. Níl sé sin i ndóthain. Tá daoine ag streachailt lá i ndiadh lae i nGaillimh, sna cathracha agus faoin tuath mar gheall ar an easpa infreast-ruchtúir cuí sa tír agus mar gheall nach bhfuil tithe ar phraghas réasúnta, tithe sóisialta nó fiú tithe ar chíos réasúnta ar fáil. Tá daoine ag streachailt mar gheall air sin.

Caithimid dul i ngleic leis seo. Níl an plean seo ag dul i ngleic leis ach caithimid é sin a dhéanamh agus a chinntiú go mbeidh 20,000 teach in aghaidh na bliana ar fáil do mhuintir an

Stáit seo mar níl an méid atá ag tarlú faoi láthair sách maith.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Housing for All policy was launched by the Government to a big fanfare. However, the policy would be better called “Housing for the few and not the many”. Since the policy launch, people and independent experts have had a chance to examine the details of the proposals and concluded that those proposals are problematic and, in areas, do not add up. For example, Social Justice Ireland has criticised the targets set by the Housing for All policy of 33,000 new homes every year, as well as 90,000 social homes over the period from 2021 to 2030. These targets were established from housing need and demand assessments, HNDAs, and from research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. Social Justice Ireland rightly contends the data from these targets indicates they are insufficient to meet the needs and that substantial numbers of the social housing targets will be delivered through the private sector using HAP.

This housing plan is developer-led and we have seen in the past how a reliance on the private sector was a central factor in the housing crash which, in turn, led to the economy crashing. It would not be an exaggeration to say this Government’s housing plan is heading in the direction of only one long-term outcome, and that is the crash of the economy, similar to what we experienced in the past.

This policy also shows there is a wide gap between what the Government regards as affordable and what is realistically affordable for the ordinary person. The only people who will be happy with the shared equity scheme will be developers. Deputies would have to be blinkered not to see the scheme will inflate prices and increase developer profits to the detriment of the would-be home purchaser. The Minister needs to take on board the legitimate criticisms, not just from Sinn Féin, but from housing experts and other bodies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Shanahan is sharing with Deputy Tóibín

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Housing for All strategy has outlined four main aims: “[to] support home ownership and increase affordability; [to] eradicate homelessness, increase social housing delivery and support social inclusion; [to] increase new housing supply; [and to] address vacancy and make efficient use of existing stock.” The aspirations within the plan include “over 90,000 social homes by the end of 2030, including an average new-build component of over 9,500 social homes” during that time; some “54,000 affordable homes between now and 2030 with yearly targets for the provision of affordable Housing” and a “focus on new builds to provide social homes, with the ending of long-term social housing leasing arrangements through the phasing out of new entrants.” Beyond these targets, what are the headwinds to this policy? I believe affordability is now the main issue and the main danger to the aspirations of the Minister and the Department.

6 o’clock

There are the increasing supply chain costs, which may not recede. I do not believe they will ever go back to pre-pandemic levels. There is the lack of skilled labour and new entrants to the labour market, which is causing a consequent rise in wages and overheads. There are significant developer water and electricity connection fees. Other build costs have escalated quickly, including professional services, insurance finance, interest charges and embedded Irish building supply costs, particularly the cost of materials such as timber, concrete and insulated panels. The Minister of State might not be aware of this, but if he were to go to get a container

28 September 2021

of building materials comprising largely of those three items in Poland, he would pay up to 30% less than in Ireland today. What about the Government's take of fees and taxes in the build costs? The figure includes VAT, developer levies and other fees, which can be up to 25% of a new build cost. Perhaps the Department might devise a mechanism whereby a tax credit is retrospectively awarded to first-time buyers to assist purchase but in a timeframe that would not lead to developer price escalation.

I refer to the town and rural regeneration schemes. Getting existing property into habitable use should be a primary goal of the policy. However, how are planning applications and requirements to be fast-tracked? How will objections be dealt with? How should listed buildings be dealt with while still incentivising owners to develop or is the plan to CPO these properties? If so, in what timeframe will that deliver new home opportunities? In addition, rural planning and minimum density guidelines have not been confirmed in respect of the new plan, and local authorities are now drafting their development plans in these areas. We need to see certainty in respect of preferential planning to continue for families to be able to build on their own lands. This should be extended to nieces and nephews. Many rural villages cannot avail of minimum density requirements, and if discretion is not offered in this area, erosion of rural communities will continue. Areas in my constituency such as Ballyduff Upper, Ballysaggart, Dunhill and Clonea-Power will not have new builds. If we cannot have a certain amount of one-off housing in those villages, they will die on their feet, as they are dying at present.

The local authority purchase scheme, whereby the local authority proposes to take an equity share, is supported by a Government affordable housing scheme. I understand that the Department is using a rolling 12-month average build cost to estimate the support it will provide to each local authority. Given the rapid change in building supply costs, I ask the Minister of State's officials to take a second look at this analysis; otherwise, local authorities such as mine in Waterford will struggle to deliver on this policy, given the recent rapid price movements in the construction sector in the south east.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I reiterate what other Deputies have said about it being a disgrace that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has not stayed to listen to the debate. This has happened in large part because Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin have changed the way in which the Dáil operates, meaning that now most of those due to speak for those three parties have spoken before Opposition parties such as mine can get to speak. This is despite the fact that some of these guys have an opportunity to speak to the Ministers at their parliamentary party meetings anyway.

Vacant homes is probably one of the biggest scandals of the housing crisis over recent years. It is incredible that right now the Government does not know how many vacant homes exist in the State. Let that sink in for a second. We are in a housing crisis that has been going on for years. Fine Gael has been in government for more than ten years while Fianna Fáil has been in government for the past year and a half and supported the previous Government, yet the Government does not know how many vacant homes there are in this country. We have the highest rents and house prices in Europe. We have spiralling homelessness and people waiting on housing lists. The vacancy element is still not understood by the Government. It is not even that the Government is acting on it to change it; it does not know how many vacant homes exist in this State.

I asked the Minister for Finance last July, when he was implementing his new local property tax, LPT, Bill, whereby he was reforming that tax, whether he would levy a higher tax on vacant

houses so we could mobilise some of those homes into use. The Minister said the Government did not know how many houses were vacant and did not know why they were vacant. As a result, he will carry out some investigation or research into this before he will decide whether to introduce a tax on those vacant homes. It is so frustrating to most of the people in the country to listen to a sentence like that, which exudes a complete lack of urgency, and then to look at the housing crisis as it exists for most people, which is a matter of urgency. That chasm between the Government's understanding of the problem and where the people are is incredible.

The Minister is on record as having said he does not believe that a tax on vacant homes will be a game changer. There are no silver bullets in the housing crisis. There are a large numbers of levers that, when all pulled, will have a positive effect on the housing market, and vacancy is one of the biggest of those levers.

The GeoView directory, which was done in quarter 4 of 2020, takes the number of homes that are considered vacant by An Post. It shows that there are 92,000 vacant homes in this State. Some 4.6% of the housing stock is vacant. In at least ten towns and villages in my constituency, streets, including the main streets, are festooned with vacant homes. This is happening at a time people are in crisis. The frustrating part of this is that dealing with vacancy is probably the quickest solution to some elements of the housing crisis. It is much faster to get a home that is 80% built into use than going from design on paper to a complete build of a new home. It costs a lot less to do the job as well. In the context of the Green Party, getting those vacant homes back into use would have the lowest carbon impact. Still there is no urgency on the part of the Government to do this at all. It strikes me at times that the location of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is now more in Dublin than in the rest of the country. Is it because of their lack of understanding of what is happening in the rest of the country that they are slow in fixing the vacancy issue? It is a disgraceful dereliction of duty on the part of the Minister, given the housing crisis.

I had only four and a half minutes to speak on this. I would have loved to have mentioned a lot more, but if there is one thing the Government should set about doing with energy, it is fixing the problem of vacancy because it will also rejuvenate those towns. It will get them back to a vibrancy they have been missing for a long time.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am after listening to this debate for the past hour and a half and, like many fair-minded people, I try to digest it and listen to the facts and the counter-arguments being made. However, there is a lie being perpetuated here by many people on the Opposition benches tonight and in recent months. The lie is that these caps on affordable houses are actual prices. In my case, the cap will be €450,000 in Cork city and €400,000 the county. I have listened to Opposition Members over recent months perpetuate this lie. One affordable housing scheme has been launched in Cork city because Cork City Council took the initiative to get ahead of the legislation and to launch its own scheme. A two-bed house is €175,000 and a three-bed house is €215,000. This myth and this lie that has been perpetuated by people in the Opposition needs to be called out for what it is. When I turn on my local radio station, I hear that lie regarding the affordable housing plan being given every day.

As I said at the outset, I am a fair-minded person. Am I saying that everything in the contents of this report is perfect? No - far from it. I myself have issues with a number of items in it. At the same time, however, I need to promote some of the positives from it. Fianna Fáil agreed as an Opposition party that we would abolish the SHD process. While that is taking a bit longer than we would like, it is being done. It is being delivered in this plan and SHDs are being phased out. We also gave a commitment that we would treble spending moving from the

Rebuilding Ireland programme to this current plan, and we have done that. That is costed and in the document. We have also provided for a new cost-rental model and it might not be for everybody. It is certainly not for me. As a person with a young family, I want to set down my roots. I want to stay in my locality and buy my own home. However, a cost-rental model is now being launched. Many of those homes have been announced in Dublin in recent months and they will come to Cork as well shortly, with an announcement due in my town of Glanmire.

There are challenges, which a number of speakers referred to, including in regard to Irish Water and infrastructure. As Deputy Shanahan said, the inflationary cost of building homes is probably the main issue at this time. This is a plan for the delivery of affordable housing. The great difficulty I have with it, and this is a question I have put to the Minister and both Ministers of State in the Department, concerns what implications those exorbitant costs might have for the deliverability of the plan in respect of the number of social and affordable units provided. There are several actions we can take to rectify that problem. We can consider changes to the standards and regulations, which are adding to the costs of building in other sectors. For example, €56,000 for a water pump is a charge many people will be expected to face in retrofitting their homes in the coming years. It would be just as easy to retrofit an oil heating system for €5,000, which is a fraction of the cost, and source the energy needed from biofuels and other sustainable energy sources.

As I said at the outset, we need to dispel the myth that this plan is anti-tenant and anti-homeowner; it is far from it. In fact, it is the first constructive attempt at addressing the housing problem in the past decade. That needs to be acknowledged.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I met the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, last week at a beautiful new housing development in Castlecomer, County Kilkenny. I was delighted to see a number of one-bedroom homes included in that development, particularly from the perspective of accessibility for people with disabilities but also because we need to build more one-bedroom and two-bedroom units in a context where people are living longer and may require smaller homes later in life. It is important that Housing for All should address that need as soon as possible.

I have spoken to the Minister of State previously about how delighted we are in the south east to be getting a technological university. We are exceptionally lucky in County Carlow that we can access two excellent third-level colleges. However, there is going to be a massive lack of housing supply in the area. The drawback of the presence of a technological university will be felt by people who are on the local authority list, in receipt of HAP and finding it hard to find accommodation to rent. Every September, people come into my clinics saying they cannot find a house and there is nothing to rent. That needs to be addressed and it requires looking at supply. We have had 32 cases of homelessness in Carlow in the past few weeks, which is unacceptable. We need to ensure no one is homeless. Everyone should have a home.

I have concerns about the HAP scheme in that people are finding it hard going now because they are paying landlords and local authorities so much. Many are on the breadline. Then there are the people who do not qualify for the housing list, who are also finding it really hard. As the Minister of State will be aware, Carlow is one of the local authorities that has a cap on eligibility for applicants to the list. That is another issue. We need to examine the ceiling to qualify for acceptance on local authority housing lists. Previous speakers referred to affordable housing. Provision of such housing is crucial but we have none of it in Carlow. We must make sure that what is set out in the plan is delivered within a quick timeframe. I have nine or ten cases of

people contacting my office who would be delighted to get an affordable house, but there seem to be problems with wastewater and all those issues. We need to address all those problems.

In addition on the issue of affordability, according to *daft.ie*, County Carlow experienced Leinster's second-highest house price increase this year, at a whopping 14.4%, with the average house price now standing at €226,391. Outside Dublin, we are all seeing a large rise in prices in rural towns such as my own in Carlow-Kilkenny. I know the Minister and the Minister of State are committed to dealing with this but delivery is key if we are to deal quickly with the lack of supply.

In the time remaining, I want to speak about an issue I have raised several times with both the Minister and the Minister of State. Capital funding for Carlow County Council is down by nearly €3 million annually. Indeed, it gets one of the lowest allocations of capital funding in the State from central government. That is unacceptable and everyone in Carlow is paying the price for it. Services are not being delivered because those who deliver them cannot afford to do so. There is a major issue with staffing and service providers cannot afford to pay staff. The only people who will suffer in the long run are the people of Carlow. I am asking the Minister of State, as a representative of Carlow-Kilkenny, to secure more capital funding for Carlow County Council and make sure it gets the staff it deserves.

Deputy Emer Higgins: We have before us an ambitious plan to tackle the housing crisis, which is an issue of vital importance to families up and down the country. Many of the points I have heard from Opposition Deputies today are simply that - opposition for opposition's sake. That helps no one who wants to own his or her own home. Listening to the debate, one could be forgiven for thinking Sinn Féin voted against the Government's Affordable Housing Bill. In fact, the party's Members voted for it. As for the legislation to establish the LDA, the body charged with the delivery of public homes on public lands, they opposed it without even attempting to shape or amend it. Their opposition to the shared equity scheme stands in total contradiction to their stance on the similar scheme operating in Northern Ireland, which party representatives there oversee. Sinn Féin's opposition to the help-to-buy scheme did not help the 20,000 people who need support to purchase a home.

Sinn Féin says it wants to solve the housing crisis but there is a big difference between what party members say and what they do. Local authorities are tasked with delivering homes on public lands and councillors are asked to support them in that objective. Fine Gael members on South Dublin County Council, which is my local authority, have voted in favour of 96% of proposed homes on council lands. Sinn Féin members have voted for only 44% so they voted against 56% of houses the council proposed to build on council-owned land. In fact, they have opposed almost 1,500 homes that the chief executive of South Dublin County Council has sought for approval. That figure is close to 6,000 when the numbers for the whole of County Dublin are included. Sinn Féin does not look like a party that is serious about building homes. It does not look like a party that is serious about delivering homes on public land. Indeed, its stance looks an awful lot like opposition for opposition's sake. The latest tactic of the party's councillors seems to be to abstain altogether and refuse to use the voice and vote that people elected them to use. We saw this in Tallaght just a few weeks ago when Sinn Féin councillors refused to vote either way on a proposal for 620 homes, 80% of which would be social or affordable. In the lead-up to that vote, they told people they were against the project. When it became obvious that they would not get away with a free ride in opposing it, they abstained, leaving their constituents wondering where they stand.

The Opposition's ambition for solving the housing crisis does not measure up against its record in my local authority. There is a big difference between what Sinn Féin says and what it does. As I speak, there are boots on the ground in Kilcarberry, Clondalkin, where more than 1,000 new homes are being constructed, in excess of 300 of which will be social housing. Sinn Féin voted against that development. Solving the housing crisis requires ambition, not opposition. Our ambition is set out in Housing for All. It is a radical, realistic and costed plan, underpinned by record State investment. It will help families to access affordable, high-quality housing for purchase or rent. It has been broadly welcomed by NGOs working with families who need homes, but surprise, surprise, it is being opposed by Sinn Féin. To reach our targets, unprecedented levels of funding are being provided for housing. Over the next five years alone, more than €20 billion will be made available. That represents a doubling of the budget, with €4 billion to be invested in housing every year. Housing for All is a costed and comprehensive plan. It provides multimillion euro funding on a multi-annual basis and it is going to deliver homes. At the end of the day, that is all people care about. When I speak to my constituents, they are not concerned about who builds houses or what ideology is behind their delivery. They just want good-quality and affordable homes. That is what Housing for All will deliver.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sharing time with Deputy Mattie McGrath. I sincerely hope this plan will, as its name suggests, deliver housing for all. Such delivery is badly needed in this country. We have a housing crisis throughout our cities and we certainly have a massive crisis in west Cork. Last Friday, 12 people came into my clinic in Bandon, seven of whom have a housing issue. Two of them are homeless. This new thing of couch-surfing is very popular now in west Cork. I only heard about it in the past six or seven months. Although housing has always been an issue, the problem is growing and I do not see a solution to it. I sincerely hope there is a solution.

I do not like to condemn something until it is given time to work but we certainly need to look at the current housing situation in towns and villages such as Ballinadee, Ballinspittle, Goleen and Ballydehob in west Cork. There are fabulous places to live in these towns and fabulous opportunities that have never been developed. Why are grants not being given to get people living over shops or pubs? There should be grants for people who want to develop their town or village but cannot afford to do so right now. Consideration should be given to grants for people who own derelict houses. If those people avail of a grant in respect of the derelict property, then, obviously, they must let the house afterwards. They should be given tax relief if they do so. That is how we can get the system up and running but it has not been done up to now.

I have been very critical of the planning regulations, rules and laws that are in place because planning is a no-go area in west Cork. There are young people who want to build a home on the family farm and help to rebuild rural communities but they are not being allowed to do so for silly and nonsensical reasons. The whole thing needs to be shredded. Local authorities and local planning rules will have to be changed completely.

In west Cork, people are trying to work from home and get their lives together through this damn pandemic. In fairness, the local mobile phone company, Three Ireland, put up a new mast in Gaggan, near Bandon. The Department has encouraged the erection of little masts to provide broadband. However, the planning authority in Cork County Council has now decided it wants the mast pulled down. It is an insane situation. One cannot even see the masts in Gaggan, just outside Bandon town. A significant number of people will be insane about this when it is revealed that the local planning authority has turned down the mast. The decision has gone to appeal before An Bord Pleanála. The whole point I am trying to make is that anywhere I drive

in Dublin city, there are masts everywhere. I have no issue with that. That is the way it has to be because life has to progress. The mast near Bandon could not be seen but the planning authority decided to object to it. We are in a dire situation in respect of planning and somebody in the Government needs to wake up. If we want people to return to rural communities and live there, the Government has to decide to change the planning rules.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Murnane O'Connor referred to County Kilkenny. I want to wish Bobby Aylward, our former colleague from that county, well. He is going through a bad patch at the moment. Is an-chara liom agus le gach éinne é. He is a former colleague of the Minister.

I previously asked the Minister of State to come to see one of the great Irish houses near where I live, in Knocklofty. Will he please come down to see it? It is part of our national heritage. Knocklofty House is being plundered. I was at one of the houses on the site last night. It was a very sad occasion. I was shocked to see the state of it. The Minister promised to come down in September but September is nearly over. "Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid? Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár." Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid anois? Níl píosa adhmaid ar bith le fáil.

This housing policy is great on paper but I am sick and tired of it. I was on the committee for five years and I just walked away from it. If thought could build houses, there would be no one homeless. Who would have thought there would be so many homeless families? There are 753 families homeless at the moment. That there are 2,120 homeless children and 8,212 homeless adults is a shocking indictment. In response, the Government gives us reports like this.

I am not going to play politics like Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin did the other night. There is not even one Sinn Féin Deputy present for this debate, which is amazing. They would build sandcastles in the sky for you, no bother, but none of them ever drew a plan or built a house in their life or was part of a voluntary housing association or anything else.

The Government needs to go back to basics. It needs to go back to voluntary housing associations and support them. I did it myself with voluntary lay people. We have bureaucracy now and rules and guidelines and all kinds of rubbish and regulations. Many of them are the result of the actions of the Minister's party. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, is sitting there and will not allow a tree to be cut down. One cannot get a bit of timber now. The price has gone up. A supplier will not give a price more than three days in advance because the price is going up and up. The Government is fooling itself by hiring extra experts. A man who plants a tree should be allowed to harvest it in the same way as a man who plants spuds, beet, miscanthus or anything else can harvest them. God's law is that one reaps what one sows. What the hell kind of laws do we have here that we will not allow that? The price of oil has gone up. The Government closed all the peat plants. The price of insulation has gone through the roof because of the increase in the cost of oil. It is the same with everything else. The Government is talking about other things instead of sorting out those problems.

I refer to families trying to get planning permission in rural Ireland. Someone asked about getting planning permission for nieces and nephews a while ago. One cannot even get it for sons or daughters. It is a mockery. To think that we are a herding people. Let us take the situation in cities and the small towns such as Clonmel, Tipperary, Carrick-on-Suir, Cashel and all the rest. Mrs. Mary O'Gorman, who is in her 80th year, is the aon duine amháin, the only person living on O'Connell Street in Clonmel. It used to be a busy, bustling business street but it

was also a living town for many families. There is only one person left living on the street. All the buildings are empty, whether upstairs, downstairs or whatever. Many of the shopfronts are empty too. We have been talking about doing something with those schemes and centres for so long. Talk will not sort this out and neither will these plans or announcements.

I understand the plan was delayed several times because of ideological disagreements. There is no longer any ideological difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They are all the one - joined at the hip. Fadó, fadó, there were arguments outside church gates and speakers at podiums. I remember the goings-on at election time and everything else. Now they are all the one.

The Government needs to start listening to the people and to have compassion but, above all, it needs to allow people who have a site and can build a house to do so. Then it needs to make building a house affordable. It is not affordable. The prices are going up by the hour. There are no apprenticeships. All the apprentices who are out on sites at the moment will be going back into college. Who will be left to do the work? There is no one there. Many of the non-nationals have left and gone home. There are fundamental problems. This Housing for All plan will not deliver. It is more likely to be housing for none. A fundamental change is needed.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I have listened to the debate so far and the one issue that has seemed to unify both sides of the House is an emphasis on derelict sites and dereliction. I wish to very much focus on that issue. All Members accept there is a dire need for housing. My county of Clare is no different from any other in that regard. I wish to focus on dereliction because many Deputies spoke about the number of derelict houses across rural Ireland. The only place in which one does not see widespread dereliction is Dublin. Even then there is dereliction in parts of Dublin and certainly there is a significant space not utilised over shops, business premises, etc. In fairness, the Housing for All plan mentions dereliction quite a bit, but when one drills down into it and looks at the concrete steps to be taken, one sees that dereliction is only mentioned once in the chapter dealing with the table of actions - it is one of the last chapters of the plan - and that reference is in the context of harnessing European regional development funding to tackle vacancy and dereliction in towns.

The lead is to be taken by the regional assemblies. I have never served on a local authority but, as far as I know, regional assemblies are comprised of members of local authorities. Local authorities already have extensive powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 in respect of dereliction. Under the Act, local authorities have a duty to take reasonable steps to ensure that any lands situated in their functional area do not become derelict. They can serve a notice on the owner of a derelict site. The Minister can direct the local authority to serve a notice in respect of a site. The Minister can make a direction in respect of any land on the derelict sites register that is owned by a statutory body. Local authorities have the power to acquire, by agreement or compulsorily, any derelict site in their functional area and use it for whatever purpose they wish. Local authorities have the power to issue a derelict sites levy. That is a considerable range of powers. It may be the case that there is very little about derelict sites in the Housing for All plan because there are extensive powers on the Statute Book.

However, very little is being done with those powers across the country. I tabled a series of parliamentary questions on this issue earlier this month. I asked about the number of derelict sites registered for each local authority, the number of notices issued under section 11 by each local authority in 2019, 2020 and 2021, the number of directions made by the Minister and his predecessors under section 12, the number of directions made by the Minister and his predeces-

sors under section 13, and the number of derelict sites acquired by each local authority under the powers provided to them. The table is quite depressing. Notwithstanding all of the powers and the number of people who are looking for social housing in every county in Ireland, we see that very little is being done.

In my own county of Clare, four notices were issued and no levies were collected. County Clare is probably among the poorer performing counties, but it is by no means the worst and by no means unique. Everybody agrees that dereliction is a problem and we need to bring these properties back into the housing stock, but nobody seems to do anything about it. That is not to take a cut at any particular side. The Government parties do not control the local authorities.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have three minutes. I will do my best to remain focused in those three minutes.

I have with me the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness from 2016. The only difference I see between that plan and the new plan is that two Deputies introduced that plan and three Deputies are introducing this plan. In the previous plan, we were told by the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, that, “A truly ambitious social housing programme of 47,000 units to 2021 will be delivered with funding of €5.35 billion.” It did not happen. The former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, told us the range of options set out in the plan was ambitious. I also have with me the new plan. I read both plans, so sad is my life, to try to see if there was something positive I could say, which I can. There are some positive initiatives in the plan. My difficulty is that the Government is following the same failed model. We are being accused of ideology. I do not think the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is going to listen to me, but I was elected to give voice to those who think differently and who want to give constructive criticism and show there is a different way.

