



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2021*

*Thursday, 14 October 2021*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

1. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if a review has been conducted by her Department or the Charities Regulatory Authority on whether the work of the authority and its €4 million annual budget is delivering increased confidence in and within charities. [49932/21]

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Has a review been conducted by the Department or the Charities Regulator on whether the work of the regulator and its €4 million annual budget is delivering increased confidence in and within charities?

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I thank the Deputy for the question. The Charities Regulator, under the aegis of my Department, is the State organisation responsible for registering and regulating all of Ireland's charities. It is important to note that the regulator is fully independent in the performance of its statutory functions, including investigations into the activities and conduct of charities.

All registered charities in Ireland, and their trustees, are subject to the provisions of the Charities Act 2009. Concerns about charities may be raised with the regulator and I am assured by the regulator that all such concerns are addressed. The level of trust and confidence in the charity sector is an important indicator of the overall health of the sector. In April, the regulator published its Irish public survey into society's attitudes and engagement with registered

charities in Ireland. Overall, the results were encouraging, with 91% of respondents expressing reasonable trust in the sector and 36% rating their level of trust highly.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to update legislative provisions to ensure the Charities Regulator has the necessary powers to increase trust and confidence in the management and administration of charities. This work is at an advanced stage and proposals will be brought to the Government in the near future. The Charities Regulator has a budget of €4.6 million in 2021. As part of its governance oversight of the Charities Regulator, and in line with the code of practice for the governance of State bodies, my Department will be commencing a periodic critical review of the regulator shortly.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I am raising this because I got several complaints from registered charities that are having huge problems with bogus charities using their names to collect clothes. Criminals who were doing this were traced to a yard in my area in Blanchardstown. A registered charity sent me the following:

Over the last two years we have been fighting to put a stop to bogus collections being done using our name and logo. We found the yard and clothes were being sold and stored and contacted the gardaí in Blanchardstown. Unfortunately there seems to be no law to put a stop to them.

The criminals had a waste collection permit and the charity could not find out why. Even though the criminals were using a bogus charity and its logo, it seems that neither the Charities Regulator nor the Garda could do anything. Some 466 complaints were made to the Charities Regulator and 177 of those were on the legitimacy of an organisation as a charity. Can we have a look at this issue? It is eroding confidence in charities in the community. When people are giving, they want to know that they are giving to the right people.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** It is difficult for me to comment on individual cases, particularly because they are under the purview of the Charities Regulator, but I will try to provide some reassurance. With over 11,000 charities on the register, the work of the regulator is vitally important. All registered charities in Ireland and their trustees are subject to the provisions of the 2009 Act, which sets out comprehensive legal obligations surrounding the definition of charities, their operation and their reporting requirements. The regulator has made significant progress in recent years with developments that are helping to restore public confidence in the sector, enhance compliance measures and ensure proportionate regulation. These have included the increased capacity of the regulator to address public concerns, the consolidation of supports available for the implementation of the charities governance code and the publication of safeguarding guidance. In support of the statutory responsibilities of charitable organisations and their trustees, the Charities Regulator introduced the charities governance code in 2018. The regulator has also provided a number of online training sessions during 2020 which are available on its website.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** The critical issue we are facing is that although the Minister of State says that 91% of people say they have reasonable trust in the Charities Regulator, including 36% who have strong confidence in it, that shows that the regulator still has a long way to go. For people who are working in the charity sector and for the community it is essential that we have a much higher level of trust in the regulator to do the job it is supposed to do. That job is to ensure we have confidence that when we are donating to a charity it is a legal charity. We must have laws in place to ensure that when people are using the name, logo and number of a

charity there is some sort of action that can be taken by the regulator to call in the Garda. That is fraud and I cannot understand why the Garda or the regulator cannot act.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** Again it is difficult for me to comment without knowing the details of the case but I fully back the Deputy's sentiments on the need for people to have trust in charities. The regulator was established in 2014 and it has been growing its capacity ever since. This will be the first year it will have a full staff complement so it is moving in the right direction. That said, we are proposing changes to the law that frames the regulator. The proposed Bill intends to provide clarity in a number of areas, including accounting, audit and reporting requirements; the responsibilities of trustees; the operation of the register of charities; and other provisions, including sharing of information, sanctions, trustee remuneration and disposal of assets. Registered charities which are also companies are not legally required to submit an annual statement of accounts to the regulator but we are putting forward amendments to rectify this situation. That will significantly improve the levels of transparency and trust in charities more broadly.

## Rural Schemes

2. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department intends to facilitate a local improvement scheme in 2022; and if so, the criteria that will be applied to ensure an allocation of funds based on an equal and fair distribution across the country. [50256/21]

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I wish to raise the local improvement scheme, LIS. It is a valuable scheme and one that has benefited many rural dwellers. Our perception is that a significant proportion of the 2021 allocation went to the Cavan and Monaghan region. Cork is the biggest county and the native county of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, and it could argue by any objective analysis that it did not receive a proportionate and fair share of that allocation.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I will read this answer for the Deputy but his assumption is wrong. The LIS supports the improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities and represents a vital piece of infrastructure for rural communities. The funding can be a lifeline for such communities, directly improving access to family farms and supporting economic activity. Over €80 million has already been provided for works on roads since the scheme was relaunched in 2017. As part of Our Rural Future, the Government is committed to ensuring that the LIS is funded into the future. In that regard, I was pleased to announce an increased allocation for the scheme from €10.5 million to €11 million as part of budget 2022.

The amount of funding allocated to each local authority is typically determined by the physical area of each county, with minimum and maximum thresholds applied. However, the second tranche of €10.5 million that I announced for the LIS earlier this year was distributed based on the amount each local authority indicated it could deliver before the end of the year. This was to ensure that the funding would be fully delivered before the end of the year. In normal circumstances, and in the absence of reliable data on the number of roads eligible for the scheme in each county, I am satisfied that using the physical area of each county is a fair and transparent basis for allocating the funding. Having said that, the approach to allocating funding is considered each year in advance of launching the scheme. I will keep the position under review in 2022.

To be clear, we told the local authorities to send us in a list of what they could do. If the local authorities were not able to send in lists, we decided that there was no point in them getting the money. The Deputy will have to revert to his local authority.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** The metrics will clearly show that, in the second round, Cavan and Monaghan did extremely well. I take the point that the Minister is making in respect of the second tranche and the notification to individual local authorities, but I would argue that, by any reasonable analysis, the lead-in time in July and the deadline for receipt was very short. Cork, whether we like it or not, is the largest county with the most roads. The Minister of State sitting beside the Minister will attest to that fact.

Coming out of the second allocation, there was not a proportionate allocation across the board. Cork could tee up approximately €2 million in LIS projects, which would take a savage amount of an allocation out of the LIS. Cork, with the reasonable people that there are in the local authority, put in projects-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Are you reasonable with your time as well?

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** -----for which there was a return for a minimal investment. All I am asking for in 2022 is equity across the board for every county.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have a chance to contribute again.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I will make this clear for the Deputy. The reason I was able to put extra money into the LIS was because savings had emerged during the year and local authorities had to spend the money before the end of the year. Each local authority was asked what it could deliver. It is not my problem if Cork cannot deliver, but Limerick is very good. It is just beside Cork and it got the largest allocation in the country. It got more than any other county or area. It got its act together, put its application in and got an allocation based on it stating that it could spend the money before the end of the year. Every county got 70% of what it asked for. If local authorities do not send in applications, I cannot give them money, particularly given that, due to how this scheme is designed, the money has to be spent before the end of the year. Actually, in the second round-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister will get a chance to contribute again.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** We will have to carry this conversation on outside. All I am asking is that account be taken of the size of counties like Galway and Cork. They are big counties with a large number of roads, for which there is the potential to deliver more through the LIS. The whole nature of the LIS is to service roads that are unserved by local authorities. We have a lot more of those in Cork than most other counties. I acknowledge what the Minister is saying in respect of Limerick and her own part of the world, but there needs to be a greater degree of flexibility or a longer lead-in time to allow local authorities to respond with projects. That is all I am asking for in 2022.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I understand that Cork is a large county and we want to see everything distributed fairly, which is what we are doing. With this fund, local authorities had to spend money by the end of the year. There was no point in my giving Cork twice what it asked for. Like everywhere else, it got 70% of what it asked for. Limerick got €1.1 million because it asked for a large allocation. It said it could get the roads done, so it got the money.

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I moved more money into the LIS because I knew there were long lists across the country. The bigger picture is that the LIS was previously a Department of Transport scheme, and that Department has a substantially larger budget than mine. I have raised the issue of co-funding with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. In fairness, he has not ruled it out. He has to cut his cloth to his Department's measure, but we could get some matched funding from it, which would make a significant difference. I will continue to raise the matter with the Minister. Local authorities need to know that, if they get the money, they have to deliver.

### **National Development Plan**

3. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the impact the national development plan, NDP, will have on the spending by her Department; the provisions in the plan for rural and community development; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50326/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** What impact will the NDP have on spending by the Minister's Department and what provisions are in the plan for her Department?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Deputy will be aware that, last week, the renewed National Development Plan 2021-2030 was launched. It is the largest NDP in the history of the State, amounting to €165 billion, with a focus on funding solutions to strengthen housing, climate ambitions, transport, healthcare, jobs growth in every region and economic renewal for the decade ahead.

While the plan is a whole-of-government approach, Chapter 8: Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities sets out details that will be delivered and administered by my Department. In March, I was delighted to launch Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025. The NDP will support the achievement of the ambitious objectives set out in that policy.

The budget for my Department in 2021 is €351 million, a 50% increase in the gross budget since the first full year of the Department's life in 2018. Regarding capital funding, this budget includes €87 million for our rural regeneration and development programmes, €44 million for the LEADER programme and €16 million in other rural supports, all of which are vital to the economic and social well-being of rural Ireland.

Over the life of the NDP, my Department's capital allocation will grow from €169 million this year to €192 million next year, €196 million in 2023, €200 million in 2024 and €205 million in 2025, with subsequent years to be added on a rolling basis. While the exact allocations for programmes will be decided as part of the annual budgetary process, this level of funding will ensure increased investment levels for all of the Department's schemes, building on the strong success of these schemes in recent years.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The Minister is saying that the capital funding of €962 million that was announced in the NDP will be spread out over a five-year period, starting with €162 million for 2021. Is the 2021 figure new money, by which I mean will the Minister's Department be getting additional money for the rest of the year? Is the €962 million announced in the NDP new money?

The Minister mentioned the importance of ensuring that the regions got their fair share. I

have raised this matter with the Minister a number of times. Was the west and north west region considered in the NDP in any specific light, given that it is no longer a developed region and is now a region in transition? It has regressed.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The NDP will see significant increases in our funding programmes over the coming years. Those allocations are for each year. It is new money every year; it is additional money. We want to spend it in 2021 and I want to try to get as much of it out as possible. That is why I am putting a great deal of pressure on local authorities and project promoters to get their projects delivered and the money spent. It will be difficult for me to make the case for more money next year if I do not spend what I have this year. That is one of the reasons I moved money into the LIS. I wanted to get the money spent and I knew that people wanted to get their roads repaired. The point of that move was to get the money spent early in the year and to deliver much-needed improvements to the lanes that got the investment.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Regarding the €162 million for 2021 of the €962 million announced under the NDP, if I have those figures right, does the Minister know how much remains to be allocated? We are towards the end of the year.

Will the Minister reply to my question on the west and north west region? Was any specific focus given to it? When we look at the projects outlined in the NDP, can we see positive discrimination? Was that considered for the west and north west region? That would be important. The west and north west region is the only region that is no longer developed, as stated by the EU Commission. It is also at the bottom of the table when it comes to funding across the State, compared to the south and the east.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** In regard to the €162 million funding, many of the bills will come in at the end of the year. That is usually the case. The pressure is on to get as much in as possible. The last thing I want to do is return money to the Exchequer. I want to see the funding being spent on the ground.

The Deputy mentioned the north west. Like the Deputy, I come from that region and I am very aware of the challenges it faces. We work closely with the Western Development Commission in rolling out broadband, co-working spaces and remote working spaces. I visited Stranorlar a few weeks ago. Fantastic work is being done there. I met people who are working for multinational companies and can do so from Stranorlar, having moved there from Dublin. All of this will help to revitalise the towns and villages in the north west. I am willing to work with anybody to improve the situation.

## **Domestic Violence**

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department has been involved in supporting efforts to establish a domestic violence refuge in County Carlow; and if her Department provides assistance to such rural-based community services. [50090/21]

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Over the last two years we have seen a shadow pandemic of violence against women yet in many rural communities and counties such as Carlow there is no domestic violence refuge available. The Carlow Women's Refuge Campaign supported by Councillor Adrienne Wallace has long been pushing for this injustice to be corrected. Numer-

ous reports and experts have recommended it. Two temporary emergency accommodation units have been provided but this is far from adequate. Will the Minister agree that Carlow needs a refuge?