The Minister made a speech today. In case we were in any doubt, he told us that this is a plan for the so-called squeezed middle. I hope the Minister of State hears that. He is part of this Government that has a plan for the squeezed middle. In the Minister’s foreword to the plan, he repeatedly uses the phrase “squeezed middle” and keeps telling us about it, in case we were in any doubt. In two and a half pages of a foreword, he mentions the squeezed middle four times. He then tells us who the squeezed middle are. In case we do not know who they are, we are told they are the “people who work hard and play by the rules but seem to have nothing to show for it at the end of the day”. Can you imagine that as a basis for a housing plan for all to inspire confidence? How could something as divisive and terrible as that inspire confidence in us?

I think about beautiful Galway city. Tá me thar a bheith bródúil as. Rugadh agus tógadh mé ann. Tá géarchéim úafásach ann atá ag leanúint ar aghaidh bliain i ndiaidh bliana. We look at that and we see the homeless figures. Nationally, 8,212 people are in emergency accommodation. In Galway, there are 241 homeless adults in emergency accommodation. House prices have gone up by 14.3%. People are on a social housing waiting list going back to 2005. A housing task force that was set up in 2019 has never once produced an annual report that I have had sight of. One of the nine terms of reference stated it would produce such a report. We are being accused of ideology. The ideology is on the part of Government that believes the market will provide. The market has utterly failed to provide. There is a role for the market, but the State has a role to play in conveying the strong message that we are not talking about a home as a commodity. A home is the most basic unit and we must provide public homes on public land that will bring down the price of houses. The Government is artificially keeping house prices up.

I understand that more than €1 billion will go into HAP alone. I welcome the fact the Government is going to phase the scheme out gradually, but it was one of the biggest mistakes. When there is talk about billions going into social housing, it is going into the private landlords' pockets.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss significant delays to An Post international parcels as a result of Brexit and new EU customs rules; (2) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the tender process for a school building project in County Cork; (3) Deputy Paul Kehoe - to discuss restoration of grant funding for primary schools to keep libraries fully stocked; (4) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss a pest control policy for local authority flat complexes in Dublin; (5) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss pay and conditions for school secretaries; (6) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss funding to meet unprecedented demand under the sports capital and equipment fund; (7) Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss a review of the Charities Regulator and whether its €4 million budget is delivering increased confidence in and within charities; (8) Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Thomas Gould - to discuss staff and resource shortages and delays in completing inquests at Cork Coroner's Court; (9) Deputies Paul McAuliffe and Cormac Devlin - to discuss the issue of a potential delay to metro north; (10) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need to construct piers on Inis Oírr and Inis Meáin in view of the danger of an accident in severe winter weather when using the existing piers; (11) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss the need to fund the N73 upgrade between Mallow and Mitchelstown on road safety grounds; (12) Deputies Jim O'Callaghan and Gary Gannon - to discuss increasing antisocial behaviour in Dublin city; (13) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae - to discuss a Topical Issue matter for the Minister for Health relating to the drug Zolgensma; (14) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss concerns regarding available Garda resources to deal with an increasingly visible drug dealing problem in Dublin North-West; (15) Deputies Darren O'Rourke, Johnny Guirke and Peadar Tóibín - to discuss urgently the threat to emergency and critical care services at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan; (16) Deputy Pauline Tully - to discuss the shortages in staffing being experienced by employers across many sectors; (17) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss current difficulties in childcare with the return to the workplace, and the need for flexibility with childcare options and after-school clubs; (18) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss when County Carlow will have an ambulance base with an ambulance bay which is fit for purpose; (19) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the Mental Health Commission report into conditions at the Owenacurra Mental Health Centre, Midleton, County Cork; (20) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the case of a woman (details supplied) approved for a home care package who cannot return from a nursing home because of the lack of carers; (21) Deputy Pearse Doherty - to discuss a State apology to the families of the Ballymanus mine disaster in County Donegal; (22) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the lack of ASD units and classrooms in Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary; (23) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss plans for ensuring the opening of the Group Home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (24) Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne - to discuss visitor restrictions on maternity services; (25) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss the acquisition of a site for a Wexford TU campus of the Technical University of South-East Ireland; and (26) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss the need to enhance availability of mental health services for

children and adults with eating disorders.

The matters raised by Deputies John Lahart; Michael Healy-Rae; Darren O'Rourke, Johnny Guirke and Peadar Tóibín; and Sean Sherlock have been selected for discussion.

Hospital Waiting Lists: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

—there was an alarming rise in healthcare waiting lists from 461,908 in 2014 to 740,712 in January 2020;

—waiting lists have spiralled out of control since January 2020 to 814,345 in August 2021, rising to 907,648 including planned procedures;

—210,740 people are waiting more than 18 months on inpatient and outpatient waiting lists;

—a further 203,976 people are on radiology diagnostic waiting lists for CT, MRI and ultrasound scans;

—more than 98,000 children are on hospital waiting lists, including 31,216 children waiting more than 18 months; and

—children with additional needs are forced to wait on average 19 months for an assessment of need, despite the legal right of three months;

notes that:

—in excess of €300 million will likely go unspent on vital community and primary care service expansion to ease the burden on hospitals;

—more than 150 promised acute inpatient and critical care beds are unlikely to be operational by year-end; and

—mental health services are not fit for purpose in the context of the looming pandemic mental health crisis;

further notes that:

—the recent high profile Sláintecare resignations are a vote of no confidence in this Government's commitment and ability to deliver major healthcare reform; and

—the latest Sláintecare Implementation Strategy & Action Plan 2021 — 2023 notes major obstacles to the delivery of key Sláintecare measures, including a plan to tackle waiting lists;

reaffirms its commitment to:

28 September 2021

—universal healthcare with universal general practitioner care and universal counselling; and

—the removal of private healthcare from public hospitals to free up public capacity for public patients; and

calls on the Government to:

—urgently implement a waiting list reduction and management plan;

—commit major funding to the rapid modernisation of healthcare information systems, including individual health identifiers, an integrated waiting list management system and a centralised referral system; and

—deliver major capacity boosting measures including additional inpatient and critical care beds next year, a capital fund for expanding theatre capacity, and the modernisation and expansion of diagnostic capacity with direct community access.

We have just had a very lengthy debate on housing where we talked about public land being used for public housing and having a strategy that is not built around developers, landlord and institutional investors. Truth be known, the same argument should, and can, be made on healthcare, namely, that public moneys should be spent on public healthcare services and private medicine should not come before the public good. Yet that is not happening because we have a deeply two-tier health service, where private medicine and the private sector is embedded in the healthcare system.

First we must appreciate the scale of the problem that faces us. We do that in our motion, which I am proposing today. The figures are so stark that it is hard for people even to comprehend them. More than 900,000 people are on some form of health waiting list, either waiting to see a consultant or waiting for a hospital procedure. The big jump in those figures came before Covid, as we know, but has accelerated due to Covid. Of the more than 900,000 people who are awaiting treatment, 210,000 have been waiting for more than 18 months and 31,000 of them are children. There is a human story behind each and every one of those people who are waiting for treatment.

I conducted a survey a number of weeks ago, which I published, in which I asked those who are on waiting lists, sometimes for years, what their experience is. I heard many stories from parents of children with scoliosis who are waiting years for treatment, often in pain. I heard stories of people who are waiting years for orthopaedic treatment and for other procedures, including ear, nose and throat, ENT, and ophthalmic procedures, in areas where we know waiting times are very high. I also heard of the human consequences of people waiting that long. It has an impact on their mental health, their overall physical well-being and their ability to work. Many of them are out of work for too long. My point is there are human consequences and real consequences for people when we have the kind of waiting lists we have.

I wish to go through the Minister's amendment to the Sinn Féin motion. I must say it is weak, to say the least, and it is lame in terms of the excuses the Minister gives. I will provide some examples of this. In the amendment, the Minister talks up some of what was done last year. I accept that investment was made in healthcare last year. The amendment mentions that 795 acute beds were put into the system this year, with a target of 938 that will be reached by the end of the year. The Government funded 1,150 beds last year. Therefore, 204 of those beds

will not be delivered. In respect of ICU beds, we had 600 ICU beds in 2009. Even if the Minister delivers what he has said he will deliver, we will fall way behind on where we were then.

The amendment mentions community intervention teams. What the Minister forgets to mention in his amendment is that of the €150 million he provided for enhanced community services last year, only around half of that money is anticipated to have been spent. The Minister took to his feet last year and said we were going to recruit 14,500 people into the Irish healthcare system. That figure has now been revised down to around 7,500. Only around half of the staff promised by the Minister have been recruited. He cannot hide behind Covid, or anything else for that matter. He was the one who made that promise. Covid was with us when the Minister put those figures out there, provided the funding and made those commitments. He simply has not delivered.

In the remainder of my time, I must say there are huge challenges in healthcare and there are big decisions that have to be made. We have had high-profile resignations in Sláintecare, which I reference in my motion. That cannot be seen as a vote of confidence in the Government's ability to deliver the big changes.

One of the areas where we must collectively stand our ground concerns public consultant contracts. Consultants who work in the public system have to do public work. The other big changes, involving removing private medicine from public healthcare and moving to universal GP care, also must happen, but they are happening at a snail's pace. They are not happening anywhere near quick enough. If we do not make these big changes, more and more people will become disillusioned and put on waiting lists.

On the Government's promise to have multi-annual waiting list targets and a plan to make this happen, unless there is a centralised referral system it will not work. Unless there is an integrated waiting list management system, it will not work. Unless the capacity is put in place, it will not work. I could wallpaper this room, as could the Minister, with all the waiting list management plans of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. These plans have not worked because they were not backed up with capacity.

The Minister should think about the victims of long waiting lists. Those children and adults who are waiting years for treatment are the ones for whom we have to deliver. They are the people who are at the front and centre of why we moved this motion.

Deputy Pa Daly: Last Friday I met a woman from mid-Kerry in the front room of her house. There was a beautiful view looking out over Castlemaine Harbour. She has been battling and beating cancer for the past ten years. She has a young family, one of whom returned home from school as we spoke. Every three weeks, she receives treatment in University Hospital Kerry for three hours with six or seven others. She knows all the staff by their first names. She had the height of praise for everybody in the unit. The people of Kerry are very proud of all the nurses who work there. The woman is comforted by the backup services in the university hospital, including the physiotherapy and scanning facilities. It seemed strange to me until recently that the unit has been borrowing wards from other departments. The most vulnerable are affected. What awaits the woman with the amazing view are anxiety and concern because it seems that, rather than investing in space to treat those affected, the authorities will outsource treatment to a private hospital. I do not know the financial cost but there will be no ancillary services in that hospital. Nurses say there will be a risk to health and safety and that if people become unwell, they will have to be blue-lighted from one end of the town to the other. Is the

Government waiting for a charity to pick up the pieces for the unit?

Recently, in the past couple of days, there has been more depressing news from University Hospital Kerry. Surgeons there sent a letter to GPs stating facilities are not available there anymore. Elective surgeries have been curtailed for four weeks running. Things are falling apart. We in the office are receiving call after call about people having to wait for an hour for an ambulance. The situation is not sustainable. Nurses who have given their heart and soul to the hospital are leaving, and surgeons have written to GPs stating 2,200 patients are waiting to be seen in the surgical outpatients department. They say protected surgical daybeds have been taken over for emergency purposes. They also say nursing and infrastructure shortages mean the service the people of Kerry deserve cannot be provided any longer. Non-urgent surgical referrals can no longer be accepted. I ask the Government to do something about that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am not being dramatic when I say people on hospital waiting lists are literally dying; it is a fact. They are going blind and their illnesses are getting much worse as they wait, wait and wait again to be seen by a consultant in the first instance. Having been seen by a consultant, they must wait, wait and wait again for the procedure. For those in need of a single hip replacement, for example, the waiting period is so long that their good hip becomes banjaxed. Therefore, instead of one hip needing replacement, both need to be done. Can you imagine your hip being so bad that it takes 20 minutes to get up the stairs to bed or to the toilet? What about the fact that the strain from the stair climbs or crawls and the constant excruciating pain, the lack of mobility and the constant use of strong painkillers often result in other ailments, including heart attacks, ulcers, obesity and mental health strain. I know many constituents who have suffered in this way, including a cancer survivor.

Others face blindness while languishing on the waiting list to see an eye specialist. That is before they are even put on the four-year-long cataract waiting list. These incidents are scandalous enough but for our children on the waiting list, the circumstances are a living disgrace. Shame on the HSE for overseeing, or maybe not overseeing, a waiting list with nearly 100,000 children who are awaiting operations and medical procedures. The 100,000 do not include children awaiting an assessment for speech and language therapy and much more.

Níor chóir don Aire an milleán a chur ar Covid nó ar ionsaithe ar chóras ríomhaireachta an HSE. Níl daoine tiubh. Tuigeann siad gurb é seo toradh polasaithe rialtais Fhianna Fáil agus Fhine Gael ó tháinig siad i gcumhacht nuair a chruthaíodh an Stát seo. Ba chóir don Aire smaoineamh ar na hothair, na leanaí agus na seandaoine atá ar na liostaí feithimh agus beart a dhéanamh de réir an briathar atá ann i rún Shinn Féin. Gabhaim buíochas leo siúd atá sa chóras sláinte atá ag déanamh tréaniarrachta. Níl an milleán ná an locht orthu. Is ar an Rialtas seo, agus ar na rialtais a tháinig roimhe, atá an locht.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I have raised before with the Minister in this Chamber the issue of the funding discrimination that our major hospital in Donegal, Letterkenny University Hospital, continues to endure. There are more than 20,000 people in a county of 160,000 on the waiting list. That amounts to one in eight. I am not even including Sligo hospital, whose waiting list includes people from south Donegal. That is a damning indictment of Government after Government.

The issue for Letterkenny University Hospital is that despite its being the sixth largest hospital in the State, and its having had more than 24,000 inpatients before the pandemic, it is ranked 13th when it comes to the budget. Some allowances can be made for the fact that the

major hospitals in Dublin and Galway are dealing with additional specialities but how can we explain the circumstances whereby budgets in the major hospitals are two to three times greater per capita than in Letterkenny University Hospital? I was asked to get these figures by senior hospital staff in Letterkenny because they felt the only way to get to the bottom of this was through parliamentary questions. What is happening is a scandal. There has to be acceptance in the HSE that Donegal is treated like a backwater. It means real impacts in Donegal, where people are forced to travel huge distances for basic procedures unnecessarily. We should have the specialities in Letterkenny University Hospital, the sixth largest hospital in the State. People should not have to travel long distances. This is about equality of access to healthcare. I ask the Minister to examine this. I am going to send to him directly all the statistics I have gathered on this.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank my colleague Deputy Cullinane for tabling this important motion to tackle the hospital waiting lists. It is shameful that almost 900,000 citizens of this State are languishing on waiting lists just to get the treatment they need at this very moment. It is good to see the Minister of State responsible for mental health present. I am my party's spokesperson on mental health. We are all aware that early intervention is key in a child's development.

The latest figures I have on waiting lists indicate there are still more than 2,500 children waiting for a child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, appointment. Almost 9,000 children are waiting for a primary care psychology appointment, which is not good enough. To have testimonies in the debate on this motion, we asked people to contact us and outline their real-life experiences. Some people cannot even get on a waiting list. One response we got was from an individual who stated their daughter was referred to the local psychological service only to get a letter back stating there was no service in her area. This is not good enough.

We have had announcements from the Government on additional funding for mental health services. Back in February, the Taoiseach announced, to much fanfare, €10 million in additional funding for a Covid response to mental health issues. Not a penny of this has been spent yet. We are in a mental health emergency, yet not one single euro of the money announced has been spent.

I got a response to a parliamentary question this week on the money allocated for Sharing the Vision and the early recommendations in that respect. A sum of €23 million was allocated for Sharing the Vision in the budget for 2021. To date, €2.7 million has been spent. That is less than 10% of the money allocated. We need to make sure this money is not rewashed, redressed in a new shirt and tie, and used for the forthcoming budget; we need to make sure it is available and ring-fenced for the people who really need it. We were in a mental health crisis pre-Covid; we are now in the mental health emergency. This Government needs to get the finger out and start putting things into action. If it is announcing money for mental health supports and services, we need to make sure those resources go to the services that really need them.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As the Minister well knows, my city has a number of hospitals and they have fantastic staff working in them. The waiting lists are not of their making. It is not their fault but it is the staff and patients who suffer. I believe the Minister has no plan for this. There is no direction.

I have raised this issue with the Minister in the Chamber since he was appointed, especially the trolley crisis in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, which is ongoing. This month will see

28 September 2021

almost 1,000 people on trolleys in UHL. I plead with the Minister again to come and have a look at that.

As has been said, more than 900,000 people are on waiting lists throughout the State. The figures for UHL are particularly stark with 43,656 people currently on outpatient waiting lists for a consultation. More than 23,000 of them have been waiting for more than one year, and of these, 19,000 have been waiting for more than 18 months. This totally unacceptable. We can get lost in the figures but each and every one of those is a person whose life is being impacted by his or her ailments.

Last week, I received a response from a parliamentary question I tabled regarding one such individual, a woman in her mid-60s who is suffering from severe cartilage damage to her knee. It inhibits her movement and restricts her lifestyle. Her status or grading on the waiting list is “urgent”. For me, the word “urgent” means she needs her consultation promptly, yet we are advised she will be waiting for 30 months. How can the Minister stand over somebody waiting 30 months for an appointment that is deemed urgent? She will endure 30 months of pain and limited movement. She will be 70 years old by the time she sees her consultant. This is an absolute disgrace.

Recently, a consultant who was on duty at UHL rang me to ask if I could intervene to get a scan for one of his patients. How bonkers is it that a consultant in the hospital has to ring a local parliamentarian to get a scan done in the hospital? There is something seriously wrong there. The Minister needs to intervene.

We need to see a centralised referral system coupled with an integrated waiting system to manage this. The planning and additions will allow for patients to be seen at different hospitals as capacity allows. As I said, UHL consistently has problems with overcrowding.

This month today, we have almost 1,000 people treated on trolleys in the hospital. I refer back to the waiting lists and categories of appointments on which people are waiting. There are so many, and of course the type of appointment which some will be waiting for will be the most important for those individuals. One figure that stood out for me was that of maxillofacial outpatient appointments in UHL. These are people with physical injuries to the face. Some 2,891 people have been awaiting such appointments for 18 months or more.

I do not want to be all negative. We in Sinn Féin have a plan for how to fix the health service. We know the direction to take. It will require significant but necessary investment. We cannot have our sick being treated like this and we cannot leave our healthcare professionals working in such challenging conditions.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The issue here is about capacity more than anything else, and that is the same in every hospital in the State. I am very conscious, especially in Sligo University Hospital, that we have a situation where people are waiting on wards but they cannot get in. They are being sent to a four-bed ward with six beds in it. It does not have the capacity or the staff. It is the same in the emergency department, which is overrun and has not got the staff. This issue needs to be dealt with. At the moment, in the Saolta University Health Care Group, there are 54 vacant consultant posts. I am sure that is the same in every other region in the country. This is the core of the problem. The investment is not being put in to employ the necessary staff to deal with this issue.

Our hospitals are all running at more than 100% capacity most of the time. Internationally,

it is said that they should be at approximately 70% capacity to deal with the surge, when it comes. The problem we have here is that the private system is being used to back up a public system that is in decline. The Minister needs to get a grip on this and put that public system back on the agenda as being the priority. That is clearly what needs to happen. There needs to be a centralised system for waiting lists to ensure people can be seen as quickly as possible in whatever hospital there is an available appointment in. We have solutions and we need to have those solutions delivered. As long as the Government continues to go down the track of using the private system to back up the public system, however, it is not going to work. There needs to be a clear division as to where we are going to go to get on the right track.

The Sláintecare resignations are a reflection of the frustration felt by the people who were on those boards. They want to deliver Sláintecare. They see the potential of it and yet they see it being held up by the Minister and others in the Department who simply have not got it in them to stand up to vested interests and ensure we deliver for our people. That is what this is about. We have to deliver for the ordinary people out there who are on these waiting lists, in pain and distress, not for months but for years in many cases. I know many people in my constituency who are in that situation. It is simply not right. There is right and left in everything when we talk politics but there is also right and wrong. This is a situation of right and wrong. Until the Minister and this Government are prepared to stand up for the people and ensure we deliver, this health service is going down the tubes.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion and for their contributions. It is a debate we need to have and one we need to come back to repeatedly.

Some time ago, a constituent of mine in County Wicklow, Sarah, needed a hip operation. She was suffering. Much like the scenario recounted by another Deputy, she was waiting in intense, debilitating pain. She did not have private health insurance and she was told that on the public system, it was going to take two and a half years before she could be operated on.

I went to the National Orthopaedic Hospital in Cappagh to find out what was going on. The problem was not that we did not have enough doctors, nurses or operating theatres. It was that the budget allocated for buying the titanium hips was gone. We were still paying all the overheads, but because of this broken system, Sarah and many other people were not being seen. Three of the seven operating theatres in Cappagh were closed and surgeons were having their lists cancelled again and again.

When I took office, one of the first places I visited was one of our children's hospitals. I was told that right now, many children in our country who have been referred for an MRI by their GP or consultant must wait in some cases for years for that MRI. That is not acceptable. I will not stand over it. No government and no Member of the House would stand over it.

Before Covid-19 arrived here, our waiting lists were too long. They were described regularly as some of the longest and worst waiting lists in Europe. The number of patients waiting for a procedure in one of our hospitals peaked in mid-2017 at approximately 87,000 people. It has come down by approximately 12%. Today's figure is approximately 12% lower than that peak but it is still completely unacceptable. The figures were coming down. The inpatient and outpatient waiting lists were beginning to fall, but as we all know, because of the pandemic and the cyberattack, they have gone up. We have seen that a lot of planned and scheduled care unfortunately had to be delayed.

28 September 2021

I want to be absolutely clear about this. As the threat from Covid-19 continues to recede, and, please God, it is going to keep receding, tackling the waiting lists is the greatest challenge we face in healthcare in our country. Addressing the waiting lists is my number one priority as Minister for Health. They will receive the same intense focus, attention and determination that I, my officials, the HSE and many of our partners have put up against Covid-19 and used to roll out the vaccine programme.

What are we doing? We are tackling the waiting lists in several ways and doing those all at the same time. The first thing we are doing is adding permanent capacity to the public health-care system. We are adding that capacity in spite of the pandemic and doing so at record speed.

This year, we have added approximately 800 beds to the public hospital system so far and it is still September. We intend on adding beds right to the end of the year. That is the biggest number of beds that have been added to our public system going back several decades, as far as we can tell. At the start of last year, the number of critical care beds stood at 255. We have been adding beds all through the pandemic. By the end of this year, we intend to move from 255 critical care beds to 321.

7 o'clock

That will be an increase of about 25% in our critical care capacity during the pandemic, which is welcome but not enough. I have secured agreement from the Cabinet that we will continue after this year and I have agreement to extend critical care capacity to 446 beds, which is very necessary and will help greatly with these waiting lists and stop the continuous cancellation of planned care that so many people have to deal with.

We are also adding to the workforce, again at a record speed, with more doctors, nurses, midwives, therapists, scientists, clinicians and specialists throughout the system. Last year, during the pandemic, saw the largest increase in the public health workforce since the establishment of the HSE, while this year will be another record year. Deputy Cullinane rightly stated we have funded just above 14,000 posts. We are on target to hit more than 7,000. While we would all like the original target to have been met, nobody last October anticipated the full year the world has seen in the context of the pandemic. In spite of the pandemic, however, and even though people have not been able to travel and all sorts of restrictions have been in place, we will see another record year in terms of increasing the workforce and we intend to continue in this vein. At the same time that we increased the permanent capacity in the HSE, we recruited, with external partners, 3,200 women and men to work in areas such as contact tracing, testing and tracing and the vaccination programme.

Consultant numbers continue to grow. In the past five years, more than 700 additional consultant posts have been filled, with more than half of them in the past two years. The number of consultants has increased over the past two years from 3,153 to 3,506. There are clear recruitment challenges, in certain specialties in particular and in particular locations. We all know that and it has to be addressed. Issues in Letterkenny University Hospital and University Hospital Kerry have, understandably, been raised during the debate and other hospitals are also finding it very difficult to recruit people. The majority of posts, however, that have been identified as vacant are currently filled under fixed-term or specified-purpose contracts. We want people full time in those roles and the new Sláintecare public-only contract will be essential to that end. In disability, mental health, home care and addiction services, there has been much progress over the past year or two. The Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Rabbitte, will outline some of

the successes and plans in these areas.

Elsewhere, we are innovating to improve how and where patients are treated. As the story of Sarah from Cappagh shows, it is not just about money and capacity; it is about using what we have as well as we can. It is about our clinicians working to the full extent of their licences. It is about ensuring that our operating theatres and diagnostic suites will not just run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday. We have to staff them, run them longer and build and use the capacity within our public health system as well as we can. Right now, we are not doing that. There are some notable good examples but there is much opportunity to do better.