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I thank the Deputy for the question. I can confirm that the Department of Rural and Community Development has had no involvement in the establishment of a domestic violence refuge in Carlow. I understand that, in the main, domestic violence issues are a matter for the Minister for Justice and are legislated for in the Domestic Violence Act 2018. My Department's mission is to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. A key objective of all of the Department's programmes is that they are targeted at those sectors, areas and individuals most in need and provide effective responses to ongoing and future economic and social challenges.

Of some relevance is the Department's community services programme, which supports community organisations to deliver local services and create employment opportunities for disadvantaged people through a social enterprise model. The programme provides a funding contribution to over 2,000 positions in over 400 community organisations throughout the country. The Department is providing SICAP funding in excess of the €220 million mentioned. This year, €39 million was allocated to the programme. I am delighted to say that an additional €4 million has been secured for SICAP in budget 2022. This represents a 10% budget increase for the programme, resulting in an additional 60 community workers nationwide.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I accept this matter is not the primary responsibility of the Minister of State, but a Department with responsibility for community and rural affairs should be supporting the fight for rural communities to get the services they need. I ask the Minister of State to add his name to the list of those calling for a women's refuge in Carlow, and in all those counties without one. I will set out a striking statistic. In the first nine months of this year, more than 500 incidents of domestic abuse were reported to the Garda in Carlow, but there is no local domestic violence refuge for those who need it. Instead, people are being sent to Kilkenny, Kildare and Dublin, causing unnecessary additional distress and uprooting their lives. The problem has been highlighted many times. Fr. Peter McVerry has described the absence of a refuge in Carlow as "scandalous".

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge his point. Since 2018, some 1,138 individuals have been supported through SICAP in Carlow. The supports offered vary in accordance with the individual's circumstances. Examples of such supports are personal development, lifelong learning courses, health and well-being assistance and other labour market supports. In 2019, Carlow County Development Partnership carried out research on family homelessness which highlighted the plight of women affected by domestic violence and the need for a women's refuge in Carlow. It liaises with and refers women to the outreach worker from Amber Women's Refuge in Kilkenny and Carlow Women's Aid. Staff have supported women in crisis situations to access women's refuge services. Under its 2022 annual plan, Carlow County Development Partnership proposes to commission research into the ongoing need for a domestic violence refuge in Carlow, including what model would be most appropriate.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The absence of a refuge has been ongoing and highlighted for a number of years. In 2018, a report on homelessness in Carlow by Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe highlighted how women and children are often forced to stay in violent homes for the lack of a refuge. Tusla's 2019 needs analysis accepted that a refuge is "the most effective means for pro-

protecting women and children". The Carlow Women's Refuge Campaign was set up in 2018. An emergency motion was passed by Carlow County Council in 2019. All of the experts agree that a proper, full-time refuge that offers all of the safety requirements and supports, including child-minding and counselling, is necessary in terms of safe accommodation for women and children.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy. I refer to some useful points from the budget, particularly in regard to the Department of Justice. A funding package will be provided to extend legal aid for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Expenditure on victim supports for people who have suffered domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is also set to increase by €5 million, bringing total funding to €13 million, inclusive of €1 million to improve Garda divisional protective services units. These units are now operating in every Garda division to provide a consistent and professional approach to the investigation of sexual crime, child abuse and domestic abuse. Funding is provided for ongoing training for gardaí in priority areas such as combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. An additional €3.3 million is provided to support the work of the Legal Aid Board, including the provision of legal advice and legal aid services to victims of sexual offences.

I will make one other point that is of relevance in terms of rent supplement. A victim of domestic violence is eligible for rent supplement on referral by Tusla. Where an application is made, rent supplement will be provided for an initial three months and will not require a means test.

### **Departmental Funding**

5. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the measures she will put in place to increase funding already allocated under the rural regeneration and development fund to projects in which the costs have increased substantially due to the unprecedented rise in the cost of materials; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49400/21]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** My question relates to the current problem in regard to costs for projects for which money has been already allocated. Costs are rising. Funding has been already been allocated. What measures are being put in place to top up the grants already provided to meet rising costs or is such a facility already in place?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for the question. The rural regeneration and development fund has to date approved funding of €252 million for 164 projects nationwide costing over €343 million. Projects initially approved for funding in principle progress through a comprehensive due diligence process before final confirmation of funding is provided by my Department. At each stage of this approval process, the project is reviewed by my Department to ensure it continues to meet its stated objectives, including financial sustainability. This review includes an assessment by an independent quantity surveyor to ensure all costs and contingencies have been included by the lead party.

*11 o'clock*

However, any such case must be supported by a detailed justification from the lead party setting out the reasons for the increased cost, detailing exactly where the additional costs arose and outlining what was attributable to construction inflation. As the project would have been

approved based upon the original budget, a full value for money review with an updated business plan must be provided by the lead party before any additional funding could be considered.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive reply. I am glad to see she is using the quantity surveying profession, of which I am member, to help her to keep the costs in check. I welcome her clarification that these costs are open for review because normally what happens on projects is when the application is made, applicants perhaps do not have the full design in place or the details done right, in the sense that they are not done fully. The contingency sum that would be built in would reflect that type of scenario. Given the unprecedented nature of the situation at the moment, there are unreal costs, especially for older buildings such as Loughrea Town Hall in my constituency. It will need a huge amount of insulation, and insulation costs are going through the roof. We also have other projects like that in the county where we find that costs have increased since the applications were first submitted and moneys granted two years ago. It is important we recognise that.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I have visited some of the really good projects in the Deputy's constituency, including the Athenry regeneration scheme and the Bia Innovator Project, which is an absolutely fantastic project that is going to make a huge difference. I was delighted it secured €3.5 million from the rural regeneration and redevelopment fund. There are a number of other projects, including Portumna Courthouse, which is another really good project. To be clear, we look at them on a case-by-case basis. If it is a matter of genuine construction inflation affecting costs, we can all understand that. However, I do not want requests coming in which expect us to cover costs raised by poor initial estimates - and that can happen - or by change in scope or a failure to factor in elements of the project identified as necessary later. I do not want half-baked stuff coming in and then applicants coming back looking for more money because it causes problems. I would rather see the money going to good projects that can be delivered. Sometimes if there is an overrun, there are delays and it holds the whole thing up.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Absolutely. I hope and trust the projects she mentioned in Athenry and Portumna, as well as those in Loughrea and Tuam, are not half-baked and the figures are correct, inasmuch as they could have been at the time. It is a picture of a cost at a particular time. I welcome the fact that it is being recognised by the Department that costs rise. I compliment its staff for all the work they have done right through Covid in working with the local authorities. I also compliment the Minister's predecessor, my great friend and colleague, Deputy Ring, who initiated a significant number of these schemes when he was in the Department. It is great to see that the Department is still thriving in what it is doing for rural Ireland. I congratulate the Minister for getting increased funding for towns and villages via LEADER in the budget. That is a lifeline for rural areas.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy. I appreciate I am working from a very strong base. I inherited a great Department. Deputy Canney and Deputy Ring did a great deal of hard work and it is my honour to build on that work as I deliver more projects for rural Ireland.

To go back to Deputy Canney's original question, to date we have provided additional funding totalling €6.3 million for 20 projects, which are listed on the Department's website. When they find that projects are going to cost more than initially thought, applicants put in detailed submissions showing exactly why they need more money. I am happy to support that and my officials, in fairness to them, have worked extremely hard with a number of project promoters to try to ensure these projects are delivered if they need that bit of extra money. Deputies under-

stand that this is taxpayers' money. We must ensure that it is spent properly and well and that there is good value for the taxpayer at the end of the day.

### **Departmental Schemes**

6. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there is a specific scheme within her Department for the upgrading of playgrounds. [50030/21]

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Canney and the Minister for their kind words. I take this opportunity to compliment the Minister for the great job she is doing in not in one or two Ministries, but in three. She is almost a third of the Government. It is fantastic to see the job she has done in the three Ministries. I have a very simple question for her. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle will understand it. Very simply, we have a number of playgrounds around the country that were a godsend to people, families and children when the pandemic was on. When they were able to go someplace, these were the places they went. Some of them need to be upgraded. I am asking the Minister to consider putting a specific scheme in place for playgrounds.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for his kind words. I genuinely mean it when I say there are some great schemes in this Department that he developed when he was there. It was a new Department he set up with Deputy Canney and people in rural Ireland are really starting to reap the benefits. He is right about the playgrounds. I am going to mention a few schemes but the Deputy is well familiar with them. Playgrounds, public green spaces and public parks are all key to community well-being and he is dead right that they were a godsend during Covid.

The community enhancement programme provides small capital grants to community groups to enhance facilities, including playgrounds, in disadvantaged areas. Funding is allocated by my Department to each local authority area. The local community development committee, with support from its local authority, administers the funding. For 2021, €4.5 million is available with €145,203 allocated to County Mayo. That funding is there to support the small playgrounds. Under measure 2 of CLÁR 2021, €2.3 million in funding was provided to support outdoor community recreation facilities, including playgrounds. Emerging from this call I recently announced funding for 20 playgrounds, including new playgrounds and upgrades to existing playgrounds. I expect to launch the next round of CLÁR funding early next year.

The LEADER programme is not a specific scheme for the upgrading of playgrounds. However, funding may be available subject to compliance with LEADER operating rules. In line with the Government's ambitious policy for rural Ireland, Our Rural Future, which was launched in March, I announced an increased allocation of €70 million for the transitional LEADER programme. This funding will support local-led projects, including by developing outdoor amenities in rural areas. This programme, covering 2021-22, came into effect in April for new project applications. It will be delivered through 28 local action groups, LAGs, around the country. The decision to approve a project, or otherwise, is a matter for the LAG administering funding in each LEADER area. Interested applicants should, in the first instance, contact the relevant LAG to discuss project eligibility and available funding. Details of LAGs, implementing partners and contact details are available on my Department's website at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/c45498-local-actiongroups](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c45498-local-actiongroups). There are supports available. I take the Deputy's point that some of these playgrounds need a bit of work done to them and it is certainly something I am happy to look at.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank the Minister for her reply. A number of playgrounds around the country have been damaged by people who have no respect for public property. The schemes that are there are great schemes. I am sure the Minister will look at having a specific scheme especially for upgrades and for putting security cameras into some of these playgrounds. Security cameras are vital now because, as I have said, there are people out there who just want to destroy public property. I do not know what is wrong with them. When the pandemic was on, these playgrounds really came into their own for children and their parents. I compliment the Minister, her Department officials and the county councils for the playgrounds that have been built around the country. They have been a major success and I hope this will continue and the Minister will have a look at a specific scheme.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I take the Deputy's point and I will see if there is anything we can do to provide funding to upgrade the playgrounds and carry out necessary repairs. It will not cost a fortune to do a bit of work on these playgrounds, which are essential.

The Deputy is also correct about security cameras. The Department of Justice is developing community partnerships, which involve gardaí, local authorities, local agencies and communities coming together and making suggestions for their local areas. Security cameras will be sought by many of these partnerships and work is ongoing in the Department on that. The Deputy understands well the benefits of security cameras, including making people feel safer.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I am glad that the Minister also has responsibility for the Department of Justice because the previous security camera scheme that was in place did not work. There was too much red tape involved and I am glad the scheme is being reviewed. It needs to be simplified because while funding was made available, it was not drawn down. In my experience, when funding is not drawn down it is because the scheme is too difficult. To be fair, most of those involved in community groups are volunteers and they do not have the expertise for complicated schemes. They are depending on us to make schemes very simple. I am delighted that Deputy Humphreys is in the Department of Justice and that the work that needed to be done is being done.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I welcome the Minister's comments. During the summer a group of volunteers, some of whom were from UCC, carried out an audit of all of the parks and playgrounds in Cork. They discovered that the north side of Cork city has fewer parks than the south side and that the north side parks are smaller, of lower quality and have fewer amenities. Great work is being done on the south side of the city and I compliment Cork City Council on the Marina Park, the Tramore Valley Park, Regional Park Ballincollig, Bishopstown Park and other parks in the area. However, on the north side of the city, including Cork North-Central, which I represent, there is no regional park. I ask the Minister to commit to supporting Cork City Council, both financially and with staff, to upgrade John O'Callaghan Park in Glanmire and Kilmore Park. There is a disparity between the north and south sides of Cork city and I ask the Minister to support the council with funding.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As Minister for Rural and Community Development, I can only assess applications that I receive. Cork City Council needs to examine the issue the Deputy raised. Perhaps the council has a plan for the area. The best thing to do would be to map out where the deficiencies lie. We have supported local authorities with funding to produce plans for rural areas, although the Deputy is talking about a city, which is somewhat different. We have helped many towns to bring their communities together to develop a plan for their area, decide what they want, get local buy-in and then submit an application for funding. The

Deputy is talking about Cork city but my focus is on rural areas. If Cork County Council wants to submit an application for funding, it will be considered by my Department.