Change, as we all know, can be difficult. On my visits to the hospitals, including Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda in recent days, Tallaght University Hospital and many other places throughout the country, I have been meeting a galvanised, determined workforce who have been living change and innovation throughout the pandemic and who are passionate about universal healthcare, our public health system and their patients. They talk to me about a desire to continue innovating, continue changing and continue finding ways to treat patients more quickly and in their communities where possible when they need the care.

This year, we have provided funding to ensure GPs have access to diagnostics, MRIs, X-rays, ultrasound scans and CT scans. At a cost of €25 million, it has not been done before. We estimate that by the end of year, we will have funded about 140,000 additional scans, and we are getting strong feedback from the GP community on this. We are scaling up the provision of advanced nursing practitioners, one of the most exciting opportunities we have.

Advanced nursing practitioner-led teams in the community are treating and discharging a majority of patients waiting to see a consultant. In Tallaght University Hospital, for example, the urology waiting list has fallen from five years to 12 weeks, and we are going to be doing an awful lot more of this.

Third, I am launching a plan to tackle the waiting lists. In the immediate term, through the waiting list action plan, we will examine the impact of Covid-19 and the cyberattack. This is all the more necessary given that we expect hundreds of thousands of patients to come into the system between now and the end of the year. The second component of this is the development of a longer term, multi-annual waiting list plan. It will be overseen by a ministerial task force I am establishing, which will be led by my Secretary General. Targets and detailed hospital-by-hospital lists and plans are being established and it is our full intention to keep driving and investing on this until we meet the prescribed Sláintecare waiting list times for inpatient, outpatient and diagnostic care.

I welcome views on this issue from throughout the House. Sinn Féin will have been examining it in Northern Ireland, where the inpatient waiting list *per capita* is more than twice that in the Republic, while the outpatient list is about 70% higher than it is in the Republic. I expect, therefore, that there will be many ideas. We need to work on this together. I welcome the debate and look forward to sitting down with Deputies and figuring out how we can do everything possible to ensure men, women and children will get the care they need when they need it.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. It is good to see him and both Ministers of State here for the debate.

I will begin by reading from statements I received in recent weeks in the context of a survey. They are the stories of people. One woman said she is a full-time carer, a single mother

28 September 2021

of two boys with special needs, who has been waiting five years to see a consultant. She stated she does not get respite or home help. Another mother said her child's teeth are severely out of shape and now, at 13 years of age, is the optimal time to fix them, but the HSE waiting list extends to at least four years. She said her daughter's confidence has been severely affected. A third respondent stated they had been waiting four and a half years to see a consultant about carpal tunnel syndrome. The person saw a consultant in May and was told they urgently needed surgery, which they would receive by the end of June. They were still waiting at the end of August.

Sláintecare called for maximum waiting times of 12 weeks for inpatient procedures, but in Cork, 645 adult patients have now been waiting more than 18 months. The total number of patients, both adults and children, on waiting lists in Cork for inpatient or day care stands at 4,846. Sláintecare also called for maximum outpatient waiting times of ten weeks. The total number in Cork on waiting lists, between adults and children, is 66,299. Behind those figures are people who are feeling the impact of the HSE's failures and of the health service crumbling. In a recent survey, more than 70% of people reported physical or mental health issues, including increases in stress and anxiety.

I am glad both Ministers of State are here. The HSE wants to close the Owenacurra mental health centre in Midleton, in the middle of a pandemic, when we have been talking so often about mental health. I hope the Ministers of State will revert to me in respect of my request for a meeting to discuss that. Families need help now. We need to create a national health service with a deliverable plan to tackle these long waiting lists. There is a national emergency and the Government should recognise this.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am curious about the case of Sarah from Wicklow that the Minister has cited. It reflects part of the frustration over the HSE's management of funding and so on. He stated the funding to purchase the replacement joints Sarah needed was gone but the State was nonetheless paying for overheads and staff, with theatres closed. Was that changed there and then? The Minister is nodding. That is a start, because that would be the most frustrating aspect of all.

We have talked about 900,000 people, a figure I heard all the previous speakers mention, but we should stop and think because we all know these people. There are 900,000 people in pain, stress and worry, waiting for their scan, in a small State such as this. Some 100,000 of those 900,000 are children, with many of them, almost one third, waiting over 18 months. We cannot blame the Covid-19 pandemic or the cyberattack. The number was 870,000 in January 2020. That has nothing to do with the Minister, but it is a damning indictment of the last Government and this Government.

Two weeks ago, at the Committee of Public Accounts, I asked representatives of the HSE about the additional home help hours. There were 5 million additional hours to be delivered this year. The HSE has only delivered 2 million thus far and it is hoping for a further 1.5 million by the end of the year, but who knows about that given that it is the end of September now? Therefore, it is short 1.5 million. Of the 612 public beds that were to be developed in the winter plan for last year, only 288 were delivered. It appears that the Minister is failing to address waiting lists in every sector of the health service, be it for scans, outpatients or inpatients. It is the whole shooting gallery. People have been waiting so long to be seen.

There are over 15,000 people on waiting lists at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and they

have been waiting for a long time. The Minister said he was at the emergency department there last week. People are actually getting up and going home to take their chances at home because they have been waiting up to 14 hours. It is crazy, and it has to stop.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to address the motion. The constituency that I represent, Laois-Offaly, has witnessed the healthcare system struggle consistently for years. This is despite the exceptional work of the front-line staff in the services. There are now almost 30,000 people in Laois and Offaly on hospital waiting lists. This is from a population of 150,000. In Laois, 13,411 are on outpatient waiting lists and 2,038 are on inpatient waiting lists. In Offaly, 11,572 are on outpatient waiting lists and 1,709 are on inpatient waiting lists. As has been said in this debate, behind each of those figures is an individual who is suffering deteriorating health, delayed diagnosis, which obviously leads to other problems, stress and dreadful pain. People are waiting for hip replacements and so forth, and it is unacceptable that they are fed with painkillers year on year, which leads to them developing ulcers and other health problems. The Minister and I have seen that in our constituency offices and we must stop it.

The hospital waiting list crisis can be resolved. I know it is a challenge, but no job is easy, particularly turning around our health system. It requires leadership and commitment. This means facing down the vested interests. The Minister knows what they are better than me because he has had a closer look in the last year. In the 11 years I have been a Deputy and in the decades before that when I was a councillor, I got a glimpse of what it was like. Those private vested interests need to be faced down. Hospital managers must be running hospitals, not private consultants. That is what happened in Cappagh, if it was traced back to what went on. The hospital managers must run the hospitals.

Our motion sets out some of the solutions and our vision for resolving the crisis. We would introduce single integrated waiting lists. That is one of the can-dos. It is a system that we believe would significantly speed up the process and reduce waiting times across the hospitals. We would also provide a major capital fund to increase the number of beds, staff and capacity within the system. This is the type of ambition that we must see from the Government. What is particularly worrying, however, is that we are not seeing the progress that is necessary. Sláintecare is one example. This is very concerning. I pinned a great deal of hope on Sláintecare, as did other Members. The report notes that there is still no waiting list management and reduction plan in place, despite the waiting list in the State being at 907,648. There is an estimated €300 million which will go unspent in the health budget this year, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. If this is not happening, that is good. The money is there and it must be well used.

Over 700 consultant posts are still vacant. I heard what the Minister said earlier and that is welcome, but there are still over 700 vacancies. I do not see an urgency to address this from the Government. We must be training and promoting doctors into those essential vacancies. There should also be public-only contracts for consultants to work in the public system, unlike the current mess where they do private work during their working day in public hospitals. That must stop. There must be new public-only contracts for the new consultants coming in.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: As somebody who lives in, and represents, a rural region and county and as the mother of a child who has endured the child's unfair share of waiting lists, the findings of the survey brought forward by our spokesperson on health, Deputy Cullinane, who put Trojan work into the collection of this information, confirm what I have experienced and what the people of Clare are dealing with daily. We had the curtailment, as it was called at the

28 September 2021

time, of the Shannondoc services, which resulted in their disappearance. Dentists are opting out of the medical card dental treatment services scheme, DTSS, and GPs are not taking new patients. People are left without access to primary care.

The people of Clare are definitely feeling disadvantaged when it comes to accessing health-care. If they must present to University Hospital Limerick, for example, which has one of the busiest emergency departments in the country, they will more than likely spend a few nights on a trolley. Every week a constituent contacts my office asking for representation to the HSE because those constituents feel they have been completely forgotten. They do not understand how they could possibly be expected to wait and endure chronic pain and anxiety caused by having an untreated illness. I am working with a woman who has been trying to access rheumatology care for the last nine years and who is coping with severe daily pain. In the meantime, I have another constituent whose surgery, which was deemed urgent at the time of the consultation in 2019, has been cancelled three times, but only once because of Covid-19 restrictions. He was told he was at the top of the list nine months ago and he is still waiting.

In terms of children with additional needs, the average waiting time is 19 months. That is in spite of the legally imposed timeline of three months. Sadly, once a child accesses an assessment of needs the child is basically back to square one, left out to dry and made to source, resource and secure the intervention needed to support the child's development, as if the assessment of needs had not happened. This is truly ineffective and, to be frank, immoral. It must be addressed by the Government.

Major healthcare reform is absolutely necessary. Key Sláintecare personnel are dropping away and nobody seems to know why. It is not exactly a vote of confidence in this Government.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion forward. It is very timely. I apologise for not being present for the start of the debate. I had a scheduled meeting with Care Champions, who the Deputy and members of his party have met. They are relatives of people who passed away in nursing home care in the last 18 months and, with the indulgence of the proposers of the motion, I ask the Minister to engage with the group. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has done so. I am still absorbing the half hour that I was on the call with them. It was very powerful.

This motion is very important and timely. Again, I thank Sinn Féin for proposing it. There are currently 652,344 people on an outpatient waiting list, an incredible number. Some 263,354 of these have been waiting on a list for more than 12 months. What is even more shocking is that since January 2020 the number of people who have been on a waiting list for more than 18 months has increased by over 80%, from 107,000 to 192,764. It is very hard to conceptualise these numbers. We could say it is two or three Croke Parks or whatever, but it is a huge number. These are people in our lives whom we know personally, not to mention the countless people who contact us through our constituency offices. They are not just numbers on a page, but real people with real conditions who need treatment. With every passing day and week they are getting further away from the treatment they need, with their conditions in many cases deteriorating in that time.

It is not a problem that is exclusive to one part of the country. Five kilometres from here there are 45,000 people on a waiting list for the Mater hospital. There are 60,000 waiting for treatment in University Hospital Galway, 48,000 are waiting to be seen in University Hospital Limerick and in Cork, the Taoiseach's city, 36,700 are waiting in Cork University Hospital,

26,000 in South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital and 7,500 in the Mercy University Hospital. Age does not appear to be a discriminatory factor in whether one is on a list, with over 12,052 children waiting to be seen by an ENT service. Shockingly, there are 71,369 adults waiting to get orthopaedic treatment, accounting for over 11% of those on waiting lists. That is so wrong. In terms of orthopaedic treatment, we think about mobility. Make Way Day last Friday was one of those days where we got to shine a light on the impact of the obstructions of everyday life for people with mobility issues and those who are using wheelchairs.

Whether it is a young girl in County Kerry suffering from scoliosis who has been on a waiting list for 18 months or a man in his 70s waiting for hip replacement for more than a year, the State should not be keeping people on a waiting list for significant periods. Never before in the history of the State have so many people been on waiting lists. Unless the Minister takes action, this will spiral further out of control.

Staggering waiting lists are not a symptom of the Covid crisis. It may seem like a long time ago, but this was a major problem with our health service long before the pandemic. Unfortunately, our health service was always described as being in a crisis - throughout my lifetime at least. While we have been dealing with a pandemic which is an enormous crisis in itself, we are now returning to the pre-crisis state of our health service. As we come out on the other side of the pandemic, we are faced with a broken health service.

The sad reality is that the Government thinks the National Treatment Purchase Fund is the be-all and end-all that will solve all our problems. The NTPF was established by Mary Harney on a promise that it would deal with waiting lists, that we would move beyond it and that we would not need to use it in the future. It has now become a crutch. Successive governments have promised to end waiting lists, but the reality is that as the drive towards a two-tier health system continues unabated, the NTPF will be a fundamental tool used by the Government which is wrong.

Thanks to Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's ideological commitment to for-profit medicine, there is a danger that those who can afford to pay get the best attention while those who cannot end up on waiting lists. We see it in many different areas of care. Families with children awaiting speech and language therapy are being forced early in the child's life to go private. It is only €150 or €200 for an initial consultation. People will scrimp together and get that initial consultation, but of course after that there is further care and suddenly they find themselves in the private healthcare system. They cannot afford to be in the private healthcare system, but they have been led there and because it is their child and they want the best for that child, they will do everything they can. It is fundamentally unfair; it is not good practice and it is not providing the solutions we need. We need a patient-centred healthcare service that caters to the needs of the individual regardless of their ability to pay.

There are different types of waiting lists. Today's *Irish Examiner* contained a very harrowing story about Emma-Jane Stoker-Phelan who has suffered from anorexia for the past 12 years. She said she feels like she is "slowly dying" due to a lack of services. Bodywhys has pointed to a 60% increase in hospital admissions for people suffering from eating disorders. We need to ring-fence money in the budget, but we need to ensure that mental health gets the funding it desperately needs.

We need to move our system to a more community-based system. If we can treat people in the community, they will not be on waiting lists for our main hospitals. They will be getting

the treatment they need where they need to be getting it. For areas like this, which seem to be on the fringes of healthcare provision, it would make a major impact on our overall healthcare system if we can deliver that model and if we can deliver this care where it is needed.

We cannot keep trundling from crisis to crisis in our health service. It is always one thing after another. Staff and patients in our hospitals are incredibly frustrated by what they perceive to be the hands-off approach of this Government and the previous one to solving the waiting list crisis and the trolley crisis. The funding of our public health service must now be multi-annual and focused on investing in and retaining all staff - doctors, nurses, midwives, healthcare assistants, porters and medical scientists. The professionals in our healthcare family are multi-faceted and we need to recruit them and retain them. There are too many long-term vacancies across a swathe of healthcare jobs and that issue needs to be tackled.

It is depressing that every time we mention a health-related issue in this House, it is followed by the word “crisis”. Until we do something about it, that will always be the case. As we all know, it is not the fault of the amazing workers in our health service. It is incredible that over the past 18 months the HSE has been on flags and bunting hung out of people’s windows as a source of pride. That is the first time that has happened in my lifetime because people have really felt connected with their front-line workers and all workers in the health service. We are in danger of losing it but we cannot lose that. The way to ensure we do not is by investing in the system and trusting the great professionals in there to improve and increase the care they provide. If we do that, we will tackle the waiting lists.

We are still a small country, but we are a rich country. We should not have these crises. We should not be rolling over and accepting every year that we will have debates about waiting lists and access. We can solve this. Hopefully, the Minister can solve it and not leave it for subsequent governments.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I commend Deputy Cullinane on a very good, detailed and timely motion tonight, providing an opportunity to take stock of the state of our health service. We have had many accounts this evening of the shortcomings in our health service. Various people read out letters outlining the incredible difficulties people are having in accessing healthcare. It is important to take a bit of time to listen to another letter which was delivered to every home in England in 1948 about the new National Health Service. It reads as follows:

Your new National Health Service begins on 5th July. What is it? How do you get it?

It will provide you with all medical, dental and nursing care. Everyone - rich or poor, man, woman or child - can use it or any part of it. There are no charges, except for a few special items. There are no insurance qualifications. But it is not a “charity”. You are all paying for it, mainly as tax payers, and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness.

Is that not a wonderful letter? Imagine everyone in England getting that through their door. Imagine the value system and the ethos that underpins the political thinking behind that. Here was a country emerging from the war. It was broke, but the Labour Party government at the time and the Labour Party Minister for Health, Aneurin Bevan, had that vision for a civilised society, part of what has to be a modern, caring and inclusive society. He created the NHS and he spelled out to people why he was doing that and what it was.

The most impressive part of that letter was in telling people that it was not a charity but that they were paying for it. Is that not a million miles away from our health service where suc-

cessive governments have regarded the public health service as some kind of charity? Indeed, for many decades it was provided as a charitable service, mainly from religious organisations. To a large extent, there is still that element and the ethos behind our public health service that somehow this is a charity.

This goes to the core of why we do not have a modern public health service that is universally available and that everybody is happy to use. There has been a mindset within successive governments, including this one, that the public health service is merely for people who cannot afford to go private. Fundamentally that is what the thinking is. I grant that is not to the same extent in Fianna Fáil, but it is a very prevalent view within Fine Gael. That view is not only in respect of the health service. It is also about childcare and housing. There is an attitude that there must be something wrong with someone who cannot afford to pay their own way. That absolutely goes against the thinking in any kind of modern inclusive social democratic society where there is a social contract, where people pay a fair share of tax and in return they get access to good quality public services in a timely way.

I have quoted the origins of the NHS. I am not saying the NHS is perfect by any means. Successive Tory governments have starved the NHS of funding. It is probably the least good model of universal healthcare across Europe. We are an outlier in not having free access to primary care and other levels of care. What happens in this country is unheard of in other countries. Looking at the NHS and its current shortcomings, almost 90% of people in the UK are happy to use it. The level of private health insurance in Britain is only somewhere around 12% to 15% even after all of the cuts but the vast majority of people there are more than happy to use the NHS and they are proud of it. We know that and there have been many demonstrations of that.

It is part and parcel of the social contract to know there is a service available and the vast majority of people are more than happy to use it whereas almost half of the population here feel they have no choice but to scrimp and save, as many have to, to pay for private health insurance in order to access timely care. It is a massive indictment of successive Governments in this country that people feel they have to fork out thousands of euro every year. It is effectively a health tax and people feel they have to do that in order to be able to access care. People who cannot afford to do that, which is nearly half of the population, are told that they can wait, which is what they do. Some of those people are left waiting for too long and they lose their lives as a result. Other people suffer massive impacts on their quality of life because of health conditions that they cannot access services for. Many thousands of people cannot go to work because they are waiting for hip operations or some kind of procedure. These people are effectively disabled and dependent because they cannot access healthcare.

Many thousands of children are robbed of critical years of their childhood because they cannot access services. We have early intervention teams for children under five years of age. The theory behind them was to pick up on difficulties or conditions that children had at the earliest possible stage. The tragic irony is that some children age out of that because they have been waiting for so long by the time they reach five years of age and the early intervention team is not available to them any longer. Hundreds of thousands of children are waiting for speech and language therapy and assessments of need. Many elderly people have a seriously diminished quality of life because they cannot get access to the kind of physiotherapy and other therapies that they need. We know there are 900,000 people waiting for hospital appointments or procedures of one kind or another. There are the hidden waiting lists, including the many hundreds of thousands of people waiting for community services and then there are the other thousands

of people waiting for mental health services, including children and adults. It is a scandal and it is a massive indictment of this Government and successive Governments that they have not been able to tackle that.

I listened carefully to the Minister's speech earlier and he barely referenced Sláintecare. The Minister and his predecessor had the unprecedented opportunity of being handed an all-party plan to take us from the current unfair, dysfunctional, uneconomic and two-tier health service to a point where we could be equal to every other European country in having a universal public health service. The Minister did not have to devise a plan or come up with policy. He was handed a plan and he was told that everybody in this House would support him in implementing it. It is disappointing that the Minister is squandering that opportunity.

The Minister talked about more of this, that and the other. That is fine and extra money and capacity are being provided, which are fine and important but unless the Minister implements reform and, in particular, accountability, that will only amount to throwing money at a dysfunctional health service. The Minister has to do much more than that and follow the reform plan which is set out and which is about establishing accountability. Central to that is the aspect of the regional health authorities because that incorporates a legally-based accountability system for the provision of services and the spending of budgets. Unless the Minister does that, this will be another flash in the pan with more money being provided but without any substantial long-term difference being made. Please follow the plan.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I want to start on a very positive note about the past 18 months, which have been testing to say the least. The doctors, nurses, auxiliary and care staff and everybody who works in hospitals had the most challenging 18 months of their professional lives. They saw their patients, loved ones and family members die of this particularly terrible disease. The public health system protected and saved us and at its greatest hour it saved many people in the most difficult of circumstances. Notwithstanding the public health emergency we have faced, before that Ireland had one of the highest waiting lists for inpatient and outpatient care in Europe.

As a consequence of the pandemic, the parameters have changed fundamentally. Those parameters are what people accept and do not accept anymore. The underfunding and mismanagement of our healthcare system has led to this crisis of waiting times for procedures, including surgical procedures, and that is completely unacceptable. We all agree on that. There is a reason that happens and it is not a simplification to say that it is down to the policy of successive Governments. If you look at the policy of a two-tier health system, which we have, it involves private and public healthcare. Once there is that kind of split in society you will have a dysfunctional health system.

Deputy Shortall mentioned Sláintecare and the recent resignations do not bode well. There are reasons those members have resigned from Sláintecare and that does not bode well for reforming our health system. Sláintecare was the vehicle for reform and I have issues with the Sláintecare policy but it was going in the right general direction to see a universal healthcare system. When we see waiting lists there are huge numbers and there are people behind those numbers but if you are from an area of socioeconomic disadvantage and waiting on a procedure or operation, the consequences of that will be severe.

Deputy Shortall mentioned the NHS, which is a cherished institution in Britain. It came from the ashes of the Second World War. I do not know who said it but somebody said that if

you do not give people a health system they will give you a revolution. We have to learn the lessons of this pandemic. The parameters have completely changed. The Government has to address the issues around recruitment, capacity and the historical legacy of those who are waiting and those who have suffered from that split in society between private and public health-care. I see that the Minister's statement is positive enough. We are, hopefully, at the tail end of this pandemic and I hope the Government will focus on trying to address these issues. If it does not address the issue of waiting times, the political cost will be extremely painful and one no doctor can remedy.

Deputy Mick Barry: From 1918 to 1920, the Spanish flu epidemic swept the world killing tens of millions of people. The pandemic clearly revealed to the masses that the existing health systems based on private ownership and charities were not fit for purpose. The demand for public health services grew louder and unstoppable. In 1945, following six years of world war, the people of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland resolved there would be no return to the poverty of the 1930s. They fast-forwarded the creation of a welfare state and the jewel in its crown came in the form of the National Health Service. In this country, after more than one and a half years of a deadly pandemic, our health services stand at a crossroads. The health system has nearly 1 million people waiting for treatment, a list that contains untold numbers of stories of pain, frustration and hardship. These waiting lists are the product not merely of Covid but of a health service that is not fit for purpose.

We have a Government made up of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, which is blocking and frustrating the progressive Sláintecare reforms, irrespective of what the Minister might say. I have no confidence in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or the Green Party to deliver, even on the limited Sláintecare reforms. They will only be fully implemented when these parties are removed from office and an alternative Government is elected, one that is brought under such pressure from below - this is the key point - that it is forced to take the necessary steps. I hope that pressure is so great that such a Government will challenge the vested interests of profit and privilege embedded in the Irish health system and move towards what is needed, which goes beyond Sláintecare. What is needed is a not-for-profit Irish national health service.

The resignation of the Sláintecare duo of Laura Magahy and Professor Tom Keane clearly indicates they felt hugely frustrated in implementing their mandate. I am certain, however, the frustration they felt was as nothing compared to that felt by the nearly 1 million people on our waiting lists. The Minister was quoted in the press today as saying he intends to bring a memo to Cabinet shortly regarding new elective hospitals for Cork, Galway and Dublin. The people on waiting lists in Cork, and no doubt in the other cities also, are tired of vague formulations and the Minister's talk of *mañana*. Like me, they want some straight answers to some straight questions. Will the Minister clarify if this memo will be brought next month, the month after that or next year? Will it include details of selected site locations, a commencement date for construction work and a date by which the hospitals will open?

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this topic for discussion. The issue of hospital waiting lists has, in many cases, been exacerbated by the impact of the Government's response to the Covid pandemic. I have highlighted many times the scandal of curtailing services such as cancer screening as part of the Covid response. I hope big lessons have been learned from those decisions. We also need to remember hospital waiting lists have been a long-standing, unresolved issue and a major problem long before Covid entered our vocabulary, as has overcrowding. News reports on how many people were left on hospital trolleys or in corridors were a regular occurrence, yet in the last 18 months we have been conditioned

to panic upon hearing the hospitals were only approaching capacity. Hospitals and our public health service are, unfortunately, now used to operating at levels exceeding capacity.

Of all the billions spend on health-related matters over the past 18 months, what have we really got to show for it as we go forward? Will any of the billions spent have any lasting positive effect on our health service? The bigger picture appears to have been lost in a blaze of panic. How useful could all the billions have been in providing a type of SwiftCare clinic in every large town, for example, to ease pressure on the hospitals, or in adding to the money raised by the people of Wexford to fund an MRI scanner, which has yet to materialise? The HSE has spent billions on ventilators that did not work and personal protective equipment, PPE, gear that was not fit for purpose. That was pure waste.

It is not all about spending money hand over fist. It is about trying to use the financial resources available in the most useful way possible. That cannot be said of the HSE, as we have seen at the Committee of Public Accounts for the past two weeks. If these wrongs go without accountability, how will things change? Accountability must be part of change.

As the population ages and life expectancy rises higher and higher, we will see further demand for certain medical procedures. We not only need to ensure we have capacity but that we have excess capacity to be able to meet the rising demand over the next few years. In Wexford, we have more than 500 families waiting for home care supports. There are no carers. Massive waiting lists are being reported across all areas of the health service, from scans and consultant appointments to primary care services, such as dental, occupational therapy, audiology, speech and language therapy, mental health and dietetics. I spoke previously of an orthodontic waiting list for teenagers of more than six years. These waiting lists mean that problems go untreated and, often, become worse. We need to tackle the issue head-on across all sectors.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. We all know of people in chronic pain who have been waiting four years for pain management clinic appointments. Many Deputies have spoken about these kinds of issues tonight but I will concentrate on something else and I am glad the Minister and the Ministers of State are here to listen. The Saolta group, which covers the west of Ireland, deals with cancer and cancer treatments. The probability of receiving a timely diagnosis of cancer and surviving the disease varies substantially across Europe. Due to majority inequity in access to cancer diagnostics and treatments, the chances of surviving cancer are reduced in the west of Ireland relative to the rest of Europe.

The Saolta cancer centre, based in the model 4 hospital, University Hospital Galway, delivers a programme of cancer care to an overall catchment area of approximately 1 million people across the Saolta group area of Connacht and Donegal, which includes others in the mid west and midlands. The Saolta group covers some of the most rural and deprived areas nationally, mainly associated with the western seaboard. Cancer is a leading cause of premature mortality for those living in the Saolta group area. According to National Cancer Registry Ireland, cancer patients from this region have the worst cancer outcomes in Ireland. In addition, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic means the mortality rate is expected to increase.

Cancer services in the Saolta group have been working beyond full capacity, with no resilience, within the cancer programme to deliver a safe, staffed and sustainable service prior to Covid-19. While we produced the national cancer control programme in 2006, which designated eight cancer centres, the cancer programme for the west of Ireland has not received any

infrastructure supports for the past 12 years and has not been able to develop into a sustainable, staffed and secure programme. It is important we develop a smart, integrated programme, which will allow timely access to diagnostics, therapeutics and follow-up in a sustainable manner throughout the region. The people of the west deserve this. The national development plan gives the Minister and the Ministers of State an opportunity to positively discriminate in favour of this region.

We cannot allow this situation to continue *ad infinitum* and we cannot continue to pay lip service to it. We have had enough of it. We need to put the infrastructure in place. We have enough plans, reviews, etc. It is important the Ministers and the Ministers of State bring this message back to central government. It is time to make sure the Saolta group is properly funded and given the proper infrastructure to make sure we can deal with cancer inequality like everyone else.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I note the Minister's announcement that he is proposing a task force to deal with waiting lists and that he has put in a funding request for a budget allocation of hundreds of millions of euro to pay for this multi-year plan. That is wonderful news. Again, we can find emergency money to outsource waiting lists, yet we cannot find the money to support expansion within our own hospital settings.

I will speak about the regional hospital of the south east, University Hospital Waterford, UHW, a model 4 hospital that is servicing a catchment of approximately 520,000 people. It is a hospital that continues to be the least resourced model 4 in the entire country. To put that in context, UHW, with its catchment of 520,000 potential patients, receives €194 million in annual funding. University Hospital Limerick, by contrast, has a catchment of 400,000 and receives annual budgets of €266 million. That is a €72 million budget deficit compared to a hospital providing exactly the same services and to a smaller number of patients. What is that additional €72 million paying for in Limerick? A portion of it is certainly paying for the additional 865 whole-time equivalent employee positions the hospital enjoys over the hospital employee number allocated to the south east and Waterford. I often hear Deputies in the House describing the funding deficits at University Hospital Limerick and if there are such deficits, and I am sure there are, what does that say about the treatment of the main regional hospital of the south east?

The Minister has long been aware of the extensive waiting lists that have been a feature of UHW's treatment landscape, record waiting lists nationally in cardiology, ophthalmology, endoscopy, elective trauma and colorectal surgery. The list goes on. In fact, national media reported last year that UHW waiting lists were ranked the third worst in the country. What has been the response of the Department of Health in the interim? Did it decide to revisit the budget issues or examine the efficiency metrics in terms of procedures completed per euro spent in this hospital, which ranks among the best in the country? Did the Government decide to provide additional funding and approve whole-time equivalent positions to consultant staffing, specialists in general nursing, radiography and lab technicians to build on the capital efficiency of this hospital? The answer is "No". The Minister did not do that and nor did the Department, the HSE or the South/South West Hospital Group. Instead, money was found from the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, to begin targeting south-east patients for treatment options in Cork and Dublin private hospitals. Most galling of all was the loss of the significant rescue provided to the cardiac service during the pandemic, where UPMC installed a new laboratory that gave a massive service to our hospital system. No sooner did the resumption of procedures happen in UHW than an NTPF contract was drawn up which bypassed the UPMC facility in favour of sending vulnerable cardiac patients more than 80 and 120 miles, respectively, to Dublin

or Cork to have cardiac diagnostic procedures completed. Less than half the people selected on the list took up that option. That clearly shows medical management are totally out of touch with the needs of people to have these procedures in their own regional hospital where they regularly attend.

The issue of waiting lists has always been a component of poor capacity, staffing and recruitment issues, available theatre and diagnostic space, and the ability of patients to attend appointments. Many of these factors are solvable by increased health resourcing. This is the status that private hospital consultants must reach to remain commercially viable and that is why they, as opposed to public health systems, can offer a solution to low level elective procedures.

Many of the patients the new initiatives will target will just move from one waiting list to another. Having received one procedure, their care plan and management will likely still fall back on the regional hospital they attend. Money will not solve the waiting list problems but will only dampen down them for a number of months. The Minister's recent talk of looking at new elective hospitals in Cork, Dublin and Galway tells me that he is deciding to continue to give to those who already have much more and in so doing, he will continue to embed health inequity and waiting lists within our public health system.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of health services in this State has been catastrophic but we know there were issues with waiting lists long before the pandemic. We know that the waiting lists across nearly all medical specialties have increased significantly and that it will be years before we can finally determine the sheer magnitude of the crisis that has been created in non-Covid-related areas, such as cancer, coronary and paediatric care. Not only that, in my constituency of Laois-Offaly, thousands of adults and children remain on lengthy and unacceptable waiting lists for occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. I accept and welcome the fact that there was a recent decision to allocate increased funding for the assessment of need process, especially given how bad the backlog of cases is in Laois-Offaly. However, we currently have at least 1,118 children waiting for speech therapy and we also have 159 children waiting in excess of 12 months for occupational therapy. That is to say nothing of the waiting lists for dental treatment. The current orthodontic waiting list in Laois-Offaly is unacceptable. I am aware of too many children and teenagers who are waiting on a list for at least six or seven years. It is unacceptable. The waiting lists must be tackled, once and for all.

Deputy Michael Collins: We have massive waiting lists in this country. There is no point in my saying any different because that is quite evident. The lists are, unfortunately, growing. People are waiting for four or five years for a 20- to 25-minute cataract procedure. That cannot be allowed to happen because those people will go blind if some solution is not found. Waiting lists for knee and hip treatments are two to three years. The waiting lists for orthodontic treatment for children go back to 2017. The lists go on and on. I could be here for the next two hours explaining the crisis. People are not waiting just five or six months, they are waiting very long periods of time. The health crisis in west Cork is remarkable at this stage. We have a massive crisis and the Minister has been very quiet on the whole issue. Admissions to the accident and emergency department of Bantry General Hospital were closed for 16 days due to a staffing crisis. SouthDoc's after-hours service in Castletownbere has collapsed due to a staffing crisis. The following may be more of an issue for the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who I have emailed about it, but CoAction is closing its residential service. That flies in the face of everything about independent living for people with intellectual disabilities. CoAction in Castletownbere has announced that due to staffing problems, it will close its residential service.

That is outrageous. It is an attack on the most vulnerable in society.

One slight solution we have, and it is not the greatest solution in the world, is the Northern Ireland healthcare scheme. There has been no announcement as to whether that scheme is going to continue or not. People do not know if they are going to be blind. They do not know if the Minister is going to pull the plug on the scheme at the end of the year or if it will continue. It is desperately needed. Thousands of people have gone abroad for healthcare under the European cross-border directive. I ask the Minister to announce whether that scheme is going to continue. It has benefited thousands of people in west Cork by allowing them to get their cataract surgery. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, Councillors Ben Dalton O'Sullivan and Danny Collins, and myself have worked very hard to make sure that people can get to Northern Ireland to get treatment for their hips and knees if they are in desperate situations.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Yes.

Deputy Michael Collins: I appreciate that. It is a good solution if that is happening today. If that is the best I can pull out of the Minister, I appreciate it and thank him.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad the Minister and the Ministers of State are here to listen. The situation is truly shocking. I was again contacted yesterday evening to go to the accident and emergency department in the hospital in Clonmel. There were five ambulances parked there at 5.45 p.m. on a beautiful September evening. What are we going to do in the winter? When I arrived, there were three big ambulances that were full, one fast-responder paramedic car and a private ambulance that was just leaving. The pressure the staff are under is shocking. There is mismanagement and dysfunction in accident and emergency departments. The Government will blame it all on Covid but it cannot do that. We saw the horrific thing that happened in Cork University Hospital, which started in November 2020.

The Government must recruit managers who are able to manage people. There are sometimes no doctors in the accident and emergency department because they have to leave with a patient and go elsewhere. Is the Government trying to close down that hospital?

I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to correct the record of this House. Earlier today she whispered to the Taoiseach when I asked a question about the number of people waiting for home help in Tipperary. There are thousands and thousands of people waiting nationally. The Minister of State told the Taoiseach to tell the House that no one in south Tipperary was waiting. The Taoiseach told the House that in good faith. The Minister of State can wave all the sheets of paper she likes. I ask her to correct the record.

Deputy Mary Butler: There is no one on the waiting list.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I checked with our head of services and was told there are 118, as of today. I sent the Minister of State a text and she came back to me to say she was giving figures for August. Why mislead the Taoiseach and, in turn, the House? The Taoiseach was trying to answer the question without the Minister of State misleading him. She also misled him last week with regard to St. Brigid's in Carrick-on-Suir. The Minister of State said she had met the committee but she had not. She met two members of the committee later that day outside the front door so that information was correct then. The Minister of State has been whispering untruths to the Taoiseach.

8 o'clock

The Minister of State should have more respect for her electorate in Waterford and for those in south Tipperary who use St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir. It is scandalous that the Minister of State would deliberately mislead them. I want her to correct the record. She texted me back to say that she checked and there are 118 waiting. When she rises to speak, the Minister of State should correct the record of the House. She should also correct it regarding what she said last week. It is disgraceful what has been done to the people of east Waterford, where the Minister of State lives, and to the people of south Tipperary and south Kilkenny. The hospital was closed. The Minister of State has a letter from an official. There was supposed to be a report. There was no report condemning the hospital. It was closed without any good reason. The Minister of State is now cobbling that up with a letter.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: That is a personal attack.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is personal.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am glad the Deputy accepts that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Children with minor ailments on waiting lists do not get an early diagnosis, which has lifelong consequences. The development test for babies is missing disabilities. I am talking about basic speech therapy and about eye, ear and mobility issues. Some 106,000 children are awaiting tests in the public system. Some 8,000 are awaiting ultrasounds and CT scans while 2,700 children and young people are on waiting lists for children's mental health services. This is very well documented.

I can list problems in the health service. The Minister inherited many of them. People can say that certain things are the problems. The first day I spoke in the Dáil, I gave the Government a solution but not one of its members listened to it. If they go back on the recording, they will see that on my first day in the Dáil, I told the Government that it needed a management system within the hospitals. This is the Government's solution. Does the Minister know if there is a roster in the public hospitals for the senior doctors? Does he know if there is a roster for the senior consultants? From what I know, nobody in management knows who is on and who is off. The health service is not a Monday to Friday operation. After 5 p.m. on a Friday, you cannot get a consultant. There is then a waiting list come Monday morning. The private hospitals in this country have got it right. They have management systems because they know that, if they do not get it right, it will not work and their hospital will fall. Public hospitals need a management system for doctors and consultants. Our front-line staff are there seven days a week, morning, noon and night but there is no roster system for our consultants and doctors. We need to fix that.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I acknowledge Deputy Cullinane for instigating this debate and I thank him for his interest in matters affecting Kerry, as well as the rest of the country. Our university hospital in Tralee is under severe strain at present. I acknowledge the work being done by management and the actual workers, including the people in the accident and emergency department tonight, who I often deal with during the night and at different hours over the weekend. They really do their best under an awful lot of pressure. Why, for heaven's sake, is our hospital being run into the ground? Why are we playing second fiddle to Cork? Cork University Hospital is a great hospital. We are very grateful and thankful that the hospital, a centre of excellence, is there, as is Bantry General Hospital. However, why is our hospital, the university hospital in Tralee, being run into the ground, because it is? There is a never-ending list of people who are suffering and waiting to have hip, knee, back or general surgery. There are even people waiting for orthodontic treatment. The health service is in shambles and the

Ministers are at the helm. Will they please stop the mismanagement? I compliment the people in our community hospitals, both management and the general staff of the hospitals, whether in Kenmare, Cahersiveen, Killarney, Listowel or Tralee. I also compliment the people who work in our ambulance service, who are also under unreal pressure. The centralisation of the ambulance service in Dublin definitely led to the downgrading of the service delivered and its speed as a result of different mistakes and things that happened, which are no fault of the people who actually work in the service. Again, it is a question of management. Billions of euro are being put into health but it is not directed or managed properly. I will not stand over University Hospital Kerry in Tralee being downgraded, which seems to be what has been happening over recent years and the past ten years in particular. It is not right and I will not stand idly by and let it happen.

Deputy Joan Collins: Today the Minister announced plans to bring forward proposals to establish a task force on waiting lists and to seek extra funding to resource this in the forthcoming budget. This is to be welcomed but the question has to be asked, why is it only now, with waiting lists approaching nearly 1 million, that emergency action is being considered? The plan to provide three new elective hospitals in Dublin, Galway and Cork is also long overdue. The response of our public health service staff to the Covid-19 pandemic shows what is possible and what can be achieved if they are given the necessary resources and funding. However, decades of underfunding have left us with insufficient staff capacity, bed capacity and infrastructure. The task now is to urgently build capacity. Unless this is done, no amount of plans or task forces will resolve the crisis.

The details on waiting lists make for alarming reading. I will not repeat them. They are outlined in the motion. It is an absolute scandal that 98,000 children are on waiting lists, with one third of these having been on those lists for more than 18 months. These include children with special needs who face an average wait of 19 months for an assessment of need.

I will refer to the pre-budget submission of the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO. It has said that, with just below 1.5 consultants per 1,000 of population, we have the lowest number of specialists in the EU, where the average is 2.5 per 1,000 of population. The number of consultants needs to double to meet present needs and the needs of a growing population. Over the past five years, almost 3,000 doctors left the Medical Council register to work abroad. This is a serious problem in respect of recruitment, training and retention of staff. Poor working conditions, poor work-life balance and career uncertainty are the key factors. These were, of course, greatly exacerbated by the pandemic, but they existed before Covid and will continue to exist if the necessary action is not taken.

According to the IMO, at three beds per 1,000 of population, our bed capacity is significantly below the EU average of five beds per 1,000 of population. Our rate of five beds per 100,000 of population for critical care is again way below the EU average, namely 12 beds per 1,000 of population.

The Minister has quoted the extra funding and the increase number of beds and critical care beds but the Government's plans are based on the minimum - and I stress "minimum" - requirements identified in the health service capacity review of 2018. These requirements were dependant on significant expansion of GP and community-based services, as well as community and long-term services for older people, none of which have been achieved. The Government plans, even if they are achieved, which is very unlikely, are not sufficient to meet the needs of our population.

28 September 2021

The IMO is also calling for an additional 5,000 public acute beds, serious investment in a stand-alone hospital for elective care, a doubling of critical care capacity to 550 beds and an urgent assessment of resource diagnostics, radiology and laboratory requirements to eliminate bottlenecks and ensure timely results for hospital doctors and GPs. We need investment in GP facilities to enable a shift to greater community care, as well as investment in women's health, mental health, ehealth, IT infrastructure, social care and social care needs for older people.

Taking the Sláintecare report out of the drawer it is confined to in the Department of Health and waving it around occasionally will not do any more. We need the political will - which I have not seen since the resignation of our two head people in Sláintecare - the resources and the finances to meet a very basic human need, that is to say, access to timely, high-quality health-care based on need rather than on ability to pay.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. The whole idea of Sláintecare was to avoid this. We were supposed to avoid coming into the Chamber to talk about waiting lists while mentioning Galway and every other city. However, one cannot avoid doing that now because Sláintecare has not been implemented. I do not wish to misquote Professor Tom Keane but he said that there was no will and "that the requirements for implementing this unprecedented programme for change are seriously lacking". That is what he said. Laura Magahy is also gone, as is Professor Geraldine McCarthy down in the south west. That is an indication. It is also an indication of the advisory council not functioning to 100% when some of the members did not even know why others were resigning. There are serious questions on every level but there is no doubt in my mind that, as Deputy Shortall already eloquently pointed out, there is no will to implement a public health system, in comparison to the situation in England. We have never made that leap. I spent ten years of my life on a health forum, from 2006 to 2016, watching the public health service being dismantled every day. Different language was used. We started with "bed refurbishment", when beds were closed. I never heard of "bed refurbishment" until I sat on a health forum and then I saw the systematic wearing away of the public health system and, at the same time, public money going into the private system and it has never stopped.

I will keep to my time and finish on Galway. I will not read out the lists for the orthopaedics. I have read them out so often, including the letter from the consultants, which I always preface by saying consultants rarely write to me but they wrote to say the pain the patients were suffering was unbearable. Respite care has never been restored. We have words like this, straight from Kafka. Regarding agency 1, whoever that is, the waiting list for respite includes 34 children. The waiting list for enhanced features is 14, along with 45 adults, and for enhanced services the figure is 41. The waiting list from agency 2 includes 15 children and 50 waiting for family support. I could go on and on.

I have begged and appealed to Ministers. I have great respect for their efforts, particularly the two junior Ministers, regarding a hands-on approach, but still we have no respite services or day centres restored in Galway. Nobody can explain why. Some 90% are vaccinated. The Government has reached the magical figure and yet we have not restored services. I will be here for the rest of my elected life pointing out that it is intolerable to have people on waiting lists for any length of time while those with private medicine jump the queues. I do not denigrate those with private medicine or private insurance. Every one of us does what he or she has to do in life. The State has to provide public medicine.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The number of men, women and children on waiting lists is truly

shocking. I do not use that word lightly or often but “shocking” is an appropriate word to describe the fact that nearly 18% of our population is on a healthcare waiting list. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion.

While the national figures are stark, the figures in the north west, at Sligo University Hospital and Letterkenny, which has already been mentioned, are dreadful. They are among the worst in the country. Trolley Watch figures for today show that the total number without beds in Sligo University Hospital is 18 and in Letterkenny it is 42. To put those figures in perspective, out of 32 hospitals nationally, Letterkenny is third worst and Sligo is seventh worst. In case those figures were an aberration, I looked at the figures for August and May of this year. I did not choose those, but just took them out of the figures to get a more complete picture. In August, Sligo had the fourth highest numbers waiting for a bed in the hospital, and in May, it was the third highest nationally. Those figures are unacceptable. Every one represents a father, daughter, grandmother, cousin, aunt or husband waiting for a diagnosis or treatment. In some cases it is life-threatening, in many it is life-limiting and it always impacts negatively on a person’s health and quality of life.

I read the countermotion and it lists a number of contributing factors to the waiting lists. For example, Covid. We all recognise its impact but it has simply made a very bad situation much worse. I looked at figures on Trolley Watch from 2006 to 2021 for Sligo and, again, took the month of August. For the first four years, 2006 to 2009, it ranged from 13, lowest, to 70, highest. For the last four years, 2018 to 2021, it ranged from 225 to 484. In other words, it is seven times worse. That is not down to Covid or cyberattacks. It is down to health policy for the last 20 years.

The Minister said he continued to implement Sláintecare yet the two recent high-profile resignations from the Sláintecare board are at least partly due to the non-implementation of a regional strategy. The figures in Sligo and Letterkenny show how urgent such a strategy is. I have real concern we will be left behind again.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The main point I want to address is the Opposition’s claim that children with additional needs are forced to wait an average of 19 months for an assessment of need, despite the legal right of three months. As I have said in the House a number of times, one of my priorities on assuming ministerial responsibility for disability was to remedy the number of overdue assessments of need for children across the country. At the end of June 2020, the backlog had risen to approximately 6,500 children. Having successfully secured Sláintecare funding of €7.8 million to tackle the backlog, I am pleased to inform the House that, by the end of last month, the waiting list had been reduced to approximately 600 cases, a reduction of 91%.

This breaks down across all the CHOs. In CHO 1, when I inherited the role, I had 138. Today there is nil. In CHO 2, there were 100 and today there is nil. In CHO 3, there was 589. There were 16 at the end of August. In CHO 4, there were 1,098. At the end of August it was nil. In CHO 5, it was 643. It is now nil. In CHO 6, it was 257. It is now nil. In CHO 7, it was 1,056. It is now nil. In CHO 8, it was 764. At the end of August it was 21. In CHO 9, it was 1,913. At the end of August it was 585. The total amount at the end of August was 622. It is worth reminding the House that HSE staff and clinicians achieved this despite challenges posed by the current pandemic and the cyberattack. This Trojan work needs to be recognised and I thank everyone involved for their efforts.

28 September 2021

Even more important, the clearing of the backlog allows services to focus on intervention to support the child, which is the key piece I will focus my energies on over the months and years ahead. The old assessment of need, AON, system has been replaced with a uniform approach across the country using a preliminary team assessment, PTA, which ensures these children timely access to services and intervention. There is a current review of that system while we are using it at the moment. From January 2020 to the end of August 2021, a total of 2,504 children received a PTA. A staggering 89% of these children were referred to an intervention pathway based on the outcome of that assessment. This means instead of languishing on waiting lists to find out their diagnosis or the supports they need, parents find out sooner and get on an intervention pathway sooner. This is at the heart of progressing disability services and completely changes how we deliver services and supports to children with additional needs from birth to 18 years of age.

At some stages, this change has been hard for families and clinicians. This is a major cultural shift in how we deliver therapies to children with complex need. Deputy Shortall referenced the word “reform”. Progressing disability is one reform Deputies will see in 2021. It has been ten years in the making and is being delivered under this Government.

The HSE is establishing 91 children disability networks across the nine CHOs. I am pleased to say 83 of these network teams are already in place. Under PDS, these teams will provide specialist support services for all children with significant disability, regardless of their diagnosis, where they live or where they go to school. It will mean the end of unacceptable situations where children age out of early intervention teams and will help tackle the current waiting lists, which we all acknowledge are at an unacceptable level.

Now that the issues with waiting times for an AON have largely been addressed, attention must move to the focus on delivery of interventions. As a result of the formations of the children’s disability network teams, CDNTs, I will be able to get a clearer picture of children who are waiting to access therapies under disabilities and those waiting to access therapies under primary care. This will help give clarity to a number of interventions being delivered on each side and every child supported. More importantly, I will have a clear sight of where specific roadblocks in each CHO may be and I will address them. I will meet with the CDNTs every week to track progress. This is an important step in reducing the number of outstanding matters. I will focus on management styles, management delivery and cost-effective measures.

I will hand over to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— the population aged 65 and over has increased by 35 per cent since 2009, with the result that there have been increasing levels of demand for health and social care services;

— arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, which broke out in March 2020, routine scheduled acute hospital care had been severely curtailed during the periods when surges occurred, and capacity reduced generally for reasons of social distancing and

infection control measures;

— arising from the Health Service Executive (HSE) ransomware cyber attack, which occurred in May of this year, these services were further seriously disrupted as hospitals endeavoured to maintain emergency and urgent time-critical services;

— other jurisdictions have experienced increased pressures on waiting lists due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and

— notwithstanding the enormous challenges facing the health care system, it is projected that acute waiting lists will be reduced, from a peak of 740,000 in May, at the end of the year through the implementation of a waiting list recovery plan, which is being finalised;

acknowledges:

— the commitment in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future to the implementation of the Sláintecare Plan;

— the major investment made this year to tackle waiting lists through the establishment of the Access to Care Fund of €240 million;

— the increase of permanent bed capacity of 795 beds to date, with a target of 938 by the year-end;

— the increase of 44 Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds to date, with a target of 66 ICU beds by the end of the year, a 25 per cent increase over the level at the beginning of 2020;

— that the National Development Plan provides for health capital projects, including 2,600 acute hospital beds and 4,500 social care beds;

— the measures taken to ensure national coverage of community intervention teams and structured general practitioner access to diagnostic programmes;

— the additional allocation of €50 million to commence implementation of the recommendations of Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone, and €15 million once-off funding to combat Covid-19 related issues in mental health services;

— the implementation of a new standard operating procedure to ensure that children with disabilities have timely access to assessments of need and interventions;

— the progress made in relation to the Individual Health Identifier;

— the increased investment in the health services, including an increase of 6,000 more whole-time equivalent staff, with 2020 and 2021 seeing the biggest annual growth in staff since the HSE was established;

— that a multiannual plan to reduce waiting lists and bring waiting times in line with Sláintecare targets is being developed; and

— the publication of the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy & Action Plan

28 September 2021

2021 — 2023: Progress Report January – June 2021, which shows that the Government is largely on track with its implementation; and

agrees to:

— the continued implementation of the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy & Action Plan 2021 — 2023, to which the Government is committed and has the support of all parties; and

— support the Government’s measures in relation to the waiting list recovery plan for this year and the finalisation of the multiannual waiting list plan.”