### **Community Development Projects**

7. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to support the development of women's sheds in Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49403/21]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** My question relates to women's sheds. I have been contacted by a group of women in Tuam who want to set up a women's shed. They want to know where to go to get State support. Men's sheds groups have been successful throughout the country and have been strongly supported by the Department. In that context, we should consider supporting women's sheds. I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy for his question. The emergence of the women's sheds groups in recent years has been a positive development for communities throughout the country. My Department supports sheds through many funding programmes that are open to a variety of groups and organisations. These include the community enhancement programme, CEP, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and the LEADER transitional programme. In 2019, my Department established a ring-fenced fund of €500,000 for men's and women's sheds under the CEP. While the ring-fenced fund is no longer in place all community groups, including women's sheds, can apply to the programme. The 2021 CEP allocated a total of €4.5 million to community groups and it is hoped to run the programme again in future.

My Department also funds local development companies under the SICAP so that they can support the most marginalised in society. This includes work with women and the groups that represent them. Funding for women's shed groups may also be available through the LEADER transitional programme, which will cover the period 2021 to 2022. This programme provides funding under a broad range of themes, including enterprise development and social inclusion. Interested applicants should contact the relevant local action group through its implementing partner to discuss the eligibility of the project.

In general, I would encourage women's sheds groups to engage with the local authority and the local development company in their area to ensure they are made aware of funding opportunities from my Department and across government and State agencies as they become available.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Initially when I was praising the Minister, I inadvertently left the Minister of State out of the equation. Every Department needs a good team and I am delighted that the Minister of State is doing a great job in the Department. I thank him for his reply. It is important to ensure that women's sheds get parity of esteem and the same quality of service as men's sheds. Women need to have places to meet, chat, do community work and become involved to give them a sense of belonging. I welcome the fact that funding is being made available through the CEP. The Minister of State said that he hopes the programme will be run again soon. Does he have any idea when it will reopen for applications?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** In response to the previous question, I cannot give the Deputy an es-

timate on that. We run the programme every year, at the very least. I fully agree that women's sheds should have parity of esteem. I visited an excellent women's shed in Wexford recently. The sheds make a great contribution in giving people an opportunity to come together, which is particularly important in rural communities where such opportunities, especially during Covid, are limited. I fully agree with the Deputy's point on parity of esteem.

I urge him to make the group that contacted him aware that there is precedent in Galway for funding men's sheds. There are sheds in Loughrea, Headford, Moycullen and Cornamona. When the group approaches the local authority with regard to various funding streams, it would be wise to reference the fact that there is precedent there in terms of CEP funding for such projects.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister of State for that. When women's sheds are starting out, they do not know where to go for funding. The first port of call for information is the local authority. It would also be important to register with the Public Participation Networks, PPN. It is important to give groups as much information as possible. We will also look into the possibility of getting assistance from the rural development company. The message is clear that the Department supports women's sheds. I invite the Minister of State to come to Tuam to meet the women involved at some stage in the future.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I wish to take the opportunity to again ask the Minister and Minister of State to consider restoring the funding that was specifically for sheds, for both men and women, as part of the CEP. The last time I raised this matter, I had visited the men's shed in Ballaghaderreen. The issue is that sheds are applying under different funding streams here and there. They might get something but then again, they might get nothing. I would love to see a dedicated fund for men's and women's sheds given the important role they play, particularly in rural communities where there may be lots of people living alone with no family close by. The sheds help to tackle rural isolation for those living alone and they also play an important role in mental health. The Department should consider a co-funding arrangement with the Department of Health to guarantee funding for men's and women's sheds. Otherwise, it makes it difficult to sustain them.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I support my colleagues on this issue and I will give a minor perspective on it. When these organisations are applying for funding, the funding coming in from local authorities is sometimes perceived to be *ad hoc* and may not be transformative in terms of what they want to do, even though they are looking for modest amounts. If there was a core funding line coming from the Department, I would certainly join with my colleagues in supporting it.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank Deputy Canney for the invitation and I take the other Deputies' points as well. We support the national men's sheds organisation through the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, and applications for that will be opening either late this year or early next year. That is just a point of information that may be useful.

On the question of sustainability, and I recall Deputy Kerrane's previous contribution on this, having a number of funding opportunities that are locally based and connected to the local authority where the knowledge is better than what we have centrally is a good route in terms of sustainability as well. However, I take the point about predictability. Relatively small funds can get a lot of men's and women's sheds off the ground and there a number of funds, not just the ones I have mentioned such as the CEP, SICAP and LEADER. Other Departments deal

with this as well particularly in the area of mental health, and I would suggest looking at the Healthy Ireland initiative. Multiple funding streams are healthy as regards sustainability into the future.

### **Common Agricultural Policy**

8. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the percentage of the European agricultural fund for rural development, EAFRD, that must be utilised for the purposes of LEADER; and the percentage she has sought for the programme for 2023 to 2027. [50094/21]

11. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the maximum permissible Exchequer co-funding rate for the purposes of LEADER from 2023 to 2027. [50095/21]

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** In the round, I am trying to glean from the Minister a perspective on the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, and how Pillar II falls in respect of LEADER funding and the co-funding. It would be useful to know what percentage is in the mind of the Minister for co-funding on Pillar II elements. We are hearing 80% or 90%. Perhaps the Minister could give us some view on that.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 11 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The LEADER programme is a key intervention implemented by my Department, which will help to underpin the Government's rural development goals, as outlined in Our Rural Future. The programme is co-funded by the EU under Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is Ireland's managing authority for the CAP and thus has lead responsibility for negotiations of the new policy, which is to be introduced from 2023. My officials are engaging extensively with both the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the EU Commission on the design of a new LEADER programme to form part of the new CAP strategic plan. The EU regulations governing the new CAP state that at least 5.5% of the EU funding available for the CAP strategic plan shall be reserved for LEADER and that the maximum permissible Exchequer co-funding rate for the next LEADER programme will be 80%. On foot of the agreement of the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, with the EU, the total amount of EU funding available for Pillar II payments across all schemes for the period 2023 to 2027 will be more than €1.5 billion. It is important to me to maintain a significant level of funding for the LEADER Programme, to ensure it can continue to deliver for rural Ireland. In this regard, I secured an additional €70 million in funding for a transitional LEADER programme, which will cover the period to the end of 2022 to ensure that there is no gap between the end of the current programme and start of the next one. The allocations of funding across all the new CAP schemes are currently being finalised, and my Department is in ongoing communication with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in relation to this process. It is expected that indicative scheme allocations, including for the next LEADER programme, will be announced shortly to form the basis for the next stage of stakeholder consultation.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I thank the Minister for her response. We acknowledge the additional €70 million that has been provided but we are starting from a pretty low base. The €200 million allocated for 2016 to 2020 is way down on the €400 million that had been allocated

historically. We are hopeful that the Minister will be successful in clawing back that money and increasing the amount necessary to provide for Pillar II. Have there been bilateral engagements at between both Departments at ministerial level?

My second question is more of a point. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is saying that this is farmers' money. There are some of us who would argue that while it is farmers' money, it is also money that should go to rural Ireland and there needs to be a certain countering of that narrative. I would like to get the Minister's perspective on that as well.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I am very committed to ensuring that a sufficient budget is allocated to LEADER to allow it to continue to successfully deliver a range of locally-led projects across rural Ireland in the new CAP period of 2023 to 2027. This will entail both EU funding and a significant Exchequer contribution. It is expected that all scheme allocations for the range of schemes in the new CAP will be announced shortly and these will form the basis for further stakeholder consultation. My officials are engaging closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but I have also spoken to the Minister and I know he has been out around the country doing consultations in many different areas and it is his plan to make an announcement shortly. We will have to wait until he does that but it is expected that the announcement will be soon. I know he is doing his best to deliver for Ireland on this CAP funding, which is important.

### **Community Development Projects**

9. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the schemes that are available for local groups to avail of funding to establish community centres; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49453/21]

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I ask the Minister of State to outline the schemes and funding that are available for community centres.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy for the question. My Department has a number of schemes that local groups can avail of to support the establishment of community centres. Funding may be available through the LEADER transitional programme, which is delivered through local action groups, LAGs, in each of the 28 LEADER subregional areas around the country. Interested applicants should, in the first instance, contact the relevant LAG through its implementing partner to discuss the eligibility of the project and the funding that may be available. The Department also provides small grants relevant to community centres through the CEP. The 2021 programme was launched on 10 May with funding of €4.5 million. It is currently closed but will reopen in due course. In addition, the €49 million community services programme supports more than 420 community organisations, including community centres, to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model. Funding is provided as a contribution towards the cost of employing staff in these organisations. The 2021 town and village renewal scheme is also relevant to community centres, as it will support the repurposing of existing community buildings in town centres to facilitate remote working and other projects to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use. Finally, a new capital fund for the upgrade of community centres was referenced recently in the NDP and funding has been secured for this under budget 2022. The details of this capital scheme are currently being developed within my Department. It will be launched in early 2022, with further details to be announced in due course.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I truly appreciate the Aire Stáit's response. It is quite appropriate because he and I represent constituencies that are not too dissimilar from each other, albeit at other ends of the capital. In a European context they are described as peri-urban, meaning they are largely suburban, with a bit of rural and a bit of urban. There are so many communities simply caught in the middle and many of the schemes he has laid out simply are not applicable to suburban towns like Ballinteer or my home town of Stepside. Previously, under the LEADER programmes and others, great funding was provided for the more rural areas such as Glencullen and Kiltiernan under the former Minister, Deputy Ring. We are very grateful for that. No different to the Minister of State's constituency in Fingal, we are seeing significant levels of welcome residential development but that is no use unless it is accompanied by those community supports. Already in the constituency of Dublin Rathdown the community centres are simply full. There is nowhere for the active retirement groups or the smaller sports groups to go. Will that be given consideration within the new capital plan?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I can certainly identify with the issues outlined by the Deputy. The CEP is probably one of the most relevant in terms of the need he outlined in terms of his constituency and recent grants provided.

Sandyford Community Centre recently was given a €4,500 grant for an energy efficiency upgrade. Kilcross Resource Centre received up to €5,000 for a replacement fire alarm system. Furry Hill Community Centre received €8,000 for the upgrade of building maintenance and repairs. Patrician Community Centre was allocated €10,000 for the installation of solar photovoltaics. I recognise the needs the Deputy has outlined, however. That is one of the reasons the new programme is in the NDP and why we secured a budget allocation for it.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I was glad the Minister of State referenced those four centres. I would describe them as one relatively large centre and three small centres. They are full. Sandyford Community Centre is directly across the road from the estate on which I live. Not only is it full for all the services provided but the services - the Montessori school, yoga class, active retirement group - are all full too. In fact, they have a massive waiting list. The biggest issue is that the car park is now full because it is between a national school and a number of shops.

The population of a constituency such as Dublin Rathdown, which is similar to the Minister of State's constituency, is going to explode, with approximately 5,000 homes being built over the next year or two. We are not talking about the distant future. We need to see large-scale investment. I appeal for foresight to consider not just at rural areas and towns and villages, but particularly suburban areas with massive housing states, which do not particularly have that central town identifier, and funding in that regard.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I commend the new fund the Minister of State talked about regarding community centres. This originated from my constituency in Hartstown and Huntstown, where there was a major concern about two community centres closing.

My concern, and I have not seen any of the detail, although the Government will publishing it soon, is with regard to whether this is for non-local authority owned community centres or if local authorities can use some of this funding for their own community centres. A significant concern for the likes of, say, Hartstown and Huntstown, which are not local authority-owned, is that some of that funding will be siphoned off into community centres that have substantial funding from their local authorities.

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**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** We do not have that detail yet but it will be forthcoming in due course. I acknowledge Deputy Richmond's points as well. I can certainly identify because we have the same issue in Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk.

Regarding housing estates that are growing and coming on stream, there is a responsibility on local authorities in granting planning permissions to have community centres as part of a new development. That was not always done. It is improving in that regard but it is certainly a key responsibility in this area. It should not be down to us as a central Department to always fill the gaps left by planning permissions that were inadequate from day one. I certainly acknowledge the need that both Deputies have outlined, however.

### **Digital Hubs**

10. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if additional funding will be provided for digital hubs particularly in north central areas of Cork city; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50120/21]

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I wish to ask the Minister if additional funding will be provided for the digital hubs, particularly in my consistency of Cork North-Central.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. My Department currently operates a number of initiatives focused on supporting remote working, as outlined in Our Rural Future, the Government's rural redevelopment policy for the period from 2021 to 2025.

This summer, I awarded €8.8 million through the connected hubs funding stream for existing digital hubs and broadband connection points in every region. This investment will add capacity to remote working infrastructure with more than €3 million of the funding awarded to the southern region, including a number of successful projects in Cork.

In addition, the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, and the town and village renewal scheme both support the establishment of new digital hubs. Under this year's schemes, projects that bring vacant properties in town centres back into use as remote working hubs are eligible to apply for funding. Projects that repurpose existing community or publicly-owned buildings in town or village centres to facilitate remote working are also eligible.

Calls for applications for this year's funding streams are now closed and details of successful applications to date are available on my Department's website. Details of calls for applications to 2022 funding streams will be announced by my Department in due course. Applications to facilitate new digital hubs in the area to which the Deputy referred may also be eligible to apply under the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is responsible for administering that fund.