I welcome this debate. We are all acutely aware of the waiting list challenges. The Government is acutely aware of them as well. We discuss them every day of the week.

In response to the pandemic, the broad range of mental health services and supports provided by the HSE and its partner organisations have been significantly expanded to meet existing and new and emerging need. There has been progress in respect of certain initiatives and I will go through them now. This has been achieved through developments in the national mental health clinical programmes and models of care. These programmes will not only promote standardisation of evidence-based care but also improve access to supports when and where they are needed.

Deputy Ward stated that he was concerned that of the €23 million that was allocated for Sharing the Vision, only €2.77 million has been spent to date. As of this week, we are up to €9 million, and recruitment is under way. Most of the money will be spent in quarter 4 of this year, and I can guarantee that none of that money will be repurposed. Take eating disorders, for example. The three existing eating disorder teams will be completed by the end of the year in addition to the establishment of three new teams. This will have a significant impact on improving access to these vital services.

The perinatal model of care has progressed significantly, with funding made available this year for the recruitment of outstanding staff. All six main hub sites are in operation and all 13 spoke sites now have mental health midwives in place. I know everybody will welcome the fact that we have 19 perinatal mental health midwives in place. Progress has also been made on the development of CAMHS telehubs, which will enhance access to mental health supports out of hours.

Other initiatives include the selection of Waterford, Dungarvan and south Kilkenny for provision of a crisis resolution team and the opening of a community café in Galway. Some €13.5 million was allocated this year to increase surge capacity for mental health beds during the pandemic.

Many speakers touched on the primary care psychology list. It is something I wanted to work on, so last month I announced the approval of €4 million to reduce the number of children and young people waiting over 12 months to access primary care psychology. That €4 million is for the spend between September and December of this year.

Work is progressing across all the CHOs on regional, local-based initiatives, including the recruitment of new staff. They are using public capacity, private capacity and locums at the weekends and doing overtime on Tuesday and Thursday evenings to try to tackle this. We are

acutely aware of these challenges but we must also have a sustainable future for primary care psychology. That will be addressed in the Estimates process.

I was delighted to announce earlier today that I had cleared a historic deficit in mental health funding, which had grown to €53 million by the end of 2020. This achievement is critical to ensuring that our mental health services can operate effectively and efficiently from a stable funding base and enable enhanced development going forward. This includes improved access and reduced waiting lists across a broad spectrum of mental health supports. It will, on a separate basis, enable the HSE to allocate €49 million to new developments in mental health. This includes the €23 million we have already spoken about from budget 2021 and €26 million in historical development funding. More than 400 new mental health staff are at various stages of recruitment as part of these developments. There are huge issues and challenges in recruiting staff. I am not happy about the fact that it takes 50 weeks to recruit somebody and that sometimes the post has to be backfilled. That is where we are seeing the challenges, but I am working really hard with my colleagues to see how we can tackle these problems.

To conclude, I will touch on the waiting list hours that were referred to earlier. Overall, the number of home support hours has increased, with the number of people now waiting reduced to 1,460. It was at a high last May of 7,295. The one point I wish to raise is that because we delivered in excess of 1.5 million additional home care hours up to July of this year, 1,200 people did not have to enter a nursing home. That is an important point to put on the record.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I listened to the Minister earlier and I think the biggest challenge he faces is that no one believes him. I am not talking about people on these benches; I think the people who are on the waiting lists do not believe him. We have a broken health system, and that is a big problem. We heard the numbers earlier: 900,000 of our citizens are on waiting lists. That is a staggering statistic. One in five people is on a waiting list for some form of healthcare. There are 36,000 people on the outpatient waiting list of Tallaght University Hospital. That is just one hospital. Of those 36,000, 12,000 have been waiting more than 18 months. That is not acceptable. Fine Gael has been in power for ten years. It has made zero progress in improving the waiting lists, and there is no real sign I can see that anything has changed. Waiting lists are up 15% since the beginning of the pandemic, and we heard the reasons the Government outlined tonight, but they have almost doubled since 2014. It is unacceptable that sick people who require urgent care are left in limbo for years waiting to see a hospital consultant. Of course, if you have money, you can skip the queue, and that is not right. Without urgently hiring key staff to fill posts, the problems will only get worse.

The health service needs major investment to boost capacity if it is to take on the waiting lists. The Government must use budget 2022 to drive money into targeted areas of the health service to seriously tackle waiting lists and overcrowding. We will hear about the biggest health budget ever, but that is irrelevant unless it is targeted and spent wisely. We are playing catch-up as our population grows every year. We need to spend more every year just to stand still. That is why we need targeted investment in key areas, as outlined in our motion. We need delivery of a major increase in beds, staff and diagnostic capacity to meet current needs and tackle waiting lists. We must introduce a centralised referral system and an integrated waiting list management system. We need a 21st-century health system. We cannot leave sick people on waiting lists for months and years and when they need vital treatment. We cannot consign them to a life of pain and suffering and a broken health service. The Minister has a big job ahead of him, but that is the reality.

28 September 2021

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: As my party's spokesperson on children, I will focus my short time on children. We know there are 106,000 children waiting for an assessment, treatment or a diagnostic scan in a public hospital. The largest waiting lists are in ear, nose and throat and general paediatrics. I do, though, acknowledge the work the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has done on the assessments. I know that that is an area she has been working on. She herself acknowledges a lot of the difficulty. One example in my constituency is somebody who has been waiting three years for speech and language therapy. We all know about early intervention and it being key. At three years, it is hard even to know what to say to a parent in that situation. It is really important that the occupational and speech and language therapy and all the other therapies that are needed are followed through on. If that is what the Department will focus on now, I welcome that because it is really important.

Developmental checks are absolutely crucial for young children. Many of these appointments have been pushed out due to Covid and then the cyberattack. People feel like there is always something, and it is important we reflect that message tonight because people are really frustrated. Doctors and consultants tell us routine procedures are being pushed further out and many children are not being seen until they are adults, which is a whole other issue.

In the time remaining, I want to raise an issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, the details of which I will email to her. It relates to a nursing home in Ballyragget in County Kilkenny, where a patient has been approved for home care but cannot find a carer and, as a result, has been in the home since last February. This is an example of a person who could be moved on from nursing home care. The family wants the person home and approval has been given for a home care package. All that is needed is a person to provide the care. This situation will lead to waiting lists. I conclude by commending my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, on his work on the motion.

Deputy David Cullinane: I had intended to respond to the debate by going through the Minister's opening speech and unpicking much of what he said. I will not do so, however, because I want to make a number of other points instead. Many Deputies have spoken tonight, from both Government parties and the Opposition, who obviously care about our health services. I care very deeply about healthcare. It is an issue in which I have taken an interest throughout my political career. For the 20 years I have been involved in politics, I have been interested in it because of what I have seen in my constituency. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is from the same constituency, as is Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, who was in the Chair before the Leas-Cheann Comhairle arrived. We have battled for radiotherapy services, a mortuary and cardiac services. People in the constituency have taken to the streets time and again to demand better healthcare. They have heard all sorts of promises, some of which were delivered over many years and others that were not delivered at all.

I also care about these issues because of the experience of my mam, whose story I have told before. She got sick a number of years ago and was ill for three or four months with stomach pains. Her condition got so bad over the Christmas period that my family brought her to University Hospital Waterford, where she was treated very well. She was taken into the emergency department, a preliminary inspection was done and she was told she would need a scan, for which, however, she would have to wait possibly six months. A staff member pulled the family members aside and told us: "I do not like what we have seen and the symptoms; you should take her to the private clinic and get a diagnosis." That is what we did and we paid for it. Other families would not be in a position to do so. She was diagnosed with cancer within three weeks and was then seen in St. James's Hospital, where she got very good treatment. Unfortunately,

she passed away in the palliative care centre in Harold's Cross, the staff of which gave her tremendous care.

I vowed at that time to do everything I can to end the two-tier health system. That is why it is so important that we bring about these major reforms in healthcare. It is about people's experiences. It is absolutely unacceptable that we have a two-tier system whereby if one has money and wealth, one can get quicker and faster care, while people who do not must wait longer for treatment. The Minister talked about the situation of Sarah earlier, which I am sure was heartfelt, and how he was able to solve a problem in that case. However, there are hundreds of thousands of people like Sarah right across the public healthcare system for whom we must provide.

It might not come as any surprise to the Minister that I want to be sitting where he is and for him to be sitting where I am. I want to be a future Minister for Health. In seeking to achieve that, I believe we must not so much stand up to vested interests but work with people to bring about the big changes that are necessary. We will have to face hard choices. For example, if we want to remove private healthcare from the public system to achieve equality, we are going to have to do it, not talk about it. If we want to realise universal GP care, then we are going to have to do it instead of talking about it. That is what I meant earlier when I referred to the snail's pace of progress on some of the major reforms. If the Government comes under pressure on some of those big challenges, I will be standing with the people who want to implement the major reforms and deliver a single-tier Irish national health service. I will be standing firmly there because I want those changes to be made.

I have heard many politicians, from many parties, talk about the Ministry of Health as a poisoned chalice. We hear all the time in the media that health is the one portfolio Ministers do not want to get. In my view, it is the one they should seek first because of the changes they can bring about and the impact they will have on people's lives. For every one of the 900,000 people who are on a waiting list, all the children on waiting lists and all of those waiting too long for assessments or to get into hospital and receive treatment, the current system is a disaster we need to fix. The challenge is not just the numbers of people on the lists but also the length of time they are waiting. I accept that the Minister is going to put a plan in place. I have a limited number of staff but I have produced an alternative budget this year that is credible, realistic and deliverable. I will launch it on Thursday and, as always, I will send it to the Minister. There are solutions and I am prepared to work with anybody, including the Government, to make them happen. I hope that what comes from this debate is that, once and for all, a serious plan is put in place to tackle the waiting list crisis and make the health service work for everyone.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A division has been called. In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), it is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening, Wednesday, 29 September 2021.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

28 September 2021

Rental Sector

88. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the changes he plans to make to the rent pressure zones if the harmonised index of consumer prices hits and breaches 4%. [46715/21]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: When the Minister introduced legislation to link rent reviews to the harmonised index of consumer prices, HICP, he said that inflation was running at approximately 0.4% in the previous four months. Of course, in the month the legislation was enacted, rental inflation was 1.9%, thereafter went up to 2.2% and is now at 3%. What will he do to ensure that if inflation continues to rise, people do not end up with rent caps that are higher than those applying to the reformed rent pressure zones, RPZs?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 introduced a targeted rent increase restriction of 4% per annum. The Deputy will recall that we brought forward some of the subsequent changes in legislation more quickly than we would have liked in order to deal with the roll-over of outstanding increases into an 8% rise. The Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021 introduced measures in July 2021 to better protect tenants with affordability challenges by extending the operation of RPZs until the end of 2024 and prohibiting any necessary rent increase in an RPZ from exceeding general inflation, as recorded by the harmonised index of consumer prices. This was a measure all parties supported, including the Deputy's party. It significantly reduced the level of permissible rent increases for approximately 74% of all tenancies within the RPZs. The legislation also made a number of changes to tenancies outside the RPZs.

When introducing those measures, I was very clear on the need to monitor inflation carefully. I said in the debate that I was aware inflation was rising. At the time, the HICP averaged some 0.73% per annum over the previous three years, but had risen to 1.6% per annum in the year ending June 2021. I needed to revise the RPZ rent control relatively quickly in July, which was accepted by the House, on a basis that could be independently verified. The 2021 Act provides that an index other than the HICP may be prescribed for the purposes of restricting rent increases in RPZs. Given the continuing rise in HICP inflation, up to 3% per annum in August, I am considering all legal options available to me to ensure effective rent controls are legally in force in RPZs to cap the rate of any rent increase where the general inflation rate is too high. I intend to bring this change forward by way of the housing and residential tenancies Bill 2021 before the end of this Dáil term. I will give further details presently.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister for his response. The difficulty for many on this side of the House is that for a long time we advocated for rent certainty when that was the right policy but rents have now risen so high that a rental increase of 2%, 3%, 4% or possibly 5% is not sustainable, particularly for renters who have experienced a more than doubling in the cost of renting in the past decade. There have been 40% rental increases in Dublin since 2016 and 20% increases across the State. I accept the Minister's bona fides with regard to his intention to bring something forward but my concern, particularly given where inflation is going, is that if there is any delay or lag in that, we could have the intolerable situation of the cap that has been in place as a result of the Government legislation being higher than the rent pressure zones. If the Minister brings something forward that tackles that issue, he will have willing allies on this side of the House but it needs to be done as a matter of urgency and preferably before inflation

hits or passes 4%, as a precautionary measure. I ask that he give an indication of what he is proposing. That might give Deputies on this side of the House and renters some reassurance.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was very clear at the time as to why I was bringing these measures through more quickly than I intended originally, that is, to deal with the 4% issue. On 8 July, I stated clearly in the House that, effectively, I would monitor it and keep it under review. I do not intend to delay on this issue. This was the fifth rent measure we brought forward within the 12-month period. I want to bring legislation forward in this term. We are working on it at the moment. The legislation I brought through the Houses in July means that we can also use other indices to look at capping those rent increases. Rents are too high. It was previously the case that rent increases were too high. That is why I brought in this legislation. We hope inflation will come down and that it will come down in the short to medium term but in that instance we have to consider other ways of capping to ensure it does not go above 4% and I intend to do that in this session. The joint committee will be involved in that also.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister. The crucial point is that the clock is ticking and that this was entirely foreseeable. In fact, I was not the only Deputy on the Opposition benches to say when the legislation was brought forward in May that this was likely to happen. If the Minister brings forward such a measure, it will get the support of the Opposition and, therefore, I urge him to bring it forward at the earliest possible opportunity. Of course, the worry is that a renter can currently face a rent increase of 3% if the landlord abides by the rules. We have seen from the recent Daft.ie and Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, reports that the overall level of rental inflation in quarter 2 was significantly above the 4% rent pressure zone cap. It is possible that, notwithstanding the link to the harmonised index, there could be general rental inflation above that level. We will find out whether that has been the case when we get the data from those two organisations for quarters 3 and 4. I hope we do not experience rental inflation at that level but, again, I am urging the Minister to be attuned to that because what we are also seeing now, as he is aware, is that due to Covid and people relocating, there are greater levels of rental inflation in areas where that had not traditionally been the case. The sooner he can bring forward this measure, the better.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I flagged this issue on 8 July, as did others, including Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. I raised this at the time that we were bringing forward measures quickly to deal with a particular issue. I flagged that I would be bringing forward a more comprehensive tenancy Bill in the autumn and we are going to do that. Let us not lose sight of the fact that the change the Government made by linking rent to inflation was significant. This inflationary effect has been in the very short term but the change the Government made was a big break with what happened in the past. Now we are linking rates to general inflation. Under the Act we passed, supported by the Deputy's party and others, thankfully, there are other options available to us and we are considering them right now. We are not going to delay on it. I note the Chairman of the joint committee, Deputy Matthews, is present. We will be seeking co-operation from all Members of the House to make sure any measures we bring forward are done efficiently, effectively and quickly.

Wastewater Treatment

89. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will make separate funding available to Irish Water to install wastewater treatment plants

28 September 2021

in towns and villages in which no such facility exists and in which housing cannot be built due to this lack of infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46452/21]

Deputy Seán Canney: I wish to raise an issue relating to Irish Water and its funding. Will a separate funding mechanism be made available to Irish Water to install wastewater treatment plants in towns and villages where no such facility currently exists and where houses cannot be built as a result of this lack of infrastructure? This is an important issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I am aware of the demand for wastewater infrastructure in towns and villages where there is no access to public infrastructure, particularly in County Galway, which the Deputy represents, and other areas of the country. Our Department builds its strategic water policy and infrastructure delivery programmes around the national planning framework 2018-2040 and the National Development Plan 2018-2027. Investment is primarily delivered through Irish Water. Our Department operates the rural water programme directly.

The programme for Government supports the uptake of Irish Water's small towns and villages growth programme 2020-2024 which will provide water and wastewater growth capacity in smaller settlements that would otherwise not be provided for in Irish Water's capital investment plan. The current focus of the programme is on locations within existing public water services infrastructure. Irish Water is subject to independent economic regulation by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. I understand an allocation of €97.5 million from the Department to Irish Water for this programme was approved by the commission.

Complementary to the Irish Water programme, the Department is currently examining wastewater requirements in the context of villages and settlements that do not have public wastewater infrastructure. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has instructed the relevant officials in the Department to prepare a report on this topic at national level. This report will include the analysis of a baseline survey of all rural local authorities to quantify and qualify the number of villages and settlements concerned. This process is at an advanced stage and the Minister will be in a position to consider the matter further in respect of the villages and similar settlements identified in the survey once he has received the final report.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Minister of State for the reply, but it does not give me confidence that something will be done in the immediate future. Let us take the example of Athenry, a town all present know well. Three years ago, the wastewater treatment plant was expanded to take in additional capacity of all the housing estates in the town. There is a pipe network contract to be completed for that. It was supposed to be finished by now but it has not even started. What I mean by that is that surveys may be under way. The answer I get is that this could be done in 2025, pending funding. At the same time, there are housing estates where raw sewage is flowing around gardens. There is a similar situation in Craughwell, where there is no municipal treatment. I have video footage of people there looking out their back window at raw sewage coming in on top of them. This is an intolerable situation and it is an environmental time bomb. We do not need more reports. Rather, we need to get to the nub of the issue, that is, funding.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I agree with the Deputy regarding the situation in Athenry. It is unacceptable in this day and age that raw sewage could be flowing from people's houses. Our Department will certainly give consideration to that with Irish Water specifically. It is fair to say that Project Ireland 2040 supports the growth of small towns and villages with regard

to water services infrastructure. The National Planning Framework 2018-20240 support proportionate growth of rural towns and a programme for new homes in small towns and villages with local authorities and public infrastructure agencies providing serviced sites, appropriate infrastructure to build homes and live in small towns and villages. I assure the Deputy that the particular situation in Athenry will be considered with Irish Water.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Minister of State for that. He talks about appropriate housing, appropriate ways of doing things and appropriate infrastructure. What about villages such as Abbeyknockmoy and Corofin where there is no municipal treatment plant and where no planning permission will be granted by the local authority or An Bord Pleanála because they say any development in these places is premature, pending the installation of a wastewater treatment plant? When I was a councillor in 2006 or 2007, before Irish Water came into being, there was a list of municipal treatment plants to be built by the local authority. There was a schedule. A feasibility study was done in Corofin. We are now in 2021, going into 2022, and that project is still not on the horizon. The Clare river, which runs right into Galway city, goes through the village. There are six existing housing estates. There is a threat of the village experiencing pollution in the not-too-distant future. We need to see the money coming in and the infrastructure being built.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: We expect the report the Minister has commissioned in respect of requirements for smaller villages and settlements that do not have access to public water and wastewater infrastructure to be completed in the coming weeks. It will be a help to answer the question posed by the Deputy. I appreciate that the preparation of the report includes a broad range of research and consultation with a large number of stakeholders, particularly local authorities. The research element of the report focuses on villages and similar settlements without public wastewater infrastructure in the context of compiling secondary data currently available and existing commitments made by Government to support the sustainable growth of rural economies and communities. At this stage, our Department has reported some high-level analysis of the survey results. These indicate that some 643 villages and similar settlements spread across 25 rural local authorities do not have access to public wastewater collection and treatment infrastructure. That is something we aim to address with Irish Water through the capital investment that we have in place.

Defective Building Materials

90. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he is committed to introducing some form of redress mechanism for homeowners with defective homes in Budget 2022 arising out of the ongoing work of the independent working group examining the issue of defective housing. [46716/21]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister is aware, the programme for Government includes a commitment to “examine the issue of defective housing in the first twelve months of Government, having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, ‘Safe as Houses’”. That report included the call for a latent defects redress scheme for homeowners who are affected by fire safety and water ingress defects.

The group has been meeting, but it appears that it is much delayed. The 12-month deadline has not been met. I ask the Minister to give us an update on the work of the group. In particular, is he hopeful that there will be some form of support for these homeowners in budget 2022?

28 September 2021

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. As he has stated, the programme for Government indeed sets out a number of commitments in respect of this important policy area of building defects. It is a programme for Government that I, with colleagues in Fine Gael and the Green Party, negotiated, within which we afforded the proper objective to tackle this issue. It provides for an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, Safe as Houses.

In this context, I established a working group to examine defects in housing. The plenary working group has been meeting monthly since March 2021. It has met every month, with the exception of August, in addition to subgroup meetings. I have been fully briefed right the way through and actually attended the initial meetings of the group. The group's terms of reference were adopted in May 2021. It took some time to get agreement. We wanted to ensure that there was agreement, particularly with the Apartment Owners' Network and the Construction Defects Alliance.

In regard to the working group's deliberations, the group will seek to engage with a wide range of interested parties, which it is doing, including homeowners, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals and industry stakeholders, among others, to examine the issue of defects in purpose-built apartment buildings and report to me on the matter. Consultation with the relevant parties has commenced and further arrangements in this regard are currently being put in place by the working group.

As the Deputy is aware, the group is being independently chaired. I am satisfied that the group is working effectively and efficiently on this complex matter. I look forward to a report in due course, following completion of the group's deliberations. I am not putting the group under any pressure to do that. Once I receive the report, I can assure the Deputy that I will give full consideration to its contents and as to how we move forward. Any speculation on the output of the working group at this stage is, in my view, premature.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The difficulty is that, from memory, the Minister announced the working group in September 2020. He appointed the Chair in January or February. The group did not have its first meeting in March. A lot of time was wasted because, in my view, officials from the Minister's Department were trying to impose very restrictive terms of reference. That is a matter of public record. Thankfully, we have slightly better terms of reference now, but that wasted almost the full year within which the programme for Government promised for this group to do its work. That is no fault of the members of the group.

However, as the Minister is aware, the problem is that today there are families who are faced with paying very significant levies to tackle fire safety defects, some of whom are in the Minister's own constituency and he knows them well. If there is not some measure in the budget, even interim measures while the Minister is awaiting the full report, those families will have to wait another year before there is a prospect of any redress.

I know that the Minister cannot tell me what is in the budget and it has not been agreed, but can he provide these families with any indication that there may be something in the budget, even interim measures while he is awaiting the more comprehensive recommendations of the working group's report?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As the Deputy stated, it took time to get the group up and running and the terms of reference agreed. It was important that we got agreement from all in-

volved as to the terms of reference, to move it forward and to put it on an independent footing. It is fair to say that it took some time to get the terms of reference agreed. Again, I did not want to pressure people into having terms of reference imposed upon them, because it is the homeowners and apartment owners who we want to help in this regard. We are very serious about doing that. To be fair, in the last Dáil, and in this one too, we have taken a cross-party approach to this issue, which is a most serious issue societally. I know it well in my own constituency of Dublin Fingal. I am committed to delivering on this issue. I do not want to rush the group in finishing its work. What I will say is that a suite of options and recommendations will be put forward. As Minister, I am serious about moving that forward to help people. I know of apartment complexes where people have been asked to pay levies of €15,000 to €20,000. It is a very heavy fee for them to pay.

Deliberations are important and it is important that we get it right. I do not want to rush it. However, as soon as the report comes to me, it will be considered.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Nobody is asking the Minister to put pressure on the group to rush the report; it is the very opposite. However, interim measures could have been considered. For example, for over two years now, the Construction Defects Alliance has been calling for access for homeowners who have had to pay those levies of €10,000 to €20,000 to the same treatment as private landlords currently have, whereby they can write off the cost of capital improvements against future tax liabilities, although preferably over a shorter period of time. That is something the Minister could have done, or at least argued with his Cabinet colleagues to have included in this budget.