I am happy to confirm that I have secured additional funding in the budget to continue to provide support for the establishment and development of remote working hubs. I am committed to ensuring that remote working hubs continue to be available as viable options for remote workers across the country.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** We all know the importance of a good quality high-speed broadband connection in modern times, particularly in remote rural areas. None of us here

could do our jobs successfully without such a service and many businesses and jobs across the country depend on a stable, reliable Internet connection to ensure their competitiveness in a global market.

I welcomed initial funding for digital hubs across the country last year as I felt it would spread the benefits of the national broadband plan, NBP, and accelerate access to much sought-after broadband, particularly in areas where the broadband roll-out was a little slower. This morning, I was disappointed to hear that the plan is not likely to meet its targets for this year and Covid-19 is cited as the main reason for this delay. With that in mind, has the Minister any plans to increase the roll-out of digital hubs in our communities in addition to any of those initially planned?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The broadband connection points have proven to be successful. They are exactly for that purpose of allowing people who do not have high-speed broadband in their area to go to their local community hall or local centre. We have provided much support to the local authorities, which have identified where these broadband connection points need to go to get the high-speed broadband in place. We provided a great deal of money to help them kit out these halls and centres with furniture called “pods” in order that people can have a confidential space if they need to make a telephone call or whatever when they are working remotely.

I am a big believer in remote working spaces such as hubs and co-working spaces. I believe it is much healthier than working from home. I know some people like the blend between working from home and working in the office. The most important role we have is to continue to support the remote working hubs, however, because people are able to finish their day’s work. It is hard to finish work when one is at home. It keeps going on and on and it sometimes has an impact on family life. At least when a person goes into a remote working space in his or her local area or town or village, he or she can stop working, go home and then start again the next day.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** To follow on from that point, I believe it is going to be about blended working into the future. As somebody with three young kids, it is quite difficult to work at home at times. To get into one of these hubs could be quite beneficial for many people. I speak to constituents, particularly many of those working with multinational companies, who might not have to travel to the US or wherever they are going as often as they would if they had access to that high-speed broadband we are talking about.

I also welcome the connected hubs initiative and the additional funding for that, which will facilitate remote working not just for employees but it will also attract employers to areas they might not have previously considered locating. All this talk about broadband and hubs is contingent on getting broadband into these communities. Ahead of the full implementation of the NBP, which is now five years away, we need to endeavour to do all we can for these isolated communities.

Finally, we only have one such hub in my own constituency. People think of my constituency as predominantly urban but we also have many rural villages. It extends almost as far as Mallow and up to Deputy Sherlock’s area. He can speak for areas such as Burnfort and Mourneabbey, which are rural as well. We need greater emphasis on those hubs in my area of Cork.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** A number of hubs have been supported. I am delighted to

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support these remote working hubs across the country but in particular in Cork. Benchspace Cork and Republic of Work in Cork city received funding and there are a number of others. Of course, the greatest success of all is the Ludgate Hub. That is an amazing centre, but we cannot all have a Ludgate Hub, but we can have small core working spaces we develop and work with. Our colleague, Deputy Michael Moynihan, is anxious about a project that has applied for funding to convert the old post office in Kiskeam into a remote working space. We want to support these initiatives, especially in the rural areas where there is not high-speed broadband, in order that people can call in and use the facilities. I want to hold onto the opportunities Covid has presented in remote working. I want to make sure that makes the difference in rural Ireland. It is important we all work to do so.

*Question No. 11 answered with Question No. 8.*

*Questions Nos. 12 and 13 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Housing Schemes**

14. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps she has taken when it comes to incentivising persons to restore derelict properties in rural areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49837/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This is to ask the Minister what steps she has taken on incentivising people to restore derelict properties in rural areas and whether she has had any engagement with the Minister for Housing, Heritage and Local Government on this matter.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I presume a number of those existing schemes, including town and village renewal, cannot be accessed by individuals or families moving into a rural area. I have often come across, even in recent weeks, people moving into an area or returning to their home area who have a house that is derelict, vacant or in need of significant work and find they do not have an avenue. Perhaps there will be an option under some of the schemes coming on stream under Housing for All. The Minister also mentioned the town centre first approach, for which there was a pilot programme recently. What progress has been made on that? Will there be other pilots or what work has been done on with local authorities on the town centre first approach?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** My officials are engaging with the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government on the town centre first initiative. That will be a good policy. My Department will provide funding for local authorities to appoint town centre first officers. That is important, because we need to get this joined-up thinking in the towns and we want them to be able to work with the businesses, local communities and landowners on how we can do more, in a planned way, in our town centres. Significant work is ongoing in this area and in the town centre first policy framework. It is nearly complete and will bring forward the actions to look at how communities and local authorities can be supported to develop and deliver on these tailored plans for their towns by addressing vacancy and town centre living.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I presume those actions will be published shortly. When does the Minister envisage the funding for the appointment of town centre first officers in local authori-

ties will be made available? In many cases, such as in County Roscommon, one person will probably be taken on.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** In trying to get people to live in town centres, I would like the Minister to consider the issue of applications before a local authority for conversion of a premises in towns that are Edwardian or Georgian in their architectural character. Applicants find they meet massive impediments when dealing with the local authority planning department. I ask that some leeway be given to take into account the historical nature of those buildings. It is not always easy to apply a 21st century model of architecture to an 18th or 19th century building. I ask the Minister allows for some leeway or headroom to be given to the applicants such that they can make the conversions without it being overly onerous, while also meeting the fire safety and other standards one would expect for any application.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Like the Deputy, I believe we can respect the architectural heritage and importance of the building, while converting it for modern-day use. It is much better to have people in a town centre, living and breathing new life into it, than having derelict buildings. Sometimes it is about finding that balance, but there is no reason we cannot find it. It has been done in many towns and cities throughout Europe. We can do it here as well. The town centre first policy will consider these issues. They are being raised and they are being fed into that. I look forward its publication.

I am sorry, I mentioned town centre first officers; they will be called town regeneration officers. I have just received the allocations for budget 2022. The posts will be crucial in revitalising our towns and I just have to put the details on that. I will announce it, as soon as I can, across each area. I have to go into detail, which I do not have here.

### **Departmental Funding**

15. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of funding awarded and applications under consideration in counties Louth and Meath in respect of support for walking infrastructure such as trails given the importance of such local amenities particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50156/21]

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I ask the Minister the status of funding awarded and applications under consideration in counties Louth and Meath in respect of support for walking infrastructure such as greenways and trails. Many in County Louth have been successful. I thank the Minister and we have to make sure the funding is spent. I will wait for her reply and debate further with her, especially about the Mell Greenway.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, ORIS, provides funding for the development and enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as trails, cycleways and blueways in rural areas. Since 2016, ORIS funding has been awarded for 17 projects in County Louth to the value of almost €900,000 and 30 projects in County Meath to the value of more than €2.6 million. To date, 31 of these projects have been completed and it is expected the remaining projects will be completed over the coming 12 to 18 months. The 2021 ORIS scheme was launched in April and more than 300 applications were received seeking funding of almost €25 million. Four applications were received for projects in County Louth and 11 for projects in County Meath. I expect to make an announcement about the suc-

successful projects under the scheme before the end of the year.

In addition, to ORIS by Department also delivers the walks scheme. The scheme contracts landowners to undertake maintenance work on the trails that traverse their land. In turn, they receive modest payments in line with agreed work plans. I recently announced approval in principle for the Slieve Foye loop in County Louth to join this walks scheme. I also announced, subject to the development of an acceptable business case, to fund a new rural recreation officer post in Louth to help supply the delivery of the walks scheme there and to contribute to the development of the outdoor recreation sector in Louth generally. I am committed to building on the potential of the outdoor recreation sector for rural communities. The Deputy knows first-hand the value of these outdoor recreation facilities and the rural walks.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I thank the Minister for her reply. She has a grasp of all the issues in her brief. I congratulate her on that. She put her finger on it when she referred to the actions of local authorities in making applications that her Department funds them, which I welcome, but it is not always the case that funding that is granted to local authorities is spent. Indeed, there was a case in Louth County Council last year with the Mell Greenway where the funding for it was not spent. I know the Minister is working with the council to make sure the funding is spent on the greenway or walking trail.

It is an issue generally that county councils, notwithstanding the funding they have been given nationally, particularly in relation to empty homes officers, have been reluctant to do the work. The vast majority of councils took the €50,000 and did not do the work. The Minister needs to hold their feet to the fire if they are not doing the work. I welcome her commitment and that she is providing the funding, but local authorities must do the work. If they put in requests for funding, they are obliged to follow it up. I am talking especially about the Mell Greenway. The Minister might not have the brief on it but perhaps she could respond later.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I will give the Deputy a short brief on the Mell Greenway. Louth County Council was approved for funding of €200,000 under the 2019 outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme for the development and the enhancement of the Boyne Greenway. This year, it requested permission to revise the scope of the approved works. This amendment has been approved by my Department, subject to the submission of a project implementation plan. The Deputy knows how important that project is. We will certainly work with the local authority to do everything we can to help it progress the plan. We want to see it. We want to see boots on that greenway. That is what I want to see. I was down in Waterford, where I opened the St. Declan's walkway. It is a fine place.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I thank the Minister for her time and for being on top of all the issues. I welcome her working with Louth County Council to ensure the funding that was allocated two years ago is now actually going to be spent. Substantial progress has been made in County Louth. If you go north, the Cooley walk in Omeath is fantastic, as is the greenway to Carlingford. We have a proposal of a greenway from Oldbridge to Navan. We also have the Mell Greenway, which are talking about. At the moment, there is a plan with An Bord Pleanála, which will bring walkers and cyclists right out along the coast out to Mornington and up to places further afield like Skerries. The Minister is transforming our rural landscape and she is meeting the requirements of the communities for greenways, trails, walkways and cycleways. We are transforming our recreational amenities. To the Minister I say "Well done", but I will keep pressing on the Mell Greenway. I thank her for all her help on that.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Maybe I am biased because I am from Monaghan, but there is nothing more beautiful than the Cooley Peninsula. Carlingford is an amazing part of the country. You can go on then through south Armagh and back, of course, to beautiful Monaghan.

We want to use those wonderful natural facilities we have and I want to see us investing in them. That is why it will be particularly important to have the rural recreation officers. They will be able to liaise with the landowners. We cannot do any of these walks without the agreement and support of the landowners. We want to make sure we can work with them. The rural recreation officers will be able to do that. They will be able to be the bridge and to iron out any problems when they arise. That is the most important thing. If there are issues, they should be dealt with quickly so they do not become big problems. The rural recreation officers we will be vital in that.

I also want to say that Comhairle na Tuaithe is doing great work. It is developing an outdoor strategy, and I thank it for the work it is doing.

*Questions Nos. 16 and 17 replied to with Written Answers.*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are running out of time. There is time for just one more question. I call Deputy Sherlock, although he will not get the full time.

### **Rural Schemes**

18. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the input she has had in the development of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, strategic plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50093/21]

73. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the formal personal engagement she has had with communities and LEADER providers on the rural development element of the CAP pertaining to her Department in view of the national CAP consultation undertaken by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. [50092/21]

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I engaged with the Minister previously on CAP and its effects on LEADER funding. She acknowledged the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, is going around the country doing his roadshow at present. I wonder if the Minister is of a mind to do a similar type of roadshow. Certainly, we want to ensure that what will be secured inside the farm gate will be the best possible outcome for farmers, but also what will be secured outside the farm gate for rural dwellers and people living in rural Ireland is similarly important.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for the question. The LEADER programme, as the Deputy knows, will continue to be a key component of the new Common Agricultural Policy from 2023. I am committed to ensuring the programme continues to play a central role in delivering on the Government's vision for rural Ireland, as set out in Our Rural Future. Indeed, the extensive public consultation undertaken by my Department in the preparation of Our Rural Future clearly highlighted the vital role LEADER continues to play.

My Department continues to engage extensively with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, as the managing authority for the new CAP, as well as with the EU Commission, on the development of the new CAP strategic plan. My officials have also engaged ex-

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tensively with the Irish Local Development Network, ILDN, and other stakeholders, such as the Local Government Management Agency, in the design of the next LEADER programme. I have also agreed to having regular meetings with the ILDN on a range of issues. I will continue to keep that channel of communication open.

It is essential the new CAP and LEADER programme is firmly rooted in stakeholder consultation. To that end, I recently initiated an external review of the current LEADER programme, which has involved extensive engagement with stakeholders. The outcome of this review will help to inform the design of the new LEADER programme. I expect to receive a report in this regard in the coming weeks. The agreement of a new CAP strategic plan and a new LEADER programme from 2023 remains a key priority. Ongoing stakeholder consultation will remain central to this process.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I welcome the Minister's response. I welcome her specific reference to the Irish Local Development Network. The ILDN has outlined, through its future LEADER working group, a document which, to my mind, represents a good direction of travel. If there were to be greater traction on that document in terms of what the ILDN can deliver for rural Ireland, that would be a good way forward.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I will continue to engage with the ILDN. It is always important that agencies that are delivering taxpayers' money get an opportunity to raise their issues of concern with me directly. I do that, but my officials work with them closely. More than 4,700 projects to the total value of €198 million have been approved nationally by the local action groups since LEADER operations began in the mid-2016. Like the Deputy, I know the benefit of this funding on the ground, whether is to help businesses or communities. They give a wide range of funding and supports. We want that to continue in the new CAP programme.

The LEADER is a key plank in the delivery of Our Rural Future. The allocation of €70 million to the 2021-2022 transitional programme reflects this. Work on the design of the new LEADER programme from 2023 continues in conjunction with the stakeholders and the EU Commission. We obviously have to work within the parameters the EU lays down for this funding. I have met twice with the ILDN on a range of issues since my appointment. I will continue to keep this channel of communication open. The ILDN meets regularly with my officials.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

*12 o'clock*

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Yesterday, the plight of private renters dominated Leaders' Questions, and rightly so. The budget did not contain a single measure to ease the burden of sky-high rents. The only mention of the private rental sector was the extension of a tax relief to landlords. In response, the Taoiseach deliberately conflated the social rental sector with private renters. He talked about the housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. Does he not realise that increasing these expensive, short-term schemes by almost 15,000 tenancies next year will actually make the situation for private renters much worse? He said the Land Development Agency, LDA, would deliver 1,000 cost rental homes next year. Does he not realise that this is wishful thinking? The LDA does not have 1,000 cost rental units under construction. This means that the only way it can reach this target is if it purchases from private developers, snatching even more homes away from struggling buyers. He

said that funding will be provided to approved housing bodies to deliver 750 cost rental units but the Government could not even deliver the 390 cost rental units promised this year. He also rejected Sinn Féin's proposal for a refundable tax credit for renters, yet he promised this very measure in his election manifesto.

Not to be outdone, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, protested loudly when criticised for his failure to protect renters. Red-faced from his failed policy of linking rents to inflation at a time when inflation is about to pass 4%, he is now promising a 2% cap. Like Fine Gael's 4% cap on rent hikes, this measure will not work. It will not apply to renters outside rent pressure zones and it will not apply to new properties on the market. It will be impossible to police for new tenants in existing rental dwellings. The Minister's call for the Residential Tenancies Board to step up enforcement of the rules rings hollow when the Government will not even provide the board with enough staff to do its job.

The last time I raised the plight of private renters with the Tánaiste was in September. I reminded him that during his decade in power, rents have increased 100%. When he was Taoiseach, the number of properties in the rental market dropped by 20,000. Instead of dealing with the issue, the Tánaiste went on the attack. He avoided, misdirected and misrepresented. He may think that this kind of belligerent approach is good for his satisfaction ratings but it actually confirms that the Tánaiste has no empathy. He lacks that basic human ability to put himself in the shoes of other people enduring hardship. Why would he? He, more than any other politician in the Government, is directly responsible for that hardship, with working single people and couples desperately trying to save for a deposit, separated and divorced people who have lost their family homes, families recovering from Celtic tiger-era home repossession, students forced to choose between sky-high rents and crippling commutes, and modest-income workers approaching retirement and looking nervously to the future.

My question is simple. When will the Tánaiste and Government stop abandoning renters and act to cut rents and ban rent increases?

**The Tánaiste:** It is hard to hear anyone in Sinn Féin accusing anyone in the Government of misrepresentation. Misrepresentation, misquotes, telling us what we think and believe, and then criticising us for what it says we think and believe, is a classic Sinn Féin tactic. There is misrepresentation all the time. It is what Sinn Féin thrives on. I think it is beneath Deputy Ó Broin because-----

**Deputy David Cullinane:** What about the renters? Focus on them.

**The Tánaiste:** -----he is an intelligent person. He is one of the brighter people in his party and to engage in a personalised attack on me is beneath him.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** It is wrong. It is classic of the left-wing populism which Sinn Féin stands for. It is about creating ideas of masses against the elites, simple solutions to complex problems, and demonising opponents. It is not just about disagreeing with people but saying that the people that Sinn Féin disagrees with are lesser people and do not care as much. That is pure left-wing populism. That kind of populism has destroyed politics in many other democracies. Sinn Féin represents that in this country. I hope that will become more obvious to people over the years. It should be possible to disagree with people without questioning their motives or making them out to be uncaring or whatever Sinn Féin's current line is. It is beneath the Dep-

uty. It is unnecessary and I hope he will reconsider that approach. It is the left-wing populist approach. It is the mirror image of what Trump and Brexit have done, and what extremists are doing on the left and right all over Europe.

The housing crisis affects different people in different ways. Some people are struggling to pay rent, other people are struggling to pay mortgages, and there are people in their 30s and 40s still living at home with their parents because they are struggling to raise a deposit to buy a house as that is what they want to do. In the budget, we introduced income tax and welfare packages that will benefit people across society. It will not just benefit renters but all workers and indeed people who are on welfare. We stand over the approach that we took in this budget.

We have done two significant things for private renters in the budget. We are retaining the help to buy scheme, which helps people to raise a deposit to buy a house. We have record levels of investment in social housing, cost rental and affordable housing. That is what we did in the budget for private renters. Sinn Féin's approach was different. It offered a rent tax credit of about €1,000 a month, but with one hand it would give renters €1,000 while with the other hand it would take away €20,000 to €30,000 by abolishing the help to buy scheme. Renters who want to become homeowners are much better off under this Government than they would be under Sinn Féin. There is no doubt that renters who want to buy would be better off under this Government than they would be under Sinn Féin. I believe that Sinn Féin is proposing that because it fundamentally does not believe in increasing home ownership. It is not against home ownership entirely, but it does not want to see the percentage of people who own their home increasing. Its model is different. It is the Vienna model. It is the central eastern European model-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** -----which is about people renting for life. It might be the case that rents would be lower. It might be the case that people would have more secure tenancies and that they are renting from a public landlord rather than a private landlord, but ultimately, the model that Sinn Féin proposes is about keeping people renting for life, whereas we propose to help people buy their own home. That is why we are retaining the help to buy grant, of €20,000 to €30,000 in tax back, when Sinn Féin would take that away. A person would need to draw down Sinn Féin's tax credit for 20 to 30 years to match that. That is a truth that people need to hear.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Not only has the Tánaiste's response confirmed that he lacks empathy for the struggle of renters, it also shows that he does not even understand the housing crisis. The Central Statistics Office released two important pieces of information today. House prices have increased by a staggering 10.9% across the State in the past year. That is why people cannot own their home and why, under the Tánaiste's leadership of Fine Gael, home ownership as a percentage of the total housing stock has continued to decline. Saying that he is in favour of home ownership but pushing it beyond the reach of working families is not only foolish but deeply hypocritical. Help to buy is a bad scheme. Some 60% of the people who got it did not need it and it pushed up house prices. Not only is there help to buy, but a toxic pro-developer shared equity loan scheme which will do even worse harm. We also have the latest CSO figures for the harmonised index of consumer prices, which was 3.8% in September and went to 3.9% this morning. What will the Government do to stop skyrocketing rents and help renters?

**The Tánaiste:** Where is the Deputy's empathy for private renters who want to buy?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Answer the question.

**The Tánaiste:** People are struggling to pay their rent and to raise deposits. Where is the Deputy's empathy for them? He would offer them €1,000 with one hand and take €20,000-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We need 4,000 genuinely affordable homes to buy every year. What has the Tánaiste done?

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Tánaiste has the floor.

**The Tánaiste:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might allow me a little bit of extra time because my time was taken by Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** While you evaded the questions again, Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** Where is Sinn Féin's empathy for private renters who want to buy? It would give them €1,000 tax credit per year-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** And 4,000 affordable homes to purchase each year.

**The Tánaiste:** -----and take €20,000 off them-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Let the Tánaiste reply.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Once again, the Tánaiste is deliberately misleading the House.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Tánaiste has the floor.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the protection of the Chair. Where is Sinn Féin's empathy for private renters who want to buy? It would give them €1,000 tax credit per year-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We would provide 4,000 affordable homes to purchase each year. I have told the Tánaiste that three times. All the Government is providing is 500 affordable homes to purchase. I can say it a fourth time if the Tánaiste did not hear me.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Ó Broin has had his minutes. Please let the Tánaiste respond uninterrupted.

**The Tánaiste:** Where is Sinn Féin's empathy for private renters who want to buy? It would give them a €1,000 tax credit per year and take €20,000 off them by abolishing the help-to-buy scheme. That scheme has helped more than 30,000 individuals and couples to buy their own home since it was established.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** And pushed up house prices.

**The Tánaiste:** It will help tens of thousands more to buy a home and Sinn Féin would take that away. What have we done for renters in this budget?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Nothing.

**The Tánaiste:** The help-to-buy scheme has been continued. We are investing more in social housing, affordable housing-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** What has the Government done for private renters?

**The Tánaiste:** -----and cost rental housing, which will help private renters. As well as that, we have brought in a rent freeze in real terms, making sure rents cannot go up by more than the rate of inflation. We may modify that again to bring that figure down.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Inflation is 4%. How is that a rent freeze? The dishonesty is incredible.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** This is a national parliament.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It would be nice if the Government was honest with the people for a change.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** The Tánaiste does not interrupt you, Deputy Ó Broin.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If you could finish, Tánaiste-----

**The Tánaiste:** On a point of order, the Deputy, who has demonstrated no empathy for people who want to buy their own home, has accused me of a lack of empathy. I can put up with that. He has also accused me of dishonesty. That is not okay. It is out of order and he should withdraw it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have given the Tánaiste extended time. I will deal with the matter afterwards. I ask him to finish the reply.

**The Tánaiste:** I am done. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I did not hear what was said but it is unacceptable to keep interrupting any speaker. It was the Tánaiste on the floor. It is unacceptable, no matter how deeply the Deputy feels on the subject. I ask Deputy Ó Broin to-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** My apologies.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you. Can we move on with co-operation and respect from all sides?

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** This week most people were deeply disturbed and moved to learn about the plight of Adam Terry, a ten-year-old little boy who is living in agony because he has been waiting for more than four years for scoliosis surgery. Adam is not the only child who is suffering. This week I was contacted by the mother of a six-year-old girl, Rosie. She is desperately trying to get treatment for her daughter. Rosie was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus and has been diagnosed with epilepsy and scoliosis. She is a full-time wheelchair user.

In September 2019, Rosie and her mother met with consultant paediatric orthopaedic sur-

geon, Connor Green, at Temple Street and he said he hoped to operate on Rosie by that Christmas - that is Christmas 2019 - as a matter of urgency. That surgery did not take place and, more than two years later, there have been no updates from the hospital as to when it is likely to take place. That mother has contacted the hospital on numerous occasions, requested an independent review into Rosie's level of care and, earlier this year, finally went to the Ombudsman for Children. While this has been going on, Rosie's condition has significantly deteriorated. Both of her hips are now dislocated and she can no longer use her postural support equipment which is vital to try to limit the damage being done to her little body by scoliosis. Again I would point out that Rosie is six years old.

Rosie, Adam and the nearly 200 other children like them on waiting lists are enduring torture which is being facilitated by our healthcare system. There is no other way to describe such cruel infliction of needless pain. What does it say about our society and priorities that we allow this to happen? Children's bodies are becoming permanently deformed and they are enduring avoidable excruciating pain because of a lack of timely medical intervention.

It has been more than four years since the former health Minister, Deputy Harris, made a vow that children like Rosie and Adam would not have to wait more than four months for treatment. We all know Covid has had an impact but vital surgeries like these must be prioritised. In February, Mr. Green told *The Irish Times*:

“My access to theatre is half a day once a week, so I can do one child once a week. On average ... I can operate on [only] 40 children a year.” Meanwhile, three to four patients per week are added to his ... list.

Mr. Green said if he operated every day from February to the end of the year he still would not clear his list. That is how bad things are. He said it was “disgusting and unacceptable”. Will the Tánaiste give an indication of when Rosie will have her operation? Will he tell us how many theatres and what days is there space available for children in this appalling situation?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am sorry to hear about what Rosie is experiencing and what her family must be going through. I thank the Deputy for writing to me about it as well. I have the details I need and will follow it up with Children's Health Ireland during the week and get back to the Deputy about it as soon as I get a reply. My understanding from the Deputy's letter is the surgery was scheduled for 4 October but, on the Wednesday before the surgery, her mother got a phone call to say it was cancelled and they have not got an indication yet as to when it will be rescheduled. That is not a satisfactory situation. It is difficult to prepare a child for surgery, including psychologically. To find out it is cancelled is one thing; not to have another date is another thing again. That is extraordinarily difficult and I will follow it up with Children's Health Ireland to see what can be done.

On the wider issue of scoliosis and waiting lists, the Government severely regrets that children experience long waiting times for scoliosis treatment and we remain conscious of the burden this places on them and their families. Additional funding is committed as part of the budget to reduce waiting lists and improve waiting times. That is €250 million and there is a health budget of €22 billion this year, 50% higher than it was when the Deputy and I were in the Department of Health. It is a major increase in resources.