My question - and it is not an attempt to get the Minister to rush the final work of the group - is whether there have been any discussions or is there any prospect of any interim measures being included in budget 2022, either for those who, through no fault of their own, have had to pay the levies this year or last year under pressure from their insurance companies, or for those who may be forced to pay next year because of the delays in the deliberations of the working group, which, again, are no fault of the majority of the members of that group?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I understand that point being made by the Deputy. The Construction Defects Alliance did make a pre-budget submission which I received. It has also gone to the Department of Finance for consideration. Regardless of any measures in this future budget, which has not been decided, we want to help these homeowners. We want to put a process in place that will be sustainable into the future. Unfortunately, there are potentially thousands of homes affected by this issue. There is a cost involved and a duty to the sector and to those who built these homes in a defective way, to insurers, to banks, and indeed, to the construction sector. That is something we are also looking at.

I know the Deputy is not asking us to rush a decision on this. A pre-budget submission has been received and is with the Department of Finance. I received a copy of it. However, my big focus is on helping the group to conclude its work. I expect that when the report is concluded, it will go to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage for further deliberations as to how we can move forward.

28 September 2021

Approved Housing Bodies

91. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department conducts any oversight or reviews with respect to the way funding provided to approved housing associations is spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46006/21]

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise the issue of reviews, or indeed monitoring, of the funding given to housing bodies. Regarding approved housing bodies, AHBs, does the Department conduct any reviews or monitoring of how the money is spent by these bodies?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Approved housing bodies are a key delivery partner for the provision of social and affordable housing. My Department does not administer funds directly to AHBs, rather, it is primarily provided to local authorities which, in turn, advance the funding to AHBs. Social housing provision through AHBs can only be provided with the approval and oversight of the local authority. Specifically in respect of the cost rental equity loan, my Department provides the funding directly to the Housing Agency, which administers the scheme, and the agency then advances the funds to the AHBs as projects are progressed.

As with all funding provided by my Department, funding for the local authorities that support AHBs is fully compliant with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform requirements relating to the management of and accountability for grants from Exchequer funds. Furthermore, detailed grant approval, payment and performance monitoring arrangements are operated by my Department on funding approvals involving AHBs, consistent with the public spending code and the capital works management framework. My own Department's arrangements in this regard are subject to the oversight of the Comptroller and Auditor General while, additionally, the activities of our local authorities involving AHBs are subject to audit by the Local Government Audit Service as part of its annual financial audit of local authority financial statements.

9 o'clock

A new strengthened regulatory regime for AHBs has also been put in place. The Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority, AHBRA, was formally established on 1 February 2021. A key role of the authority is to encourage and facilitate better governance, administration and management, including corporate governance and financial management, of the AHB sector.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for that response. While I am aware that the responsibility falls primarily on the local authorities, does the Minister of State not believe it might be necessary or proper for the Department to have some oversight of the expenditure? Residents of Chesterfield Close, Birr, County Offaly, who are going through the housing body Respond, have been waiting for a considerable time for their houses to be properly insulated. What is happening is a bit rich coming from a Government that has talked about energy efficiency and bringing homes to an energy rating of B2 in the programme for Government. Surely if there is no oversight by the Department, it speaks volumes. A significant amount of taxpayers' money is involved. Since 2016, €250 million has been received by Respond. Does the Minister of State not believe it is appropriate for the Department to have oversight of expenditure?

Deputy Peter Burke: It is appropriate. The Department has adequate oversight. In the

first instance, I would point the Deputy to the investigation of the Comptroller and Auditor General, the report on which was published in 2018. Three recommendations were made in respect of the Department and the AHB sector, namely, recommendations 10.1 to 10.3. We sent a response in March 2021 stating that all the recommendations had been fully implemented and that there was full compliance. Aside from that, we are establishing the AHBRA, which will provide an extra layer of governance and safeguard the public finances. All eight schemes that are currently approved by the Department are in line with the public spending code and all circulars issued through the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Therefore, there are significant, robust safeguards in place to ensure public funds are spent adequately and that value for money is obtained.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I acknowledge that the Minister of State mentioned that three recommendations were made in 2018 but I am wondering about his reference to the regulatory authority. What measures will be taken in terms of oversight? The taxpayer is entitled to know precisely what measures will be taken and the monitoring that will be done. Surely it would make sense to monitor yearly. A housing body has been in receipt of €250 million since 2016. While it is building some new homes, it is not carrying out the basic maintenance of homes. Chesterfield Close, Birr, is a prime example. There are 26 houses and apartments, all of which need proper insulation. This is a basic need. Why are the basic maintenance needs not addressed by a housing body that has been in receipt of €250 million since 2016? These are the questions the Department needs to be asking. I have brought this issue up with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in the past. It is certainly one on which I will continue to ask questions.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am not aware of the specific case but I can confirm that the AHB sector has constructed, since 2016, over 15,000 units. Of those, 60% were either through building or Part V. That is a significant aspect.

On the new regulatory regime that is going to be established, internal audit procedures will be set up. There will be monitoring of financial risk and it will be ensured that proper books of account are held. Currently, there is significant oversight under the public sector spending code, the circulars of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Local Government Audit Service. All are watching in on behalf of the public to ensure the funds are spent appropriately. If the Deputy has a concern about a particular AHB, the mechanisms exist for her to raise it. I encourage her to do so because the oversight exists. The teeth are sharp and ready to respond in any of these areas. Half a billion euro was put into the AHB sector last year, and that is delivering houses on the ground for all our citizens.

Housing Provision

92. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason his Department is using the public spending code as an excuse for not directly funding Dublin City Council to develop the site at Oscar Traynor Road as a fully public housing development in the most cost-effective and affordable manner. [46717/21]

Deputy Denise Mitchell: My question is to ask the Minister's Department the reason it is using the public spending code as an excuse for not directly funding Dublin City Council to develop the Oscar Traynor Road as a fully public housing development in the most cost-effective and affordable manner.

28 September 2021

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is the question in the name of Deputy Ó Broin.

Investment in social and affordable housing is a major component of the State's capital expenditure. Under Housing for All, there is to be a sum of over €4 billion per year, which dwarfs the €2.9 billion the Deputy's party proposed as part of its submission on Housing for All.

As Minister, it is my duty to ensure that capital investment projects are prepared and delivered to achieve maximum value for money. The Deputy might agree with that. The public spending code sets out the value-for-money requirements for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects in Ireland. That is public money – taxpayers' money, Exchequer money.

During project life cycles, sponsoring agencies, or local authorities in the case of social and affordable housing, must consider and evaluate such matters as project rationale, options appraisal, both financial and economic, and procurement strategies. As approving authority, my Department, and the Government in the case of public funding in excess of €100 million, must assess and approve projects as they advance through stages of the life cycle. Considering the question that Deputies Ó Broin and Mitchell put, I do not regard it as appropriate and prudent to set aside the requirements of the public spending code in respect of any proposed public expenditure of this scale. It is incredible that the Deputies would.

Increasing the supply of social and affordable homes is a priority, clearly shown in our Housing for All strategy, on which we just had statements and on which we will have more tomorrow. Following the recent launch of the strategy, I issued last week social housing targets to all chief executives, including in Dublin City Council. Of the national target of over 50,000 new social homes, I am asking Dublin City Council to deliver nearly 9,100 in the years in question through its own projects and working with the Housing Agency.

The site at Oscar Traynor Road is located in an area with a clear need for social housing. My Department and I have consistently supported Dublin City Council's efforts to advance the proposal on the site, including through an agreement in principle on funding the social homes and supporting affordable purchase homes through the affordable housing fund, the serviced site fund. This is specifically what was asked for. I will come back to the Deputy on the other points.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank the Minister for his response but, as he is aware, earlier this year the majority of councillors on Dublin City Council proposed a plan that would deliver genuinely affordable, social and cost-rental homes for workers and families on Oscar Traynor Road. Councillors look to the Minister to deliver in this regard. He and his Department are using the public spending code as a cop-out. He is hiding behind his Department. I look to him to make the plan a reality.

When will he ensure that we will have public homes on this public land? This is what the councillors are asking of him, and this is what the many people who are caught up in the housing crisis are also asking of him.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That was a good sound bite but let us get to reality. Under the Affordable Housing Act, I have-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Gould might find the housing crisis funny-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: I find the Minister's responses funny.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: He has been at this all evening. He is kind of giddy this evening. He should just relax there for a minute and we will get back to the facts.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am relaxed.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The fact of the matter here is that the proposed development at Oscar Traynor Road has the potential to deliver well over 800 new homes, as Deputy Mitchell knows, in addition to extensive community and recreational facilities. The Deputy may be aware that Dublin City Council has indicated that any new plan would have to revert to the drawing board in that there would have to be a lengthy design, planning and procurement process. The Deputy's colleagues in the council were told that this could delay the project by more than five years. I am not going to stand over that so I have met both lord mayors, including the current one. We will support any revisions to the plan that make sense so we can deliver social and affordable homes at the site, which I visited as recently as July. I met residents in the area who want homes on the site. There should be no more delays and objections from Sinn Féin; rather, there should be real delivery of real homes for real people.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: As the Minister said, workers and families out in the community are crying out for real, affordable social and cost-rental housing. The proposals the Minister is talking about that were put before the council are - is everyone ready? - €450,000 for a three-bedroom apartment and €1,500 in respect of a month's rent for a two-bedroom apartment.

The Minister will agree with me that this is crazy and that it is not affordable. He can be the Minister who delivers 100% public housing on public lands on the Oscar Traynor site by supporting our councillors. He can cut through the red tape and fast-track this plan. Does the Minister want to do this? Will he do this?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This Government has a real plan to deliver affordable and social homes. That might look good on the Deputy's social media pages for her little sound bite.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: It is not my social media. This is what the council has been given.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I did not interrupt the Deputy once. Does she want to hear what is really happening?

In the affordable housing fund that we launched, we can increase the subvention up to €100,000, which is exactly what Dublin City Council, DCC, was seeking and doing it for. The plan that Sinn Féin has for Oscar Traynor Road, in the Deputy's constituency, would drive this project back five, six or seven years and I am not going to-----

Deputy Denise Mitchell: No, the Minister can cut through. We are going to ask the people to pay €1,500 per month for cost rental.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Mitchell might not be aware or she just might not want to hear the facts.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: These are the facts.

28 September 2021

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is hardly any point in trying to answer a question if the Deputy does not want to hear the answer. I met the former Lord Mayor Hazel Chu, the Lord Mayor Alison Gilliland and senior executives in DCC because we want to move this forward. I am serious about delivering homes for real people, not sound bites or stunts in the Dáil.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: This is not a sound bite.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The reality is that we made the changes that DCC has sought. The question is whether Sinn Féin councillors will vote for a revised plan that will deliver homes for people. Its track record up until now is that it has not, and we are going to do it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you Minister, I am moving on. We are over time.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: That is not affordable.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy does not want to hear the answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am moving on. This is the end.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: In what world is that affordable?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They are the facts, I am afraid. We will deliver homes at Oscar Traynor Road for real people in the area.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The Minister is on a different planet if he thinks €450,000 is affordable.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It might not suit the Deputy, though.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have a little co-operation más é do thoil é?

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Local Authorities

93. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he is satisfied with the current allocation of resources and staffing levels in planning departments at a local authority level; if his attention has been drawn to the extra demands that will be put on these departments with regard to the requirements under the large scale residential development Bill, the Maritime Area Planning Bill and the monitoring and reporting proposals in the draft development plan guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46310/21]

Deputy Steven Matthews: I want to ask the Minister of State about the current level of resources and staffing at local authority level in planning services, especially in light of the extra pressures that will be put on them by the planning and development (amendment) (LSRD) Bill, the Maritime Area Planning Bill and the new draft development plan guidelines, which call for extra monitoring and measuring on development plans. This is a good thing but I simply want to ensure we have good staff resources to carry out all those extra duties.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Matthews. I am anxious to ensure that the planning authorities are appropriately resourced to meet the demands of Housing for All and the national development plan, NDP. I recognise that changing work demands are being placed on local authorities from the strong terrestrial and marine planning legislation and the monitoring required from development plans.

For that reason, Housing for All refers to the need in action 24.1 to ensure there is sufficient resourcing to meet the scale and ambition in the plan. In particular, reference is made to the need for planning resources to deliver an average of 33,000 units per annum as well as the skills and resources necessary to deliver on urban regeneration and the Town Centre First policy, which relate to both planning and economic departments within local authorities.

This requirement was highlighted at a recent meeting with chief executives of local authorities. I am committed to ensuring that the resourcing is made available through the workforce planning process. The issue goes beyond the funding of posts. It also addresses the need to deal with the building of new skills and increasing digitalisation of the planning service. We received a submission from the Irish Planning Institute on this wider skills and resourcing issue and expect that this will be an important issue to be considered in the context of the planning advisory forum, which I chair and which I expect will have its first meeting in October.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I put the question in the context of the huge amount of work that is done at local authority level, of which the Minister of State will be aware. Our planning services are very professional and offer very professional services to everybody who engages with them, whether that is through the development plan process or other areas.

Development plans are getting more and more complex and we need to incorporate a lot of environmental law and climate law. It has become a much more complex process. The consent process is becoming more complex for them as well, especially with the LSRD Bill. Whereas An Bord Pleanála would have led it under the strategic housing development process, it will now fall to local authorities to carry out those pre-planning consultations. We recently had a committee session on that issue, during which we heard concerns about the resources available to local authorities and the pressures they will be put under to meet the tight timelines in the LSRD Bill. I am, therefore, concerned about that, as well as the need to ensure that enforcement, which has always been the weakest part of planning, is well resourced.

Deputy Peter Burke: I concur with the Deputy. It is a very important to ensure that we maximise our resources and skill set within the local authority sector. One thing I see as I go around the 31 local authority networks is how important it is to have the right skills in the right places.

In connection with the Deputy's issues on bringing the two-stage process back to the local authorities on the ground and ensuring that decisions are made locally, we will obviously consult with the local authority network to ensure the resources are there to manage that.

I also mention the huge issue of digitalisation of our planning system, which is to be finalised and finished by quarter 2 of 2022, with Tipperary County Council and Galway County Council in quarter 4 of this year. That will be a single process for submissions, applications, fee structure and appeals, which will obviously give strength to and simplify the planning process. It is very important to bring the citizen right to the heart of planning in his or her community. These measures will assist in doing that, and, obviously, the marine Bill will ensure, through

the maritime area regulatory authority, MARA, a very strong and robust regulatory approach.

Deputy Steven Matthews: It is reassuring to hear that the e-planning system is progressing so well. That will bring many efficiencies to the entire planning system and cut down on those masses of paperwork that are involved in a planning application. That is, therefore, a positive move.

I agree with the Minister of State about the range of services that are required now in planning. I talk about things like county architects and biodiversity officers. We see in active travel how that will also tie into our Town Centre First policies. The compulsory purchase order scheme we are going to bring into Housing for All will put those continued pressures on our local authorities. It is where we see a lot of the action and interaction between communities arising from policy we create here. I am glad to hear the Minister of State has met the chief executives and is aware of and working on those resource issues.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Matthews makes a fair point. We also need to take into account, and we all accept the necessity of, the national broadband plan, NBP, roll-out. National Broadband Ireland, NBI, has stated that if this is to be accelerated, it will have an absolute requirement for resource allocation as regards planning permissions and road opening licences, particularly. NBI is referring to planners and engineers and said that it will need that sort of resource to be guaranteed. That is even with the streamlining that has occurred with the section 254 guidelines.

We also need to take into account that sometimes we have the local development plan, the tail-end of which we have going on in County Louth at the minute, and we have an element of separation between the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, the local authority planners and even the officials at Department level. That needs to be streamlined. We have to finally have a real conversation on what we can provide for rural communities to provide sustainable communities and housing for those who live in those areas.

Deputy Peter Burke: In response to Deputy Matthews, absolutely; it is so important to see the value of the skill set of those people who are delivering services to the local authority. I recently visited Tipperary County Council, where the county architect, Mr. Liam Ryan, took me through a number of developments. I could see first-hand his input and imprint and how he changed developments to make them much more sustainable and a lot more suitable for the citizens in the area. It is absolutely important. We lost many skills from our local authorities through the post-recessionary period. We really have to drive those back. The Deputy also referenced the planning system. The Local Government Management Agency is overseeing that process. As for our Towns Centre First initiative, there will be proposals before Cabinet in November and that is progressing well.

We are updating the rural planning guidelines and we have to have a robust mechanism to ensure that through our Town Centres First initiative, there will be strong options for people to reside in towns and villages throughout the country. The Deputy acknowledged and understands the demand for rural housing on the other side of the coin.

Vacant Properties

94. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress that has been made in bringing vacant homes back into use in Cork city and county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46470/21]

Deputy James O'Connor: I am delighted the Minister is in the Chamber to respond to a couple of questions on dereliction. In the context of the Government's plans to tackle dereliction and bring back vacant units into use as homes throughout Cork county and city, will the Minister update the House on some of the work he is doing in that areas? Given the crisis we are in, it would be prudent for the Department to give a particular focus to this issue.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for the question, which he has raised with me directly in the past, as have other Members. It is important we ensure that the existing housing stock is utilised to the full extent, including by providing a targeted, effective and co-ordinated approach to identifying and tackling vacancy throughout Ireland. That is why there are very strong actions in the Housing for All plan that the Government has adopted in that area, some of which I will now outline.

We are pursuing a wide range of measures to make more efficient use of our stock, including a new local authority-led programme to help local authorities buy or compulsory purchase order, CPO, 2,500 vacant homes in their areas that can then be sold on the open market to ensure homes do not lie vacant. This is on top of local authorities CPOing homes for their public housing stock. I want some of those vacant homes to be used for first-time buyers who want to get on the ladder in towns and villages throughout the country. We have reformed the fair deal scheme to remove disincentives to selling or renting unused homes, which affects 9,000 properties. We made the legislative change in July in respect of sales, while in this quarter, with the help of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, we are moving to deal with the issue with regard to rental.

The Croí Cónaithe fund, to be delivered by local authorities for the provision of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, will enable people to live within towns and villages in all counties, including Cork and the Deputy's constituency, in a sustainable way. There is also the Historic Towns initiative, which is a capital grant scheme operated in conjunction with the Heritage Council. This initiative will be adjusted in order that there will be a particular focus to encourage private owners and-or occupiers to bring vacant floor area in historic buildings back into use. Planning exemptions, an issue I might return to, will be made available for above-shop conversions. A number of measures in Housing for All will make a big difference in respect of vacancy.

Deputy James O'Connor: It is important to put the matter into context. We are in one of the greatest housing crises the State has ever faced and we need to use every resource we have at our fingertips, including the bringing back into use of vacant units throughout many towns and communities in my constituency and Cork city and around the country. One issue that has not been mentioned much in this House relates to the fact we are facing an international commodity crisis. It is yet to be established what effect this may have on the international economy, not to mention domestically. It would be prudent for the Government to put further focus on using some of the existing housing stock, which may be able to be delivered rapidly through the renovation of many derelict sites throughout the country. No matter where one goes in Ireland, in the main street of almost every town, particularly in the rural towns of many Deputies, the

issue of dereliction is a blight. Easy initiatives such as those that have been proposed by the Government, such as giving funding to this issue to work with local authorities, will be crucial to deliver the additional housing stock we desperately need.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is correct and that is why this is such a focus of what we want to do in the housing plan. Utilising our existing stock makes sense in the context of climate action and carbon. We do not have to build all the new stock we need; rather, we must utilise what we have. Our Town Centres First approach is also crucial. I have been travelling throughout Ireland and I have seen the issue in my constituency, both urban and rural. The levels of vacancy in some places is shocking. People who want to get on the housing list will, with some help we will give them, be able to renovate a home and make it their own. Moreover, we will help our local authorities in a more efficient way, through the housing agencies, to CPO stock as well. I will move on planning exemptions for above-shop living, a nut that has not been cracked over recent years. The Ministers of State, Deputy Burke and Noonan, and I are working hard to do that, although it will require some tough decisions to enable more live people to live above shop in our towns and villages.

Deputy James O'Connor: Many Deputies in constituency clinics and offices will have experienced the challenges constituents have in respect of securing one-bedroom accommodation. We know the pressures on social housing waiting lists throughout the country and my constituency is no different in that regard. Bringing vacant units back into use for housing could have an effect in this regard, particularly for people who want to downsize. Not everyone would like to sell their home and downsize to smaller units or to move from where they reside, but it is something I deal with regularly. Many people want to move into town centres where they have easy access to services on foot and to more socialising and other aspects of life that, perhaps, when people are living in less congregated settings, can be an issue for them as they grow older. It could make a remarkable difference to that problem if the Government were to give a further focus in this area.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before the Minister responds, two other Deputies have indicated.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I commend Deputy O'Connor on submitting his question. It was specific to Cork city and county but it is an issue throughout the country, as he quite rightly pointed out. There is a great opportunity in the budget in two weeks' time to help address this issue and a number of measures could be implemented. One such measure I feel strongly about relates to the thousands of properties people are sitting on throughout the country. There is no incentive for them to go to market and the supply just is not there. The Government could give a generous window in respect of, for example, capital gains tax where someone sells to a first-time buyer, for a certain period, namely, a year and a half or two years, in order to get the properties on the market. It could also help that first-time buyer with schemes such as the home renovation incentive, HRI, scheme or help-to-buy in respect of such properties. That could get an awful lot of new units into the market very quickly and get very positive results. There are thousands these units throughout the country and it is an absolute shame, in the midst of a severe housing crisis, that this is happening.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I feel as though I am at born-again revival listening to Deputies from the Government parties talking about thousands of vacant and derelict properties. The official figure is more than 92,000. In Cork city and county - I thank Deputy O'Connor for raising the question - there are more than 9,000 vacant properties. The Minister indicated that he has

been travelling throughout the State examining the vacancies and stated it is shocking. Did he just wake up this morning and realise that?

When the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, was the Minister with responsibility for housing - I want to educate people about this - he came to Cork City Council in that capacity five years ago and I told him to examine the fair deal scheme, which the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, just mentioned. I said the same to the Eoghan Murphy, who succeeded the Minister, Deputy Coveney, two years ago. They both said they would examine the issue and two years ago the then Minister talked about above-shop living as well. We discussed that in Cork City Council years ago.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, referred to CPOs. Parts of Cork city, on our main streets, that Cork City Council is finally CPOing were derelict and vacant for more than 20 years, in virtually every street in Cork. The Minister's party was in the confidence and supply agreement with Fine Gael and allowed this to happen.

Deputy James O'Connor: Where is the Deputy's solution?

Deputy Thomas Gould: I gave the then Minister, Deputy Coveney, the solutions five years ago.

Deputy Seán Canney: I agree wholeheartedly with what Deputy Griffin said about second-hand properties. I have submitted other questions on the matter, which we will come to. We need to incentivise first-time purchasers of second-hand properties. We need to ensure the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme will be available in respect not only of the purchase price but also of the cost of the refurbishment of second-hand properties. If we do that and focus on the many empty houses that can be brought back into use, we will not have to build new houses only. We can bring town living back by ensuring we give incentives to first-time buyers of second-hand houses. It could be, perhaps, an exemption from planning or ensuring they can retrofit with some type of grant aid. It is important to do that. I compliment Deputy Griffin, because this is something I have been speaking about for the last year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Are you complimenting yourself?

Deputy Seán Canney: No.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Minister to reply.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy O'Connor and those Deputies who made constructive comments about what we have to do. We have outlined very clearly in Housing for All the measures we are going to take on vacancy. They are serious measures and they must be taken. I point out to Deputy Gould that I am acutely aware of that. I have not woken up just yesterday. I know it, and I know we have a responsibility to get them back into use. More important, for the Members who are genuinely interested in seeing solutions to it, there are things under the Croí Cónaithe fund whereby we will be able to provide grant aid to people who wish to buy those homes. We are going to do that to help first-time buyers. It will not be done through the help-to-buy scheme but through our Department. We will also be providing funding for serviced sites in towns and villages. We are very serious about making real progress in this area. It is not about soundbites, shouting at people or shouting people down, but providing real homes for real people while also putting life back into our towns, villages and cities. That is why the Croí Cónaithe cities fund and the towns fund are crucial. I ask Members to acquaint

themselves with them.

Housing Provision

95. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the progression of social housing developments in County Carlow. [46445/21]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is great to see three Ministers here tonight, which is very important. Affordable and social housing are more important now than ever. Can the Minister outline the status of the progression of social housing developments in County Carlow?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Deputy Murnane O'Connor joined the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and I at the opening of three wonderful housing projects in Castlecomer and Kilkenny city last week, which is always a positive day. It is so uplifting to hand keys over to families and new tenants for very high-quality, A2-rated, highly efficient and well-designed homes. That is what we are attempting to achieve, and will achieve, with Housing for All.

Increasing the supply of social and affordable homes is a priority for this Government, as shown clearly in the new Housing for All strategy. Following the recent launch of the strategy, last week we issued social housing targets to all local authority chief executives for the five years 2022 to 2026. Of the national target of over 50,000 new social homes, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is asking Carlow County Council to deliver 464 over those years, through its own projects and also working with the housing associations. I acknowledge that Carlow County Council, with good support from public representatives, has always delivered well on its social housing targets to date. It also has a solid pipeline of new projects in place and I am keen that it advances these as speedily as possible.

New social housing projects are already on-site in areas such as at Chapelstown in Carlow town and at Ballickmoyler in Graigcullen, while I hope to see others such as the 22 homes planned for Gleann na Bearú in Bagenalstown move through planning and procurement as soon as possible and start on-site. Under Housing for All, the funding is in place to support Carlow County Council and all councils, and the housing associations to get these housing projects built.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I was delighted to meet the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in Castlecomer last week. I welcome the fact that Carlow local authority has been given the target of 464 homes. However, I have concerns. One relates to the HAP scheme to apply to go on the local authority housing list. As I said previously, Carlow's ceiling is too low. Second, the Simon Communities is saying that HAP is not the answer to our problems. I agree with that. While I welcome the AHBs and the fact that we are looking at affordable housing through all local authorities, because Carlow does not have any, we must address these issues as quickly as possible. There is one issue I wish to address, and I have three issues to put to the Minister of State tonight. Recently, I have been working with people who are on the Carlow County Council local authority list and who now might wish to move to Laois County Council or Kildare County Council. If they go onto another local authority list, they lose their years on the Carlow County Council housing list. That is unacceptable. These changes are easy enough to do. Can the Minister of State put something in Housing for

All whereby if somebody wants to go from one local authority housing list to another, he or she does not lose his or her place on the housing list?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: In terms of the social housing pipeline for Carlow, to respond to the Deputy's question, the construction status report for the first quarter of 2021 showed 13 projects, to deliver 229 social homes, were either at design or planning stage or on-site in Carlow. Details of these projects are available on the construction status report. In addition, there has been some impact from Covid-19 which resulted in some restrictions on construction activity from 8 January to 12 April this year. However, the restrictions allowed for designated social housing projects scheduled for completion by 30 April to continue. Ten projects, delivering 140 new social homes, continued construction under the designations in County Carlow.

We will take up the issue raised by the Deputy with regard to moving to different local authority housing lists.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Last week, I brought my first Bill to the Dáil. It provides that people who apply to go on the local authority housing list only have to wait for three weeks. There are 31 local authorities and we do not know how long it is going to be. There could be information sent and then coming and going. That is my Bill for the future and it has the support of the parliamentary party.

My other question relates to a huge issue. Every day I have people coming to my clinics who, through no fault of theirs, have separated. Once their name is on a mortgage or a house, they cannot qualify to go back on another housing list or qualify for supports. I ask the Minister of State to address this urgently.

On another matter, I wish to thank the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I have been working on a major project with Carlow town council relating to a big housing project in Carlow town. It is in an area where there is a lot of housing and many of the houses need support. They have never had services. This is a local community project that will serve thousands of houses and give them the services they need. I thank the Minister for sending officials from the Department next week. I just want to say that everyone is doing their best and I know we can deliver.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: With regard to the community centre hub at Tullow Road in Carlow town, the Deputy made the valid point that the community hub could serve over 2,000 houses on the Tullow Road. It is a vital amenity for the community and will provide a lifeline for children and the community alike. The land is owned by Carlow County Council and, as such, the project is being led by Carlow County Council as there was a necessity for this project to service the community. The estimated cost of the hub is €2.5 million. Funding for such a hub would not be provided under the housing capital budget, especially when there is no new housing being developed in that area. However, given that the issue has been raised, we plan to visit Carlow town to look at the area and to consider any options with the local authority when we get an opportunity. With regard to Housing for All, a key component of the policy is creating sustainable communities, so a project like this is something that deserves worthy consideration.

28 September 2021

Housing Policy

96. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the development of serviced sites in towns and villages across the country for persons to build private homes, with particular interest in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46230/21]

110. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the work being undertaken by his Department to develop a town centres first approach in an Irish context; the international models being considered; the stakeholders being consulted; when the work may be complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46332/21]

Deputy Alan Dillon: I am seeking an update on the new Croí Cónaithe fund to service sites in regional towns and villages, which is a key feature of the Housing for All strategy. It appears that it has enormous potential to service sites in regional towns and villages in Mayo and throughout the country. I would appreciate if the Minister could provide details about this policy and how it will, in practice, increase the provision of serviced sites over the coming years.

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 96 and 110 together.

Housing for All recognises the challenges in facilitating owner-occupation in towns, where viable sites available for building of new homes are in short supply. There is significant potential for local authorities to support home ownership in these areas by making available serviced sites at a reduced cost or providing support towards the refurbishment of vacant properties where the level of vacancy or dereliction is high. A pathfinder programme will be initiated as part of a new Croí Cónaithe towns fund to facilitate the making available of some 2,000 sites for homes by 2025. My Department is currently working with the Housing Agency to develop an operational basis for this new fund.

Additionally, a town centre first interdepartmental group was established by my Department and the Department of Rural and Community Development in November 2020 to consider the regeneration of towns and villages nationally. A Town Centre First advisory group has also been established, which I chair, to enable the experiences of a broader group of stakeholders to be brought to bear in informing the new policy. As part of this process, various examples and case studies are being considered with a view to aligning best practice within the national context.

The Town Centre First policy, details of which are expected to be finalised in quarter 4 this year, will align the activities of the Croí Cónaithe and other related funds in a coherent framework that will supply compact growth in vibrant, liveable cities and towns to deliver improved options for both owner-occupiers and renters at all income levels. A future call for proposals will be open to all counties and local authority areas, including Mayo shortly.

We are concluding our work on the Town Centre First initiative. I have been privileged to chair the advisory group which has a range of stakeholders across a broad area. We have seen other towns like Skibbereen and Westport develop in recent years. Towns like that were not an overnight success. Considerable work, planning and community engagement took place to bring them to where they are. With more strategic thinking along with better structuring and enhancing of current grants, in line with Croí Cónaithe, we can really unlock the potential in

many of our towns and cities.

As Deputy Ó Cathasaigh will be aware, I was in Waterford and saw the work being done there through the repair and lease scheme, which is vital in bringing vacant properties back into use. It is incredible that more than half of such properties nationally have been in that county. Great work is being done there and improvements have been made in taking the most vulnerable of our society out of emergency accommodation in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation. Great credit is due to Waterford for achieving that.

I was also privileged to be in Castlebar to see the work going on there, with €8.53 million allocated to the historical core and €2.5 million to the barracks. I know Deputy Dillon was centrally involved in delivering €11 million for Castlebar. The Imperial Hotel dates back to 1790 and the old post office dates back to 1904. Such major historical features will breathe life into Castlebar, supporting citizens and improving the liveability of the town which is so important in such counties.

A considerable amount of exciting work is coming through and hopefully the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, will be able to bring it to Cabinet by November. From then on, we will see a more coherent structured approach to unlocking the potential of all our towns and villages.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister of State for updating the House with that detailed response. Ideally Croí Cónaithe will be a key driver in providing and increasing the availability of developed lands as soon as possible. I thank the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for two great projects funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage through the urban regeneration development fund, URDF, for the Castlebar historical core and the old military barracks.

However, to maximise the impact of these regeneration projects, they also need to go hand in hand with an increased supply of housing to boost the population in towns and villages such as Castlebar. There is considerable demand throughout Mayo, in Ballina, Westport and Castlebar, for increasing the supply of housing. The rate of population growth in Mayo is 4.2%, one of the highest in the country. There is high demand and a major shift post the pandemic to move back home. We need to move past talking about providing new funds to serviced sites and open applications to local authorities so that they can apply.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the Minister of State for his gracious words about the work that has been undertaken by Waterford County Council. Great praise is due in particular to our director of services for housing.

As the question was grouped with another, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak, but I am somewhat concerned that we are conflating serviced sites with Town Centre First. We are talking about two very different things. My central concern is that when we are talking about Town Centre First, I do not yet have a clear idea as to what Town Centre First means in an Irish context. I have a clear idea about the Scottish context. I have a clear idea about the collaborative town centre health check that the Heritage Council has but not yet about the Irish context. I ask the Minister of State to detail some of the models we are looking at and perhaps some of the stakeholder engagement for the town centre advisory group. That is very important because it is mentioned 20 times in the Housing for All document. It is essential to have a very clear understanding of what we are looking at.

Deputy Peter Burke: I again thank both Deputies. In the first instance, it is very important that we get the schemes open for application and we will be doing that. We really need to back this up with money. We have a number of schemes now, including our rural regeneration and urban regeneration schemes and Croí Cónaithe, which are really unlocking the potential of our towns and villages.

In response to Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, the serviced sites funds will be directly linked to Croí Cónaithe. We are breaking our Town Centre First policy into four areas: governance and enabling structures; economic and social purpose; a new living towns approach; and aligning investment and resources. We are talking about compact growth within our towns and villages, breathing new life into them, giving people an option to try to bring liveability back into those areas, reducing the carbon footprint by doing that and ensuring all the structures are there. The more people we have living in our towns and villages, the better the chance for the butcher to stay open, the better it is for the local GAA club and all the services that towns and villages provide. We had people on the advisory group from RGDATA and chambers of commerce along with local authority members, architects and those working in environmental areas. We had a very wide stakeholder group involving about 40 people.

Deputy Alan Dillon: As the Minister of State said previously, we now need as much detail as possible on the Croí Cónaithe funds. These need to be circulated to the local authorities. He might be aware that the draft Mayo county development plan is being finalised and it would be a shame not to have what sounds like a promising fund featuring heavily in increasingly important county development plans, which local authorities throughout the country are close to finalising. The draft county development plan in Mayo contains several references to the provision of serviced land. For a county like Mayo which is largely rural, this is a very important fund and we should be able to access it. That will support ramping up our construction sector to increase the supply of housing.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the Minister of State for providing that extra detail which is very helpful. In particular, I am heartened to hear him talk about those four elements. We increasingly need to see housing set within a context, particularly when we are talking about Town Centre First. We are not just talking about individual units. It is a term often used on the floor of the Dáil which is not useful. These are homes but also homes set within a heritage context, and within an environmental and emissions context. What we are trying to do is build communities. The Minister of State referred to the butcher and the GAA club. It is also about access to schools and the walkability of our town centre. I am heartened by the response. Setting it explicitly within that context is very welcome. It is mission critical to what we do in revitalising our towns and villages. I look forward to seeing it when it makes it through Cabinet, hopefully in November.

Deputy Peter Burke: That is exactly what we are aiming to do. If we look at the broader picture, we need to take advantage of the climate change adaptation opportunities in our towns and villages along with diverse living. We need to hive out opportunities from every crisis we have. Our Town Centre First initiative will give us a chance to do that. Regenerating our public realm and our streets in a post-pandemic environment is also important. The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has responsibility for the heritage aspect. We need to go around and look at the existing heritage assets. The environmental and the cultural aspect of what has been built in Waterford is exceptional. I know that Waterford is really trying to become a decarbonised city. It has a perfect footprint around which to build and realise that ambition. The detail will be there. All the actions will be set out and then we will link it into Croí Cónaithe when that

progresses towards the end of the year.

I reiterate to Deputy Dillon that we will see results on the ground. What Castlebar has is a treasure and the people there have done great work to realise that. What is in the centre of Castlebar will really support the citizens and make the town more attractive.

Question No. 97 replied to with Written Answers.

Housing Provision

98. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of affordable homes that will be delivered in County Monaghan in 2021 and in each of the years 2022 to 2025; and the definition of affordable in these instances. [46429/21]

Deputy Matt Carthy: According to its most recently published strategy, the Government intends to provide 54,000 affordable home interventions, which is an interesting term, between now and 2030. How many of those affordable homes will be delivered in County Monaghan between now and 2025? Will the Minister outline his definition of “affordable” in those instances?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: As the Deputy stated, the Housing for All strategy delivers on a programme for Government commitment to step up housing supply and put affordability back at the heart of the housing system with an ambitious target of 300,000 homes over the next decade for social, affordable, cost-rental, private rental and private ownership housing. Measures to deliver this housing are supported by over €4 billion in funding annually, representing the highest ever level of Government investment in building social or affordable homes. Some 54,000 affordable homes will be delivered between now and 2030, to be facilitated by local authorities, approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency and through a strategic partnership between the State and retail banks.

Delivery of affordable housing, in accordance with the schemes set out in the Affordable Housing Act 2021, which Sinn Féin supported, and the funding being made available, will be underpinned by the preparation by local authorities of housing delivery action plans, which they are currently preparing. Local authorities will be submitting their plans, to include measures relating to social and affordable housing, to me before the end of December 2021. This will allow each local authority, including Monaghan County Council, to determine any affordability constraints in their area based on the housing need and demand assessment and to plan provision accordingly. It is the first time local authorities have had this mechanism through the housing need and demand assessment. Furthermore, a new Croí Cónaithe fund will be supporting home ownership in towns throughout the country by making serviced sites available at a reduced cost or by providing support towards the refurbishment of vacant properties where the level of vacancy or dereliction is high. A pathfinder programme, as I mentioned to colleagues earlier, will be initiated later this year to facilitate making some 2,000 sites available for homes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister for that answer. In order for a strategy to work, and we can leave aside the debate on the wider strategy itself, it is crucially important that we know the where and the when. It is hard for me to comprehend how we could say that the local authority will provide the Minister with a plan or vision by the end of this year and that, within that context, any affordable houses will be delivered in County Monaghan by 2025 considering

that there are no proposals for that right now. The crucial difficulty is that in order for a family of two adults and four children in County Monaghan to even be considered eligible for the housing waiting list, their income needs to be below €28,750. If a couple with four children had twice that income, even allowing for house prices in Monaghan, they would probably not secure a mortgage. Those income limits must be increased but there must also be a middle route for those who cannot get a mortgage or avail of social housing.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is kind of a different question but it is related. I agree with the Deputy on that. We have discussed this, and the review of the social housing limits is under way. We intend to publish that shortly. On affordable homes in Monaghan in particular, early delivery of affordable housing will arise from previously approved serviced sites funding of local authority schemes where construction has commenced. In the new year the first homes scheme, which will also be in place and which will apply to Monaghan, will begin to provide affordable homes in every county across the country. Under the serviced sites fund, which is being replaced by the affordable housing fund, Monaghan County Council submitted no schemes to the Department. That is a fact, not a criticism. Accordingly, there are no schemes in the pipeline in Monaghan. That is why we are asking it to bring forward any other measures it would envisage. We have to look at where we will be focusing affordability measures. In Clones, for example, the average house price is about €96,000 and the median price across the county is €161,500. Each local authority will have to identify areas where they believe they have affordability and viability constraints. Every local authority will have access to affordability measures, particularly under the shared equity scheme that would apply to all mortgage holders across the country.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Therein lies part of the problem. The Minister is correct that house prices in Monaghan are lower than in other parts of the State. My fear is that the local authority and the Department will consider that Monaghan is not a priority for affordable housing. The difficulty is that we see the pressures that are already building, even in a county like Monaghan. House prices in County Monaghan, according to the most recent *daft.ie* report, have increased by 17.5% and the average house price is €204,000, which is way beyond the means of many people in terms of mortgage supports. Crucially, rents have increased by 13.8% over the past year and are now at just under €900. In the context of the position across the State, those might appear to be local issues that are of low priority. The problem is, however, that we know that when the prices across the State reflected this and when action was not taken, we ended up with the overall prices we have now. The solution is to start planning and to build and supply affordable houses now rather than when house prices are out of control.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not disagree with the Deputy on that. If we go back to social housing, our Housing for All plan will ensure that we have an average of over 10,000 new homes built across the country each year, including in Monaghan. It is important that we are tackling our social housing waiting list there.

On the provision of affordable homes, we passed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 before the summer recess. It was supported by Sinn Féin, and we are grateful for that. The Act is the most comprehensive affordable housing legislation ever passed by the Oireachtas. If the Deputy will excuse the pun, that puts in place the building blocks to be able to provide those affordable homes across the country. The latter will take a bit of time. We do not underestimate the challenge involved, but affordable homes will be delivered in Ireland next year and some will be delivered later this year. We already have the first tenants in cost rental homes from cost rental schemes that did not exist 12 months ago.

We are ambitious for our country. We are also ambitious in the context of ensuring that people can live in affordable homes across the 26 counties of this State. We are asking each local authority to point to areas where they believe they have affordability constraints. Monaghan County Council will submit that report to me by December.

Question No. 99 replied to with Written Answers.

Departmental Reviews

100. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the proposed review of the income thresholds for social housing. [45979/21]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: My question is straightforward and asks the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for an update on the status of a review of the income thresholds for social housing, one that he referred to in this House on 5 May when he said it was under way. Previous to that, it was also described as being under way in November 2020.

Deputy Peter Burke: Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated social housing assessment regulations 2011, as amended. The 2011 regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this and provide a fair and equitable system for identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources. A part of the broader social housing reform agenda, however, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is under way. As set out in Housing for All, the efficiency of the banding model and its application to local authorities will be considered. Equivalisation as between singles and families will also be considered. The review will also have regard to new initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental housing and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

The Deputy missed a point in her contribution and, as the Minister said in this House previously, the review is being measured against new affordability mechanisms that we now have in place for first home schemes, direct build local authority affordable housing schemes and for the cost-rental model.

10 o'clock

We are measuring them against those various initiatives. We will complete our review by the end of 2021, as is stated in Housing for All.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I thank the Minister of State for his response, although parts of it were regurgitated from the debates on 5 May this year and November 2020, bar the inclusion of the last bit of information he had. In my constituency of Clare, the band is set at 3,

28 September 2021

which at €25,000 is the lowest for a single person. The fact that each additional adult in the household is only afforded 5% of the threshold is completely and entirely nonsensical. This has been the case for ten years now.

I see the ill judgment and irrationality of these thresholds first-hand when families come to me. They may have more than four dependent children but have been found to be over the threshold by a mere €100. They are, therefore, deemed ineligible for housing support and are, in effect, left in limbo. The Government has washed its hands of any real sense of duty of care. That has now been the case for a period of ten years.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for her response. As I said during previous debates, as did the Minister, we are monitoring the situation in the context of the record-breaking monetary value of the new initiatives approved by this House. There is a recommendation in Housing for All to make a determination for quarter 4 this year. My county of Westmeath is on the same band as the Deputy's and I meet those vulnerable people at my clinic every single week. That is why we are working night and day in government, with a €4 billion multi-annual budget, to respond to that challenge and ensure people have the best possible chance of realising the ambition of home ownership in the first instance and, in the second, to protect the most vulnerable who need that housing support. We are doing that in significant proportions. As I said, we have matched the ESRI request with €4 billion a year to try to deliver 33,000 homes on average over the next number of years, which society really needs. That is the business we are in. We are listening to those vulnerable citizens.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: The Minister of State knows the heartbreaking stories that are being relayed to us on a daily basis. The fact that he cannot do anything for these people is just so frustrating. I am confused because he said the review is under way and adjustments have been made thus far but, according to Clare County Council, there has been a decision to adjust the household means policy providing the preceding 12 months' income of a household is taken into account. I ask the Minister of State to address this judgment, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the major loss of income many have experienced in work and opportunities. If he is waiting for the review to be undertaken, why was this measure introduced at this point in time?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Everybody accepts the need to get to the end of this review and that income thresholds need to be looked at. Basically, they need to go up. We have major issues in relation to people who are caught in the poverty trap and cannot afford housing without housing assistance payments. This needs to be dealt with. I spoke to the Minister previously about the assessment situation. There are added difficulties with the new means by which local authorities are carrying out assessments. They have spoken to us about this and their fear that the means by which assessments are being done will create a larger number of people who will fail to meet the criteria. That is something that is being looked at. I have been promised a briefing from officials and I will definitely take this on.

I will also come back to the Minister and the Ministers of State regarding maintenance issues in Louth County Council and the requirement for a solution. The Minister said he is open to this. I will do so in the next couple of days.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Many people are surprised to learn that income thresholds are a relatively new phenomenon. It was a Labour Party Minister, to its shame, that introduced them in order, I contend, to simply reduce the housing lists. Rather than build houses, mechanisms were

found to cut the lists. Prior to that, housing lists were determined on a raft of criteria, including income. It was taken into account and allowed local authorities to recognise the realities. It has already been said that in many counties, mine included, the income limit for two adults and four children is €28,750. That means anybody above that has been told for the last decade that they have to rent for the rest of their lives if they cannot qualify for a mortgage. The review has been ongoing for well over a year. It should not take that long for a review to be completed. I urge the Minister of State to tell his officials to get the finger out and get this resolved.

Deputy Peter Burke: On Deputy Wynne's point, the reason for what she cited in her local authority area is that local authorities have discretion to take into account short-term income, or if there is a significant change in family income, while carrying out their assessment policy.

Regarding the review, we can also look at other areas in disregarding certain types of income. It is important to state that as we go through it and review the criteria. We know what the challenges are. As I said, I meet vulnerable people week in, week out, in my clinic. Since I came to the Department, we have all been trying to do our best. We have a record level of funding to try to ensure we are meeting the demands of the most vulnerable on the ground.

We really are building record levels of housing now. We are even surpassing what Sinn Féin had in its policy. We have reached 39,000 houses over the last five years; Sinn Féin stated it would barely get to 35,000 if it was in government. We have surpassed what Sinn Féin said it would do. That is an achievement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government is still deluded.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Postal Services

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for his attendance. I had tabled this matter last week and, as happens with some Topical Issues, time moved on and it became a little less topical. However, over the last two weeks I had queries from a number of constituents around the same time. I am sure the Minister of State has anticipated the arrival of parcels from loved ones abroad over the years and especially during the Covid pandemic. I think of our emigrants in countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States who have not been able to return home to Ireland and who have not been able to visit parents, see grandchildren or meet uncles, aunts or cousins. The next best option for them to show their love, aside from Zoom calls and telephone calls, is to send a gift, parcel or goody to mark a particular occasion, whether it is an anniversary or a birthday.

I know the Minister of State can imagine and appreciate the great disappointment on the receiving end in Ireland when a much anticipated gift is expected but never arrives. I have had a number of examples of that. A mother whose daughter and grandchildren live abroad, in Australia, sent gifts - this is just one example of many but it is typical - only to see those gifts returned to sender, causing a lot of disappointment, upset and frustration on both ends. Particular anniversaries and occasions have been missed and have failed to be marked in the way family

28 September 2021

members had hoped. They then learned the reason the gifts or parcels were not being received was because of a change in procedures. One was as a result of Brexit and the other related to the implementation of EU laws on data and custom codes. The barcode on the parcel being sent did not contain the required data that was obliged to be on it.

Of course, it is not just gifts. People who use the likes of Amazon and other international online retailers and wholesalers and who purchase goods from outside the EU, which now includes the UK, suffer the same frustration. The gift, parcel, book, tool, article of clothing, shoes or whatever a customer has bought - so much shopping is now done online - does not arrive and is returned because it does not contain the required data or, in some cases, because the recipient does not realise they have to pay a tariff. In the meantime, some issues have arisen and I will get to some of those in the second part of the question.

I am curious that the Minister of State at the Department of Finance is here to take the question because An Post customer care staff are the ones who are at the coalface, taking all the complaints from disappointed customers as opposed to any other responsible Department or statutory agency with authority over this issue or that is responsible. I have a couple of other questions to ask but that has laid out the matter initially. I am grateful that the Minister of State is here to take the question.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. He will be aware that this is a tax and customs issue which brings into the responsibility of the Department of Finance as the parent Department involved.

Revenue has provided some general information that will help to explain the general situation as described by the Deputy. What he has outlined to the House certainly happened. There is no question about that. I will outline some of the background to the issue.

Revenue is Ireland's tax and customs administration and is responsible for managing the importation and exportation of goods in accordance with EU customs rules and relevant national legislation. Customs controls are necessary to protect public health and to ensure food safety and product standards, and to protect people from fraud or from unfair international competition, thus preserving jobs for European workers, including Irish workers. I am advised by Revenue that across the European Union, electronic customs importation declarations are now required for all parcels and packages coming from non-EU countries, including those coming through the postal system, regardless of the value of the goods being sent. This includes parcels and packages coming from the UK, which is no longer a part of the EU as a result of its decision to leave the Union. While goods valued at less than €150 may not be liable to a customs duty, since 1 July, all goods imported into the European Union, not just Ireland, regardless of their value, are liable to VAT. It is important to emphasise that those rules apply to all non-EU country exports by economic operators, by which I mean courier companies or An Post. This is happening right across the EU. A VAT declaration form must accompany such packages.

Recognising the volume of e-commerce low-value goods being imported, the EU developed an import declaration which contains significantly less information than the standard import declaration. However, this is not suitable for all e-commerce goods, particularly those that may be subject to a prohibition or restriction, for example, products such as foodstuffs, cosmetics and pharmaceutical products. While a simplified declaration may be appropriate in certain instances which will be and is of help to importers, the types of goods I mentioned may require a full customs declaration. That means the relevant economic operator, whether the postal au-

thority or a major transport company, requires a significant amount of data about goods in order to lodge the required documentation. This means that each of the operators must consider and examine their supply chain to ensure they are in possession of all the necessary information to complete this documentation.