Officials in the Department of Health remain in regular contact with Children's Health Ireland, CHI, regarding scoliosis services, and CHI has advised that all patients with a diagnosis of

scoliosis require a pre-operative work-up prior to spinal surgery. This includes multiple diagnostic investigations and review by a multidisciplinary team. The plan of care implemented for each patient is tailored to best meet the patient's clinical requirements. The cyberattack in 2021 caused significant disruption to the orthopaedic service and all services across the Children's Health Ireland group. As a result, many elective cases were postponed and, without access to a patient's full history and previous diagnostic investigations, it was not considered safe to proceed without all electronic support systems in place. For affected patients with complex needs, in particular, that restricted the patient cohort that could safely proceed with surgery.

Most systems are back up and running across the sites but backloading of information is continuing and this continues to have an impact on waiting lists and the number of surgeries completed. A new orthopaedic consultant with a special interest in neuromuscular conditions started in Temple Street last month, and that should enable the use of additional theatre capacity. Additional capacity is also being provided at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh. There are additional outpatient clinics and theatre sessions in Cappagh for non-complex, age-appropriate orthopaedic patients, and this should improve access to theatre on Children's Health Ireland base sites for more complex patients awaiting surgery.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Four years ago the Tánaiste's Government gave a commitment that no child would have to wait more than four months for scoliosis surgery. Four years later, what is that target now? I take it the Tánaiste is not in a position to recommit to his earlier target, which was never met. What now is the target for children with scoliosis, who are in agony? How many theatres are available and for how many hours per week to address these shocking waiting lists? In the case of Rosie, we were told her operation was cancelled because there were not beds for children who had operations. What exactly is the logjam here? Is it a problem of theatre time? Is it theatre scheduling or theatre staff? Will the Tánaiste please shed some light on this matter? Why is it we have such an atrocious situation and we are failing these children so badly?

**The Tánaiste:** The four-month target was set by the director general of the HSE at the time, but it does remain the target: four months to outpatients and then four months to surgery. I do not know exactly what the situation is with regard to theatre time or theatre staff, but I will find out and I will get a reply for the Deputy as soon as I can.

Regarding the waiting lists, Children's Health Ireland advises us that as of the end of August, 118 patients were awaiting spinal fusion, a decrease of eight patients compared with the previous year, and 78 were awaiting other procedures, a decrease of nine on the previous year. It has advised that, due to the cyberattack these data are provisional and subject to validation.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** It is not an exaggeration to say that budget 2022 ghosted agriculture. By and large, it did not feature. I accept that schemes were rolled over and some small but very welcome investments were made in forestry, organic farming, etc., but there was nothing new. There was nothing substantial for a sector that is supposed to do much of the heavy lifting when it comes to reducing emissions. Current programmes will not deliver those reductions. Farmers were waiting for policy options and support in the interim between now and the start of the new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, in 2023. If past experience is anything to go by, it can take quite a period of time for a lot of those programmes to bed in.

Farmers have been promised a just transition. What is the evidence of change so far? The evidence is we are importing peat from Latvia. Latvia is in the European Union and it has the

same laws as we have. We are importing wood from Scotland. There is a real possibility of significantly increasing the importation of tonnages of beef from Brazil. That is the reality on the ground for farmers.

It was not just that agriculture was overlooked when it came to new supports. The sting in the tail is when it comes for example to the reduction in the flat rate VAT, from 5.6% to 5.5%. While 0.1% does not sound like much, it means €7 million to farmers.

It was also the fact that €49 million in carbon tax receipts that was supposed to go into agriculture have been deferred to social welfare. Is there no policy or programme to support the agricultural sector in decarbonising? A statement from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine tells us: “The needs of the Department of Agriculture for 2022 were met without recourse to carbon tax. This is simply a matter of scheduling.” The needs of the Department may have been met, but the needs of farmers were not. There is a narrative out there that we wait for the CAP and it will sort out all the problems. I am running out of time, but I will outline one fact: 25% of the basic payment on which farmers rely is now for eco schemes under increased requirements. Farmers are being asked to do more with less.

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Harkin raises a valid question on the ring-fencing of some of the carbon tax for green schemes and farmers, but I do not think it is the full picture in terms of the budget. What we agreed to when the Government was formed was that a proportion of the carbon tax would be ring-fenced for social welfare to increase the fuel allowance. We did that and we stand over it, but also that a significant proportion of the carbon tax would be ring-fenced for climate action. That includes retrofitting, most of which is happening in rural Ireland, but also for farmers as well. Farmers will benefit to the tune of €1.5 billion this decade directly from the proceeds of the carbon tax. I stand over that commitment. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, repeated it yesterday in his speech here in the Dáil, and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, stands over that too. The sum of €1.5 billion in carbon tax proceeds will go to farmers this decade. A decision was taken to start that in 2023 in line with the new CAP. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, can explain the details of that, but it does make sense to do it at the start of the new CAP period in 2023. Farmers will get the full €1.5 billion between 2023 and 2030. I reiterate that commitment here today.

In terms of the budget as a whole, it contained €4 billion for farmers: €1.86 billion through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and €1.2 billion through EU schemes. It is a 2% increase on 2021 and an 11% increase on budget 2020.

As Deputy Harkin indicated, all the major farm schemes are protected, and that is real money to real farmers. There were a number of new measures, for example, €4 million was allocated for the establishment of the national food ombudsman and the food regulator. That is an important body we want to set up. It is being done very much at the request of farmers and will have a role in ensuring farmers get a fair price for beef and the other products they sell to the market.

In tax, the stamp duty relief for young, trained farmers and stock relief was renewed. The budget for Teagasc has been increased by €7 million, which is important as well in terms of science and research into agricultural issues. As well as that, it is important to bear in mind that farmers are workers and members of society too, and they will benefit from many of the changes made in the budget. Farmers pay income tax, so they will benefit from the reductions

in income tax announced in the budget. Many farmers are in receipt of welfare payments. Some are pensioners, some are carers and some receive farm assist. All of those payments increased in the budget. Some will benefit from the healthcare changes such as reduced medicine costs, for example. Many have students going to college who may benefit from the increase in the student grant or the fact the distance changes are being made, which is quite important for rural Ireland too. Others have children in childcare, and they will potentially benefit from the freeze in fees. It is true to say that there were new measures that will benefit farmers and rural Ireland in particular.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** The Tánaiste is correct that the families of farmers are all members of society and they benefit from some of the changes in the budget, but it was promised that there would be a ring-fencing of a certain proportion of the money from the carbon tax for agriculture and we are being told farmers will get it but not yet. My question still stands, which is whether the Department is ready to roll out programmes so that this money can be spent.

The Tánaiste states there was a 2% increase. I am not an expert on looking at budgets, but when we look at the appropriations-in-aid, in fact, the spend in 2022 is 2% less than the spend in 2021. There has been an increase in administration, animal welfare and other areas. When it comes to farmers having money in the back pocket, there is nothing specifically for them in this budget.

My final point relates to carbon tax. If we look at the ESRI report, it tells us on page 22 that rural households face significantly higher prices than urban households when it comes to carbon tax. In the same budget, we see that what was supposed to be ring-fenced is not going back to the sector.

**The Tánaiste:** A large portion of the carbon tax proceeds will go towards increasing the fuel allowance and a lot of people in rural Ireland will get that increase. In fact, they are getting it this week, and if not this week then next week. A lot of the retrofitting that is happening is in rural areas too. The same goes for the rewetting of bogs and so on. A very large amount of the money that is raised from the carbon tax is going back into rural areas.

I restate the commitment the Government has made: €1.5 billion in proceeds from carbon tax will be ring-fenced for farmers for agricultural schemes between 2023 and 2030. It will come online with the new CAP. The Government has taken a decision that the right time to do that is when the new CAP comes into place in 2023 and we have all the new schemes. We are just rolling over the existing schemes at the moment. That €1.5 billion will start flowing into farmers' pockets and yards in little over a year from now.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Foetal anticonvulsant syndrome is a condition that affects children born to women who were prescribed the anti-epileptic drug Epilim during pregnancy. Children exposed to this drug in the womb have a higher chance of genetic malformations compared to the general population. An additional 40% of children exposed to Epilim experience developmental delays and have a three to five times greater risk of developing autism and ADHD. In comments made at Epilepsy Ireland's national conference, a neurologist described the impact of Epilim as much worse than thalidomide and much more widespread. Indeed, we know following a statement from the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, in 2019 that between 153 and 341 children born in Ireland will have experienced a major genetic malformation due to unnecessary and avoidable exposure to Epilim. The HSE also estimates that 1,250 families have been impacted since the 1970s in Ireland.

Progress on identifying how this could have happened seemed to be taking place when, in November 2020, the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, issued a statement in which he committed to prioritising an independent inquiry. This followed a meeting with Epilepsy Ireland and the Organisation for Anticonvulsant Syndromes Ireland. However, it was only last week that the draft terms of reference were drawn up, with no indication as to whether the format of the inquiry will be non-statutory or statutory. If it is non-statutory, the parents of women and children want and deserve to know why, especially given the public interest and the potential recommendations which could be made to help to prevent an issue like this from happening again with future medications.

These families have already been through enough, and I think we can agree on that. They must see meaningful action taken from an inquiry, not just a report on a shelf. These families need to know what services are being put in place to help them. Can the Tánaiste outline exactly what services these families can avail of? Will he commit to doing everything possible to assist these families, who need urgent and immediate assistance beyond the promised inquiry and beyond a report on a shelf?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I know this is a very important issue. It affects some of my constituents and some of the Deputy's. I have read up on it but I have not had an up-to-date briefing for quite some time, so I am reluctant to answer the Deputy's questions in full for fear of giving her misinformation. I will ensure that my office is in touch with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, today to see if we can get her a more detailed reply in writing.

In terms of the format of the inquiry, there are advantages and disadvantages to the statutory and non-statutory approaches, as the Deputy knows. The Scally report, for example, was non-statutory but was done quickly and, I think, was done very well. A statutory one would take a lot longer but would have the advantages of particular powers of compellability and being able to make particular findings that could not be made by a non-statutory one. I am not sure what the Minister decided in that regard.

I also hear the question the Deputy has asked in regard to the services being made available to these patients. Again, I will be in touch with the Minister for Health about that and will make sure the Deputy gets a detailed note on it.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I thank the Tánaiste for his constructive response and his commitment to seek further information, which I am sure the families will appreciate. I want to point out that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, did commit to convening a stakeholder group to see what can be done and, certainly, to stamp out the risks associated with Epilim. It is vital that the stakeholder group be established immediately because this is something that could run alongside an inquiry. In addition, back in 2018, the recruitment of four epilepsy nurses was committed to. That would also be very helpful, particularly for the purpose of the implementation of the pregnancy programme, so we need to have that recruitment also. These measures will go some way to ensuring that no family will be affected by Epilim in the future.

I also want to point out that it is very concerning that approximately 1,600 women take this drug in Ireland, yet an Epilepsy Ireland survey in 2020 found that one in six women are still unaware that the drug can in some cases cause serious birth defects and learning and developmental problems in children. This highlights an urgent need to get this matter moving and an urgent need also to support so many of those who are affected by this drug.

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**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. We will all acknowledge that Epilim is a very effective medicine in controlling epilepsy but, of course, if anyone is pregnant, they need to be made aware of any risks when it comes to any medicine they may take and what risks may affect their child. It is always a difficulty when treating pregnant women that the medicine they often need to control their condition can potentially have a negative impact on the child they are carrying. That makes it a difficult call to make. It is really important that the decision is not just made by the doctor and that the patient is fully informed as to what the risks and benefits are in continuing the medicine and what the alternatives are, and that should happen if it is not happening.

I will come back to the Deputy on the issues around the recruitment of staff and the stakeholder group. Certainly, it is the case that we could have a stakeholder group at the same time as an inquiry, and it is not that one would prevent the other.

### **Retirement of Staff Members**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Before moving on to Questions on Promised Legislation, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi Gerry O’Gorman, an príomhoifigeach seirbhíse i dTithe an Oireachtais. Tá mé díreach curtha ar an eolas go bhfuil sé ag éirí as a phost tar éis 21 bliain ag obair ar ár son agus ar son an chórais dhaonlathach. Sin 21 bliain as saol oibre 42 bliain. Chomh maith leis sin, tá a bhean chéile Ann ag éirí as a post tar éis 18 mí anseo ag obair ar ár son chun a chinntiú go rabhamar slán agus sábháilte. Guím rath ar an mbeirt acu agus tús nua á dhéanamh acu ar thuras nua ina saol.

I have just learned that Mr. Gerry O’Gorman, head service officer, retired from the Houses of the Oireachtas Service this week after almost 21 years of dedicated service in Leinster House, in a career that spanned 42 years. He is known to his team of service officers for his management skills, his leadership style, his humour and his dedication. Gerry is well respected around the Houses and will be fondly remembered by Members and staff on all sides of the House. In his final week in Leinster House, on behalf of the Members and staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas, I wish to sincerely thank Gerry for his outstanding service. As well as wishing him well, I also want to wish his wife Ann well as she is also retiring from the service this week. Ann has worked tirelessly over the last 18 months to keep us safe as part of the cleaning team here in Leinster House, and we often forget that.

Arís, guím gach rath ar an mbeirt sa turas nua atá os a gcomhair.

### **Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I remind Members that this is Questions on Promised Legislation and also on issues arising under the programme for government. I ask that we avoid statements. If Members choose to make comments across the floor, the time is running and it is one minute. I ask Members to stick to the issues. Táim ag cur tús leis an bpróiseas anois le Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The Tánaiste will know that the Price report was published in July 2020 into the provision of gynaecology services at Letterkenny University Hospital. The publication of this report followed a determined campaign by patients and their

families. My colleague, Deputy Doherty, raised with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and with the Tánaiste last year the need for all recommendations from that report to be fully implemented and for an examination to see if the circumstances that arose at Letterkenny arose across the State. The Tánaiste will know that a HIQA report has been published today and it is deeply concerning for the women of Donegal on three different levels. First, governance has not been implemented, which is quite shocking considering the findings of the Price report. There just is not the oversight that is required. In terms of recruitment of staff nurses and so on-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should conclude.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Finally, there is the issue of outpatient services, which are at 50%. Will the Tánaiste intervene with the Minister to resolve this issue?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I know this is a really important issue in Letterkenny and in Donegal. Deputy Doherty has raised it with me before, as have Deputy McHugh and the Minister, Deputy McConalogue. I welcome the publication today of a targeted assurance review of the governance arrangements for gynaecology services in Letterkenny University Hospital. The report provides an important opportunity for an independent focus on the quality and safety of gynaecological services in Letterkenny for the women who avail of them. Since the publication of the Price report in August 2020, the HSE and the Saolta University Health Care Group have been working closely with Letterkenny hospital on a detailed plan to implement the report's recommendations to improve the quality and safety of gynaecology services in the hospital. Today's report recognises the substantial financial and staffing resources that have been made available to Letterkenny hospital and the Saolta University Health Care Group to implement the Price report.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** One of the more well-received elements of this week's budget was the introduction of a youth travel card for 19- to 23-year-olds. In the Labour Party's alternative budget, we examined the options in this regard and opted for the provision of free travel for under-24s on the basis that there would be technical impediments to the delivery of a discount or youth card. At a meeting of the transport committee yesterday, I asked the Secretary General of the Department of Transport about those technical impediments. He stated that the Minister for Transport had come late with this particular proposal and officials were getting their thinking caps on to ensure it could be rolled out to as many under-24s as possible, but not all of them, and that there were issues in regard to sourcing the technology to deliver it. When does the Tánaiste expect the scheme to be operational and can he guarantee it will include all 19- to 23-year-olds, not just those living in the main urban conurbations?

**The Tánaiste:** I am sure there are technical complications, but I am equally sure they can be overcome. The plan is to introduce the scheme in 2022. I hope it will be in the earlier part of the year but I cannot guarantee that today because some of the details are being worked out. As far as I am aware, it applies to everyone aged between 19 and 23, not just those in urban areas. I am sure it can be done. We have travel passes for older people, student passes and scholar passes. I am sure it can be done but, obviously, the details will have to be worked out.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** When it comes to the city of Dublin, who exactly is in control? Right now, there is a sense that the city is in decline and there is nobody at the wheel. The programme for Government makes provision for a directly elected mayor but the concern is that by the time it becomes a reality, it will be too late. If we are to be effective in preserving our culture and maintaining the aesthetic and essence of the city, so that we no longer lose buildings

of significance and see our city decline, is it not time for an Oireachtas-led task force to ensure the future of the city in the most immediate sense? Nobody seems to be in control at this time.

**The Tánaiste:** There is a Government commitment to establish a citizens' convention on the appropriate model of local government for Dublin. It was supposed to be set up when the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality was finished. As the latter has now completed its work, I anticipate we will have the new convention set up quite soon. It will be very exciting to have that discussion about what local government should look like, not just in Dublin city but in the county as well.

In regard to the functions the Deputy mentioned, most of them are matters for Dublin City Council rather than the Government. I understand his party is part of the controlling group on that council.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Tánaiste mentioned empathy earlier. Will his Government extend a bit of empathy to families that are in homeless accommodation for years on end? I raise this matter because I am currently dealing with two cases where there is a distinct lack of empathy being shown. As I understand it, this is at least significantly to do with Government policy. In one case, a family of eight, including a disabled mother, a father and six children, three of whom are in college, have been in homeless accommodation for six years. They are going to be evicted from the hotel they are in because the father briefly went over the income thresholds the Government promised but failed to raise. He has now lost his job but, because of the legislation, his family is going to be made homeless and he is not entitled, after six years in emergency accommodation, to the housing assistance payment. The other family, of two parents and four children, has been housed in multiple homeless accommodations over the past four years. The family is going to be thrown out of its current accommodation because it has to be refurbished.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. We are over time.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** What empathy will the Government show those families?

**The Tánaiste:** If the Deputy wants to provide me with the details of those cases later today or before the end of the week and give me permission to make representations on behalf of the families, which I need, I would be happy to look into them, check out what the story is and see whether there is any way we can help. Certainly, I do not think we could possibly have either of those families ending up on the streets or without accommodation. That would not be acceptable to anyone in this House. They are going to need help but I need their details. I will be happy to look into the matter.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I welcome the extension of the help-to-buy scheme but I would like the Tánaiste's comments on how it can be enhanced to include first-time buyers of any of the vacant properties that are splattered around every town and village in this country. We should give young people a chance to bring those homes back into use by extending to them the supports available under the help-to-buy scheme. It is a good scheme but this change needs to be made as a matter of urgency in order that we can start giving some hope to young people who want to buy their own home, especially around the regions, where there is a huge number of these vacant houses.

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy knows, the help-to-buy scheme, as it is currently constituted, is only for new-build properties, which include own-build homes, including in rural areas. It is

designed to encourage the provision of more new builds that are affordable for first-time buyers. The suggestion has been made by the Deputy, as well as Deputy Griffin and others, that we should extend the scheme to cover vacant properties that are brought back into use. I think there is some sense in that. I see a lot of properties around the country that could be turned into homes and, potentially, we could use the help-to-buy scheme to encourage people to do exactly that. It would make sense from a climate point of view as well to reuse an existing building rather than building a new one. However, there is potentially an alternative way of doing it, which is through a grant system. We are looking at the two options at the moment and we hope to make a decision in the next couple of months.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I want to raise an issue that was brought to my attention in an email I got this morning from a school principal. The email states:

I'd like to draw your attention to the shortage of teachers crisis that the school has been experiencing over the past number of weeks. Neither my school or the joint school have been able to get a sub teacher for over three weeks. This has led to excessive disruption within the school. I currently have teachers out on sick leave. One of these sick leaves is being covered until mid-term but the teacher will no longer be available after that. I advertised a long-term subbing contract for 19 weeks to include allocated hours the school is owed and sick leave. However, I received no applications, even after extending the closing date. I currently have no cover for the other sick leave.

The principal goes on to say: "I contacted the helpline that Minister Foley stated should be made aware of these issues but the person on the line said that she does not deal with these types of issues."

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** A serious crisis is building up, as noted by the Irish Primary Principals Network. We could have a case where children are sent home from class because schools cannot provide teachers.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As she knows, the budget provides additional funding for more teachers, special needs assistants and special education teachers, as well as a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio. That money has been allocated but it does not necessarily mean schools will be able to find people who are appropriately qualified. If the Deputy passes the details of this case on to me, I will make sure the Minister, Deputy Foley, gets them. I will ask that she perhaps contact the school directly to see whether there is anything we can do to help.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies for their co-operation as there are 13 more speakers to get through. Some Members are indicating that they wish to come in on another question. I remind them that there is a new system in place and they may not come in on another Member's question.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** This week's budget included a lot of wins for women, including a €31 million healthcare package that will help to tackle period poverty and provide investment in sexual assault treatment and maternity services. The provision of free contraception for young women aged 17 to 25 is particularly progressive. This idea was raised during the debate on the referendum on the eighth amendment. In that referendum in 2018 the people of Ireland had the opportunity to have their say on the issue of abortion loud and clear and yet today, metres from

the Coombe hospital, a provocative 6 ft tall billboard is encouraging women to rethink abortion. This is a blatant attempt to cause upset, trauma and emotional turmoil. Back in August the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, confirmed his commitment to introducing legislation on safe access zones. Where is that legislation and will it deal with issues like these advertisements?

**The Tánaiste:** I would like to join the Deputy in welcoming the significant package for women's health contained in the budget, which includes real funding to implement the national maternity strategy. That is a strategy I was privileged to be part of drawing up when I was Minister for Health.

A new scheme providing free contraception to women aged 17 to 25 will be set up next year. It is a start and we will get it going. We may be able to extend it to women above 25 in future years but as is always the case with a scheme like this, it needs to be phased in and done right. The legislation on safe access zones is still promised and it is in the Minister's work plan. I do not have a date for it coming to the Cabinet yet but it is intended to be done and we can examine the possibility of containing some rules around advertising within that legislation. We ban advertising for tobacco, alcohol and so on in certain zones so perhaps we can do the same with this.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** This has been an anti-rural Ireland budget with nothing for the fishing industry, little for the farmers and a carbon tax attack on the people of rural Ireland alone. One of the few shining lights in the budget was a 50% reduction in fares for students travelling on public transport but the devil is in the detail here too as it exempts those who are not on public service obligation routes. That means most of the people in rural Ireland will not benefit from the 50% reduction. The big winners among students as a result of this 50% decrease in travel costs will be those travelling on the Luas and DART. That is a great boost for those who live inside the Red Cow roundabout in Dublin. One bus operator in west Cork who does several runs a day from Skibbereen and Bantry to Cork tells me takes 70% of the students to Cork, many of whom cannot get accommodation and rather travel daily. This bus operator, like thousands more, cannot have his students avail of this 50% reduction in student travel costs. Can the Government immediately reverse this shocking attack on rural Ireland so that every student who uses public transport, whether they are from Clonakilty, Bandon or Kinsale, is treated the same as those students from Dublin and is entitled to this 50% reduction?

**The Tánaiste:** I will ask the Minister, Deputy Harris, to take a look at that. This is the first student grant increase in 11 years. Not only is there an increase in the grant but the budget is making the eligibility limits bigger so that more families qualify and there is a change around the distance. I am not across the exact detail of that but I will ask the Minister to see if there is anything we can do. It is designed to help students so we would not like to leave anyone out if we can include them.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It is travel. Do something about that.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** A programme for Government commitment states that we will: "Immediately prioritise the drafting of legislation for the phasing out of fur-farming, publishing legislation in this area as soon as possible." In yesterday's budget, along with the welcome increase for *ex gratia* funding for the animal welfare organisations, I noticed a funding commitment to unwind fur-farming operations. That is right and appropriate if we are asking people to leave this practice behind; they should be funded appropriately in doing so. Can the Tánaiste clarify the amount of that funding and update the House on the progress of the legisla-

tion that has been promised?

**The Tánaiste:** The legislation to outlaw fur farming in Ireland is progressing and I understand it will be brought to the Cabinet by the end of this month or perhaps early next month with a view to getting it enacted in this House before the end of the year. There is provision for compensation for the farms that are being forced to close for obvious reasons. I do not have any more information on that but perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, can add to that.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** That is effectively it. The legislation is close, funding provision has been made and that process will conclude in the near future.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I want to ask the Tánaiste about student nurses and midwives who are among the heroes we all commended over the last 19 to 20 months. I understand that an independent report has not only been commissioned but is sitting on the Minister for Health's desk and that report is looking at a permanent solution for fourth-year nurses. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation demanded that their pay be restored to 80% of an entry-level staff nurse position and that for first-year, second-year and third-year nurses there would be a fair allowance and bursary put in place. That report needs to be published, the Government needs to act on its recommendations and a fair solution needs to be put in place for nurses and midwives. It was understood that would happen before the budget but it did not happen. It was then hoped it would be in the budget but it was not. When will this issue be dealt with once and for all?

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I do not have an update on that. I have not seen the report and it has not come to the Cabinet yet but I will make enquiries with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and get back to the Deputy with a further answer later in the week.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme was put in place earlier this year to replace the EU cross-Border directive following Britain's exit from the European Union. The scheme and its predecessors enable large numbers of patients to access treatment and surgery, or both, in Northern Ireland, paid for by this State. These were typically patients on long hospital waiting lists. I understand the scheme is due to finish at the end of this year. Could an Tánaiste give me a categorical assurance that this scheme will continue beyond the end of 2021 on an administrative basis if the necessary legislation is not in place by that time? Access to spare hospital capacity in Northern Ireland is an important part of our healthcare delivery, particularly in orthopaedics and cataracts.

**The Tánaiste:** I confirm that is the intention of Government but we need primary legislation to put a new scheme on a statutory footing. If we cannot get that done in time we intend to continue the existing arrangements on an administrative basis if possible. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to confirm that but that is my understanding of the position.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I feel obliged to raise the issue of primary medical certificate appeals which are resulting in significant delays and frustration for applicants who require adapted vehicles. Following a Supreme Court decision in June 2020, the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal was advised by the Department of Finance to suspend any planned appeal hearings until further notice pending legal advice. Unfortunately there is a considerable backlog of requests for appeals due to the suspension of appeal hearings since March 2020. I understand this backlog needs to be cleared before new appeal hearings are conducted and I have been advised this is likely to happen from June 2020 onwards. The Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Ap-

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peal is in discussion with the Department of Finance on the importance of a new scheme for disabled drivers and passengers. This must be urgently prioritised. I would appreciate if the Tánaiste could advise of any progress in accelerating the process as delays are having a negative impact on those waiting for their appeals.