I am advised by the Revenue that in the context of parcels and packages, while customs declarations are often submitted by the courier business or postal operator on behalf of the recipient in Ireland, the information required to complete the declaration is generally supplied by the exporting party although the importer, that is, the recipient or customer in Ireland, may also provide information to the postal operator that is needed to complete the transaction and declaration. This highlights the challenges for economic operators and the importance of each economic operator considering and examining their supply chain to ensure they are in possession of all necessary information. The reason parcels are being held up is because insufficient information was supplied on the customs declaration to start with and the quality of the information has been the reason for the delay. This regime came in on 1 July. I was pleased to hear the Deputy say the problems in recent weeks have not been as extensive as they were originally when the new regulations came in. The regulations apply across the EU, as I said. I look forward to hearing further from the Deputy.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. One of the things that has happened since I submitted this as a Topical Issue matter last Tuesday is that An Post has issued a helpful explanatory document for consumers. It arrived in my house today. It explains and outlines exactly what the Minister of State said. I just want to raise a couple of questions arising from the Minister of State's answer. I take on board the fact that the EU developed an import declaration because of Brexit and other issues. I also acknowledge the fact that Revenue issued information to both businesses and consumers. It also followed up with relevant advice and information relating to changes that came into effect from 1 July. However, this issue is still swirling around among the public. I am intrigued, because the Minister of State represents the Department of Finance and this is a Revenue issue, as to why An Post has taken this matter into its own hands and seen fit to circulate to the public a detailed explanatory note that is simple to read and follow.

An Post's customer service staff are the ones at the coalface on this issue. They receive the queries from and complaints of the public and listen to their frustration. It is not Revenue staff who are at the coalface in that regard.

I wish to raise a couple of other issues. The following is outside the Minister of State's remit, but this issue coincides with the people being bombarded with fake texts telling them their package has arrived. That is causing a lot of confusion because those texts send the recipient to a link which is probably a spam link that may corrupt a person's mails, etc.

I want to raise another question which I know is for the business side of the House. I have heard from a number of constituents who bought online from a .ie named address, paid for the product online and then, when they received it, had to pay customs because the product was coming from outside the EU, even though the website in question had a .ie address. The people affected thought they were buying from Ireland. It was not the customs they were complaining about, but the fact that they had wanted to buy Irish and discovered the product was actually coming from outside the EU.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The issue of domain addresses is separate and I thank the Deputy

28 September 2021

for highlighting it. I inquired today about the phone calls and text messages people are getting about packages being delivered where the caller or correspondent claims to need information. I am told that issue is unconnected. It is a coincidence that a lot of it is happening at this time.

This issue affects everybody importing who has to file a customs declaration. That is why the Department of Finance is involved. The main operator of importing a parcel into the country is definitely An Post. That is why people in An Post are the front-line people dealing with the issue. The Department of Finance has, in effect, set out the legislation. The Revenue and customs officials are the State representatives responsible. They are based in the parcel departments in the main plants of An Post throughout the country, especially in my own area of Portlaoise and in Dublin. An Post is at the front line. I would say, for the record, that all other people who bring in items, companies such as DHL, DPD, Fastway Couriers and FedEx, are equally responsible but perhaps the problem has not been felt by them to the same extent because they have bigger parcels and all the documentation is laid out. It could have been happening in those other companies as well but because An Post deals with more small parcels than the other companies I have mentioned, it has experienced a high volume of difficulties.

An Post indicated it was going to deliver a guide to shopping online to homes nationwide from this week. I am pleased to hear the Deputy received his yesterday. An Post is a day ahead of us and I compliment it on that. An Post reports that only a small percentage are affected but the bottom line is that there is a question about the quality of information and regulation within the EU. The reason we are having more issues is as a result of Brexit and because Irish people buy more from the UK than from the rest of the world. That is why. We have a double problem with Brexit and the UK situation. The regulation applies overall. The issue is really that those people who are sending the documentation in the first place must make sure they provide adequate information for the relevant authorities on both sides.

Medicinal Products

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for allowing this very important issue to be raised here tonight. I have previously raised it by means of parliamentary questions but it is very important to bring the matter to the floor of the Dáil and that the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Health, the Department of Health and the HSE listen because it is a very important matter. I appeal to the Government to ask that the HSE approve payment for a miracle drug that will help save the lives of two children who are very ill. I am speaking on behalf of, and with the permission of, Lorraine and Daniel Mynard and their daughter, Kate, and Shane and Stephanie Whelan and their little son, Theo. Both Kate and Theo have a very rare muscular condition. These two little children are the only two suitable recipients in this country for this drug, Zolgensma, which is used to treat spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic condition which leads to the loss of movement in the body. It is a gene therapy drug and can vastly improve these children's quality of life and lengthen their lifespans.

Authorities in Ireland have already rejected it on the basis of cost. I do not believe that we should put a price on a child's life at this time or at any time in the future. Other drugs are being administered at present which cost up to €100,000 per treatment. It is obvious that, if this once-off drug is administered, it would be a big help to these children. I must explain that time is of importance because the drug can only be administered to children under a certain body weight and two years is virtually the cut-off point. Michael Clifford wrote a very excellent article in the

Irish Examiner recently in which he highlighted these two cases. I am grateful for that because I want national prominence to be given to this case.

The treatment will help the swallowing muscles. They will be greatly enhanced and improved by the administration of this drug. The respiratory systems of the children would also be helped greatly by this drug. I know the parents would like to thank all of the medical people who have helped them on their journey with their two little children so far. I know they would particularly like to thank the management, staff and people who run Temple Street hospital for the excellent work they have done so far in helping these two little children to have a fighting chance of survival.

I know that €2 million per treatment is a lot of money but whoever said anyone, whether a member of any party or a member of none, or any politician or government, could say that a drug was too expensive to save a child's life? I do not think that is right. At the same time, I am a realist. I understand that there are no blank cheques but - my goodness - we are talking about two little babies who we want to live and who we want to have a fighting chance in this world. We want their parents, their grandparents, their brothers, sisters and cousins to have the benefit of having those young, beautiful children in their lives. I would like to hear what the Minister of State has to say on behalf of the Government.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter tonight. I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly. I do not know what context the Deputy has or how much he knows, so I will read out the script that has been prepared but I do so while very conscious that there are two families watching us tonight, those of the parents of Kate and Theo, whom the Deputy is representing in raising this Topical Issue matter.

I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter regarding the availability of, and reimbursement for, Zolgensma in Ireland. As the Deputy is aware, the HSE has been given statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies certain criteria for deciding whether the State will reimburse the cost of medicines. These include the health needs of the public, the cost-effectiveness of the drug and total budget impact of the drug. HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are facilitated by the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE.

In May 2020, EU marketing authorisation was granted to the medicine Zolgensma for treating spinal muscular atrophy, SMA. The Minister for Health is advised by the HSE that, in April 2020, the NCPE received a reimbursement application for Zolgensma for the treatment of patients with a specific SMA diagnosis. In May 2020, the NCPE completed a rapid review for this application and recommended that a full health technology assessment, HTA, be completed to assess the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of Zolgensma compared with the current standard of care. The HTA was undertaken as a part of the Beneluxa collaboration between Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium, with Austria acting as a reviewer in the Belgian procedure. This initiative represents a very positive step in addressing the funding challenges posed by new drugs with very high budget impacts, which are shared by all Beneluxa members.

The joint Beneluxa HTA was completed in May 2021 and it recommended that Zolgensma should not be considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments. Pricing and reimbursement negotiations commenced in July 2021

28 September 2021

and are currently ongoing. The purpose of challenging pharmaceutical companies' pricing, through negotiations, is to arrive at a position of value for money. In doing so, we can be confident that public resources are used as effectively as possible to reimburse as many medicines as possible and for as many patients as possible.

The Minister fully appreciates that families want to see their children who suffer from SMA get access to new treatments as soon as possible. However, the Minister for Health has no role in the statutory process under the 2013 Act. The Government's allocation of €50 million for new medicines in budget 2021 has enabled the HSE to approve 32 new medicines or expanded uses of existing medicines to date this year. This has included 12 medicines for the treatment of rare diseases. The Minister nonetheless fully understands that this is a worrying time for the families concerned and is hopeful that the HSE can arrive at a positive outcome with respect to Zolgensma.

I am very conscious that this may not be the answer the Deputy would have wished to hear this evening but, at the same time, it is positive that conversations are still ongoing and that no doors whatsoever have been closed. He can see how the €50 million announced in last year's budget has been spent.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State very much. Of course, I appreciate her detailed response but the giant Beneluxa health technology assessment, HTA, we are speaking about was completed in May 2021. We are now into the first week of October. When we are talking about children's health and children's lives, surely the machinery of the State and of the HSE and the dealings with the Beneluxa HTA should be speeded up because of how important this is. We are not talking about trade. We are not talking about selling something commercial. We are talking about a life-saving treatment. That is the difference. Time is of the essence. I have already stated, and I will say just once more, that two years is the cut-off point for these children. If the drug is not administered in their first two years of life, their hopes and their aspirations to have a better quality of life will be very much diminished. We do not want to see that happen with these two little children. I am so glad and so grateful and thankful to God that a little child, five-month-old Arthur Morgan, became the first child in Britain to receive the drug after the National Health Service struck a deal with the manufacturers of the drug with regard to the price. I really am delighted that child was saved over in England but I want to see the Government being proactive on the two cases we have here. I want to see every Member of this House being able to say that the Government did right by those two families because, when a child is born, nobody knows what types of difficulties, whether mental, physical or intellectual, that person will have. Our job in politics is to use the intelligence of those grouped here together to come up with solutions to the problems families have. I am not just asking. I am pleading and begging the Government to do its best for these two families. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy again for raising this very time-sensitive issue. I will take on board everything he has said. Before I came in this evening, the Minister reiterated to me that he is hopeful the HSE can achieve a positive outcome concerning the drug. I will ensure he gets the HSE actioned and keeps that continuous engagement and communication open at pace. The Deputy is right that every one of us wants, in our role as public representatives, to get the best outcome for our people and I will do that after leaving here this evening with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, on Deputy Michael Healy-Rae's behalf.

Hospital Services

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this incredibly important issue. I can say on behalf of the staff of Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, that there is serious concern about the future of critical and emergency care services at the hospital and that concern is matched by the local community and the population of County Meath. The rumour mill is rife with stories of impending cuts to hours, staff and services in the emergency department and to critical care services. Is this the case? That is the question we want answered. There is deep concern and it is heightened by the silence of the HSE. As public representatives, we have raised questions, as have others. We have been deliberately ignored or those questions have been avoided. Will the Minister of State provide assurances that critical and emergency services at Navan hospital will not be cut?

Deputy Johnny Guirke: There were rumours in August that patients who had presented to the accident and emergency unit at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, were sent to Drogheda. When I heard this, I called management at Navan hospital but I did not get a call back. I sent an email to the general manager of the hospital on 26 August and again last Friday, 24 September, but received no replies. What are we supposed to think? More important, what about the people we represent if the hospital will not answer calls or emails on such serious issues? Is there a basis for our fears and those of the people of Meath that the future of accident and emergency and ICU services in Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, are in danger of being closed or downgraded? Is it true the HSE leadership has been hell-bent on downgrading Navan hospital for years? If this is true, it will seriously affect healthcare in the north-east region. Meath has a population of 210,000, the fifth largest in the State. We know the hospital in Drogheda is already under pressure, so are we to expect people from Meath to travel to Drogheda or Dublin this winter to lie on a hospital trolley? That is what will happen if emergency department or ICU services are downgraded in Navan hospital.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: For ten years, the Government's stated policy has been to close the accident and emergency department in Navan hospital. The hospital was put on the list in the small hospital framework document. It was to be moved to a level 2 hospital. It was on the HIQA hit list of ten hospitals that were to have accident and emergency departments removed. Navan hospital is the only one of those ten hospitals whose accident and emergency remains open. In March 2020, the HSE went public to say it would close the accident and emergency department at the end of March overnight. The only reason it did not do so was that cases of Covid started to arise in the country. It postponed the closure until April and then completely dropped the plan because Covid was swamping the country. In the past fortnight, four medical professionals have told me the HSE has made a formal decision to close the accident and emergency overnight. We know from a parliamentary question I submitted that the Minister has admitted a programme of redesign is under way in the Ireland East Hospital Group. That redesign includes provision for a 24-7 acute medical assessment unit in Navan, in other words, a replacement for the accident and emergency department.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Before coming to the House, I took advice in the Department. I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and my colleagues, the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Thomas Byrne, to gain a good understanding of what this issue was about. Deputy O'Rourke asked me a straight question and I am giving him a straight answer. No, it is not the case. The long-standing policy still stands and there is no change in policy.

28 September 2021

I have a script that has been prepared by the Department, which I will read. It is important but it is also important to preface it with the answer I have just given. Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, is part of Ireland East Hospital Group. In 2013, Navan hospital was included in the list of designated model 2 hospitals under the smaller hospitals framework. The framework was approved by the then Government in 2013.

The Ireland East Hospital Group has been engaged in a programme of work to plan for future service configuration at Navan hospital in line with the Government decision. This aims to further integrate and enhance the role of Navan hospital within the hospital group. Every hospital in the group has a key role. Smaller hospitals such as Navan hospital are well placed to manage routine, urgent or planned care locally, while more complex cases are managed in larger hospitals.

Changes to services at Navan hospital will be undertaken in a planned and orderly manner, when agreed, on completion of the necessary planning, which is ongoing. Planning envisages the development of a 24-7 acute medical assessment unit at Navan hospital, which is an extension of the current medical assessment unit hours at Navan. It also includes a 12-7 local injuries unit. This will replace the current emergency department and ensure that the hospital continues to cater for unscheduled presentations where appropriate and safe to do so.

I understand that it is likely that the medical assessment unit and local injuries unit services will cater for around 80% of the unscheduled presentations to Navan hospital currently. The ambulance bypass of Navan hospital is already in place for patients who have acute coronary symptoms and for major trauma, including fractured femur. The planning envisages an extended role for the hospital in areas such as delivery of day and ambulatory surgical activity to support the overall delivery of access to care targets for the group, and strengthened links with the Mater Hospital in terms of clinical governance and patient safety.

These changes will require some investment and this will take time. Capital works are under way this year to bring a second theatre into operation at Navan hospital. I understand Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, has relatively recently opened a new laboratory and a new rehabilitation facility with 20 beds. That is a considerable investment. Clearly, it is essential that we resource other receiving hospitals before we make any change to the services at Navan hospital. This core part of the planning is under way and will take considerable time.

It is important to emphasise that changes will be about patient safety and quality, on one hand, and ensuring that people have care as close to home as possible, on the other. The HSE has stated clearly there is a patient safety rationale for the change and we must be mindful of that.

The vision for the hospital in the future is that it will be a core element in the delivery of integrated care for patients in line with the Sláintecare vision - providing the right care in the right place at the right time, building up capacity and supporting delivery of integrated and ambulatory care as close to home as possible.

For the Deputies opposite who did not receive a response from the HSE, I will contact directly whoever is in charge of this area seeking a detailed response as to why the good Deputies are not being communicated with as public representatives on the ground.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State for her forthright response, which is appreciated. However, I cannot understand how she can say there is no change in policy and

then read that script. As far as I can see, the writing is on the wall. I have read enough from the HSE and enough health service policy down the years to know that. I have seen this before in the cases of Roscommon, Monaghan, Dundalk and Ennis hospitals. This is what it looks like. This is the language that is used to refer to change that is coming, including reference to a 24-7 acute medical assessment unit.

I do not believe, based on the written record here from the Department, that the concerns of the community will be allayed. In fact, I believe that what was spelled out in the reply reflects the concerns that have been raised about the services that will be provided. I am very concerned and I think the community will be similarly concerned.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I would like to get a commitment in writing that these services will not be downgraded during the lifetime of this Government. It would be good if the people of County Meath could get that because I think it would allay an awful lot of the fears they have. Those are genuine fears. You never see so many people come together than when it is to do with a hospital.

Another reason we are here is the HSE. It will not give any information, and not just to me. When radio stations, including our local station, LMFM, do not get information from the HSE, that creates fear.

I heard the Minister of State, Deputy English, on the radio this morning. He stated that there will be no downgrading of services. Navan hospital needs an expansion of its services, not a downgrade. If there is any downgrading of the accident and emergency service and the ICU in Navan, we will be left with no option but to take to the streets again. We will not let the HSE take our accident and emergency department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am watching the clock here. You have one minute, Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The response the Minister of State provided does not mention the words “accident and emergency” at all. I cannot find those words in the entire script that was written for her by the Department.

The hospital in Navan is the most important piece of infrastructure we have in County Meath. Nothing surpasses it. There are thousands of people walking around the county today who would not be alive only for the hospital’s existence. Roscommon was mentioned. A Fine Gael Minister of State said that Roscommon University Hospital’s accident and emergency department would remain open and then went into government and voted to close it. We know that the Government already tried to close the hospital accident and emergency in Navan in March 2020. That is in the plans. I am just astonished that in the whole of the Minister of State’s response the accident and emergency department is not mentioned whatsoever.

What we need is a commitment to the accident and emergency department, that is, that the Department changes and amends the language in the small hospitals framework document and takes the threat away. As long as that threat is there, the people in the HSE will be tasked to close the accident and emergency department overnight. That is their job. If they are to fulfil the policy direction of the Government, they are tasked to close the accident and emergency department. Will the Department commit to taking that threat out of the small hospitals framework document?

28 September 2021

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will just go back to exactly how I started my previous commentary, which was that there is no change. The policy of 2013-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The policy is to close it.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: There is no change whatsoever-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Exactly.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: -----and the Department of Health has set out since 2013 that there is no policy to close Navan hospital's accident and emergency department.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In fairness, the policy states that it will close it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Minister of State reply, in fairness.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will make a suggestion. I am only a junior Minister in the Department of Health and I think this is a senior Minister's conversation. With the support of the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Byrne - I know they have a meeting organised with the Minister next week to discuss this again - perhaps the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, could open the matter up to other Oireachtas Members to have that conversation. I believe that this Government has no policy to close anything whatsoever.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is written in the small hospitals framework document.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: With the height of respect, I would like the Deputies across the House to take me in good faith until the Minister can meet with them.

Road Network

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Sherlock, you only want half your time, do you?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I will take more if you are offering, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I wish to raise the issue of the N73. The N73 is a national secondary route. At present it could be considered no more than a local road in terms of how it has been treated in investment terms. The route will take you from west of Mallow to Rathmore and on up north, through Mallow and on into Mitchelstown. There is a part of the road, from Clogher Cross to Waterdyke or, as we know it locally, Canteen Cross, and also at Annakisha South where, up to now, for this year alone, through Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, €1.5 million has been spent to bring the process to tender to enable works to be carried out on approximately 3 km of road. I am given to understand that Cork County Council and TII have done all the preparatory work on this. All we are asking for is €10 million to make this road safe. It is currently unsafe. When heavy goods vehicles pass each other on the road, they have to slow down to a stop in order to pass because there are no verges on the road and you have to traverse the white line in order to pass at certain sections on the road if you are driving a heavy goods vehicle. The road is an important road because it is a national secondary road. I cannot emphasise that enough. It has been devoid and starved of investment for decades now.

All we are asking is that the Government not take the foot off the pedal in terms of the next phase of the project. We are fearful that if there is any reprofiling of roads spending - in other

words, cutbacks - to rob Peter to pay Paul, we will get caught in the cross hairs in north Cork, between Mallow and Mitchelstown. I am pleading with the Government not to take this off the agenda and to allow it to go to the next stage. In the context of overall national spend on roads, €10 million is but a drop in the ocean. It is a significant amount but it would have an untold benefit for people travelling from Kerry to Dublin, for people who travel from Mallow to Mitchelstown and *vice versa* and, in particular, for local traffic. That Mallow to Mitchelstown road is a major arterial route for local traffic, local commerce, families bringing children to school and people who travel for medical reasons, including acute medical reasons, for care in Dublin. They would travel from Rathmore on through Mallow and on up to Dublin. There is a part of the road I have just mentioned, from Clogher Cross to Canteen Cross, or Waterdyke, that has to be done. I am imploring the Government not to take it off the agenda. I have been in touch with the Ministers for Public Expenditure and Reform and Transport, Deputies Michael McGrath and Eamon Ryan, and I have had engagement with the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, about this. I am asking that it stay on the agenda.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Minister of State taking this matter as well?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Yes. I have a specialty in roads as well as everything else. I do understand the value of a secondary national route. I have loads of them around my area, so I totally understand. Deputy Sherlock has been to all the Ministers in respect of this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport.

I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. As he might be aware, the Minister has responsibility for overall policy and securing Exchequer funding regarding the national roads programme. What Deputy Sherlock is after asking for is €10 million to ensure that the N73 stays on the table and does not get squeezed when the next budgetary decisions are being made. That is what I am hearing.

Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, and in line with the national development plan, NDP, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040 and the national planning framework.

I am informed that TII conducts regular safety analyses of the national road network, which includes the N73 between Mallow and Mitchelstown. Each year, TII carries out a collision analysis of the entire national road network, in accordance with the requirements for network safety ranking of the EU directive on road infrastructure safety management. The purpose of this analysis is to identify locations of high concentrations of collisions. Having regard to the outcome of the analysis, it is then the responsibility of the relevant local authority, as the road authority for the area and in this case Cork County Council, to devise proposals to identify any appropriate road safety interventions.

In addition to the network safety ranking process, TII periodically carries out road safety inspections on the entire national road network, as provided for in the EU directive. The purpose of these inspections is to verify the characteristics and defects of an operational road for reasons of road safety. This is a proactive measure that is done in tandem with the network safety analysis.

Turning to route upgrades and safety on the N73, the Clogher Cross to Waterdyke realign-

28 September 2021

ment scheme is one of two minor improvement schemes being progressed by Cork County Council. The scheme has been progressed through planning and design and the construction tender documents have been prepared to go to tender this year. TII has approved an allocation of €1.5 million to the council in 2021 to enable this work to progress and the latter recently requested approval from TII to go to tender with the scheme. TII should be in a position to confirm whether the tender process can proceed once funding arrangements for 2022 and 2023 are finalised. I believe that answers the main part of the Deputy's Topical Issue matter.

The Annakisha South road improvement scheme, the second minor scheme on the N73, has also received planning approval and tender documents have been prepared. Unfortunately, the amount of funding available and the number of schemes that can move to construction in any given year are limited. Therefore, future construction of this section of national road will depend on the level of funding available to TII for national roads generally and the relative prioritisation of the scheme when compared with similar schemes nationally. TII has provided an allocation of €300,000 to Cork County Council for the Annakisha South scheme in 2021. Both of these minor schemes will take account of current active travel policy, in accordance with TII standards, and the council's transport policies.

TII provides annual grant allocations to local authorities for the upkeep and maintenance of national roads. I will convey exactly what the Deputy said on this matter to the Minister. It is clear from the response the Department has provided that a great deal of work has been done on the project and significant investment has gone into it. It looks to be a project that can hit the road.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank the Minister of State. I ask her to use her good offices and positive influence to bend the ear of the Ministers, Deputies Eamon Ryan and Michael McGrath, and perhaps the Taoiseach, whom I have also contacted about this issue. It makes eminent sense to progress this project to tender now. If TII has allocated €1.5 million for one stretch of the road, namely, Clogher Cross to Canteen Cross, and €300,000 for Annakisha South, all that needs to be done now is to press the green light for the project to go to tender and get the jobs done. The road will then be right for a considerable period of time, excepting normal upkeep and maintenance.

My fear, however, is that the project will slip back down the agenda in terms of national prioritisation if there is any reprofiling of budgets for roads in the Estimates process. I am raising this issue at a critical time in the hope that every Minister will look at the case for the project and see it stacks up to make the investment at this stage rather than wasting the moneys that have been spent thus far by not progressing it. If it is not progressed now, it will not be progressed next year or in the years after that. It will go into a queue, we will be waiting until kingdom come for the works to be done and the investment of €1.5 million and €300,000 will be for naught. We should spend the money wisely to upgrade the road now, for the reasons I have outlined. The RISM metrics are a load of codswallop. I appreciate that the Minister of State is responding on behalf of another Minister but the reality is that this is an unsafe road. Just because an accident or collision has not happened does not mean it will not happen. The problem is the number of heavy goods vehicles that use the road and have to traverse the white line at points where there are no verges. There is no margin of error for drivers, which is why they have to slow down to a stop.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy again for raising this issue. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle and I know the roads around Galway very well. I expect there are many people who

use the N73 who have far more sway than I in advancing the project. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, who has responsibility for this matter, has set out that under the HD 15 network safety analysis programme, safety works are based on accident density across the network. Those sections of the network with considerably higher than average accident densities are selected for analysing and sections of the road that are amenable to engineering solutions are prioritised for treatment. I will take the points the Deputy has raised this evening to the Minister. It is clear this project has been identified in previous costings around planning and design. I know that when one sees something going to planning and design, the funding normally follows. The decision is not for me to make in this instance but I will ensure it is on the Minister's agenda.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.56 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 29 September 2021.