**The Tánaiste:** This issue is ongoing. It has been going on for too long at this stage and is causing difficulties for a lot of people. Unfortunately I do not have an update on it but I will ask the Minister for Finance to talk directly to the Deputy and brief him on the state of play.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Will he share that with the House because that is something I have raised?

**The Tánaiste:** Sure.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** On page 52 of the programme for Government a promise is made to: “Publish a new Palliative Care Policy for adults by mid-2021 to update the 2001 policy.” This will reflect the many developments in end-of-life care and international best practice and will better interact with children’s palliative care. Is there any update on when this policy will be published? We are way past mid-2021.

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I do not know but I will ask the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to contact the Deputy directly on that. It is welcome that the budget made another specific allocation to hospice and palliative care, which will be welcomed by all of the House. That money will be paid before the end of the year.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Buried in Tuesday’s budget documentation was an admission that the national broadband plan is running eight months behind schedule. That is two months more than the timeline presented to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications by the contractor last month. It means that 75,000 fewer homes will have access to high-speed broadband at the end of next year than was originally planned when the contract was signed in November 2019. The yarn that was spun by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications yesterday was that this was down to Covid delays.

*1 o’clock*

However, the work was carried out outdoors and the contractors were designated as essential workers under the Covid level 5 rules. What exactly is going on and what is causing the delay?

**The Tánaiste:** There is a delay, unfortunately, but it is still anticipated that approximately 60,000 homes will be passed this year. Work is happening with the contractor to try to speed up and regain lost ground over the next couple of years. There were issues with Covid and delays in getting the necessary licences for poles and ducts from local authorities. National Broadband Ireland had difficulty in getting staff. Even though the staff in question were essential workers and allowed to work during the pandemic, I understand that quite a number were being recruited from overseas and issues like the travel restrictions made that difficult. The roll-out is behind schedule, but we still believe that approximately 60,000 houses will be passed this year. Work is under way to try to make up the lost ground in 2022 and 2023.

**Deputy Kieran O’Donnell:** In the context of the full reopening on 22 October, the 43% increase in Covid cases over the past week and the fact that two thirds of new cases involve under-44s, and with less than 10% of the population driving 50% of hospital admissions and the

majority of people who are admitted being unvaccinated, I will ask three questions.

First, with regard to the toolkit, Professor Mary Horgan is heading up an expert advisory group on rapid testing. Where is its report? We need to get rapid testing rolling. The Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications wants to see rapid antigen testing as part of the toolkit.

Second, 370,000 people are unvaccinated. Of those, 300,000 are adults who have not received any vaccine and 70,000 have not received a second dose. What are we doing as a public campaign to get them vaccinated?

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

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** Third, will the Covid certificate be extended beyond 22 October?

**The Tánaiste:** We have not made any decision yet on the planned easing of restrictions on 22 October. We will do that during the early part of next week, probably on Monday or Tuesday. We will have more data and a better read on the epidemiological situation by then. However, no decisions have yet been made in that regard. We will have to consider matters as we see more data over the next few days.

The vaccine booster programme is progressing. We are waiting on advice from the national immunisation advisory committee, which I hope arrives soon, in respect of a wider booster programme. Israel, which saw a return of Delta, got its numbers down and under control again through an extensive booster programme. The case for something like that is stronger than ever.

I do not know when the rapid testing report is due but I will find out and revert to the Deputy.

Regarding people who are not vaccinated yet, vaccines are still available and vaccine centres are still open. It is a personal choice, but the truth is that, if everyone in Ireland was fully vaccinated, we would probably have approximately 25 people in ICU and 200 in hospital overall today, and there would be no question about easing restrictions on 22 October. It is a personal choice, but it has an impact on other people.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I wish to discuss the pension scheme of workers in CIÉ. A ballot was taken in June 2020 on changes to the regular wages scheme, a deal that would have seen modest increases in weekly pension incomes. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, stated last year and earlier this year that he would sign a statutory instrument to bring those increases for retired workers into effect. Will the Tánaiste confirm that the Minister will sign that statutory instrument?

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I cannot confirm that, but I will see the Minister this afternoon. I will let him know that the Deputy raised the matter and ask him to revert to the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I wish to raise the issue of ambulances. There was a report in *The Clare Herald* this week about an ambulance that was sent from the Carraroe base in County Galway to an incident in Kilkee, two hours away. Luckily, an off-duty paramedic was there to help. There is a major shortage of ambulance drivers. Meanwhile, paramedics who are being trained in the University of Limerick are not accepted by the National Ambulance Service, NAS, and NAS personnel from County Clare were in Northern Ireland carrying out Covid testing. I readily accept that Covid poses a threat to health and life, but ambulances are sent to

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threats to health and life and we do not have enough ambulance drivers. The introduction of the European standard, under which an ambulance can only take one person instead of two, was never accompanied by an increase in the number of ambulances. The Tánaiste spent time in the Department of Health as Minister. What is being, and will be, done about this shortage of ambulances across the country? Ambulances are being deployed two or three hours from their bases because of the shortage.

**The Tánaiste:** There have been many changes to and real reforms of the NAS and its service model in recent years. The service works more like a fleet now than a series of bases. Often, the ambulance that is nearest to the person is the one that is sent regardless of the distance from the base.

The budget provides an additional €8.3 million for investment in the NAS. That will continue to develop and improve the service and also extend the hear and treat model, which is used successfully in other countries.

*Sitting suspended at 1.06 p.m. and resumed at 1.46 p.m.*

## **Financial Resolutions 2021**

### **Financial Resolution No. 2: General (Resumed)**

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

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

-(Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment)

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** Budgets, like politics, are about choices. This Government chooses measures which favour vested interests, golden circles, vulture funds, developers and institutional landlords. Sinn Féin's fully costed alternative budget favours ordinary workers and families, hard-pressed renters and the working poor, all of whom this Government holds in such contempt. As Sinn Féin spokesperson for older people, I would be expected not to like this Government's commodification of our society, where everything and everyone is measured in their worth to the economy rather than to society, so much so a local person's advocacy group, Older Voices Kildare, was awarded meagre funding to assist older people under the heading of "Economically Inactive". What a way to refer to older people.

I have met many older persons' advocacy groups over the past year. I would like to share some of their thoughts on budget 2022. Sage Advocacy believes this budget was an opportunity to build a new partnership between the State and older people but it has fallen short of what could have been delivered; it fails to take account of the varying supports and complexities of care that are needed to ensure that older people can live the lives they want to lead. Age Action Ireland has serious concerns that energy costs will continue to rise next year and push up prices for many goods and services, not only home heating and transport. Prior to this budget, only three in ten people benefited from the fuel allowance. The majority of older people will still not be eligible for this support despite the sharp increase in energy costs in recent months.

Active Retirement Ireland believes budget 2022 does not contain enough to give older people a good quality of life. It expresses concern about rising energy costs, along with increased petrol and diesel prices caused by a higher carbon tax. It also believes that the Government has failed to take into account the fact that for the majority of older people the State pension is their sole income. They have no other income supports. ALONE, the organisation that supports older people to age at home, believes budget 2022 highlights Ireland as a country where quality of life in old age is still something for which many have to strive. Our old people have value. There must be better integration between health, social and community infrastructure supports to ensure older people can continue to contribute on every level in every community across our land. Our older people have given so much and have an awful lot more to give. Realistically, these people are our communities. They are the backbone of what has gone before us and we need to treat them with respect.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** My portfolio as Minister of State with responsibility for heritage and electoral reform is expansive. It spans incredible dossiers from the cultural wealth of our archaeology and monuments, to the distinct architecture of our built heritage, the beauty, resilience and fragility of nature, and our democratic future. Ar dtús, tá cúpla focal le rá agam ar leasú toghchánach. Some €4.7 million has been allocated in 2022 to support delivery of our ambitious programme of electoral reform. This includes the establishment of an independent electoral commission and the modernisation of our electoral registration process and will deliver on the commitments in the programme for Government. The general scheme of the electoral reform Bill, which provides for these reforms, was published earlier this year. The drafting of the Bill is currently being progressed by my Department and the Office of the Attorney General. The Bill is included on the Government's legislation programme for publication in the autumn session.

On heritage, I inherited areas of responsibility that were relatively under-resourced and the top priority for me on becoming Minister of State was to restore heritage funding; placing nature, heritage and biodiversity at the heart of what this Government does well. Central to what we do in our Department are the National Monuments Service, the built heritage programme and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS. They are extraordinary teams of civil servants who did incredible work with curtailed resources, delivering for the citizen directly and through the agencies and bodies under our aegis, namely, the Heritage Council, Waterways Ireland and The Irish Heritage Trust.

The NPWS is a crucial and important service that is mandated with the protection, conservation and presentation of our natural heritage. Our nature and biodiversity; the variety of birds, mammals, invertebrates, fungi and plants, with water, minerals and air, combine in the dynamic ecosystems that give us vital services that society and the economy depend on, like soil fertility, water purification, carbon sequestration and storage, and of course that sense of peace and wonder that so many of us benefit from. In 2019, we learned that globally many of our protected habitats were of poor or inadequate status and that almost half were declining. That same year, the Dail declared a climate and biodiversity emergency. At that time NPWS resourcing was not sufficient to address the challenge with the level of urgency required. I was determined a hallmark of my tenure as Minister would be to leave a positive legacy for biodiversity in Ireland, to deliver on this Government's unprecedented ambition for nature and respond comprehensively to the programme for Government commitment to strengthen the NPWS, improve its effectiveness and make it the voice for nature we need it to be. The primary determinant in all of that is

resourcing. I secured additional moneys in the 2020 July stimulus, significantly increased the service's funding by almost 50% in budget 2021, and this week, I announced funding for the service would increase yet again to more than €47 million in 2022, amounting to an increase of 64% since I became Minister of State, bringing it back up to a level not seen since before the financial crisis. The funding secured in successive Estimates also enabled our Department to bring approved staffing at NPWS back to its pre-2008 levels. This has led to the establishment of a new team that will focus on the protection of our special areas of conservation and special protection areas, a wildlife crime unit, a substantial cohort of new conservation rangers, as well as the recruitment of ecological and scientific expertise, field staff, guides and administrative staff. These are major achievements that are already having positive impacts for nature and biodiversity all across the country and I will do my very best to ensure we continue on this trajectory.

Similarly, I have addressed long-running resource challenges at our National Monuments Service, the Heritage Council, our built heritage programmes and in Waterways Ireland. Together as a unit, our heritage services and agencies can now go forward with renewed purpose. The 36% increase in our heritage allocation year-on-year means that their programmes have been rebooted and re-energised. We will see more national monuments protected. We will see further infrastructural work on our stunning inland waterways, North and South. The Heritage Council will be able to do more for our historic towns and through its schools programme, communities will have more financial assistance to help preserve and maintain local monuments and restore the built heritage of their areas. Many thousands of traditional building man-hours will be supported for our skilled craftspeople. Recruitment will continue at the National Monuments Service and we will promote further candidates for world heritage status.

However, we must do much more. For instance, realising the totality of our shared vision for the NPWS requires further transformative action that acknowledges the past, reflects the present and renews for the future. I am now leading on this through a comprehensive phased process entitled Review, Reflect, Renew: A Strategic Action Plan for the Future of the NPWS. Preliminary to all of this, and as a recurring underpinning, is addressing the resource challenge. The orientation or "review" part in this process commenced in February 2021 under the direction of chair Professor Jane Stout, of Trinity College Dublin and deputy chair, Dr. Micheál Ó Cinnéide, formerly of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. The independent reviewers heard from more than 3,000 people and groups, providing an external perspective on some specific aspects of the NPWS and conducting an analysis of comparable organisations across Europe to inform a suite of recommendations. The next phase, "reflect", will take account of the outcome of the Stout-Ó Cinnéide work and then synthesise the resourcing gains of the past 18 months with a detailed, expert analysis of governance, organisational structures, communications, data systems and future resourcing, and outline the NPWS's specific requirements across those areas. The final "renew" phase will detail the objectives and prioritised actions that will equip the NPWS to deliver on the ambitious goals, objectives and targets emerging from our programme for Government, the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, the EU biodiversity strategy to 2030, Heritage Ireland 2030 and the new national biodiversity action plan, and to be the respected voice for nature that so many have called for. Working with my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, we intend to bring this strategic action plan for the future of NPWS to Cabinet by the end of 2021 and implement it in the lifetime of this Government. In that regard, I also acknowledge the hugely positive and constructive working relationship with the Minister and our shared ambition for nature and heritage.

I have listened to our many stakeholders, both internal and external. I am reflecting on the findings, in the context of significant resource increases since I became Minister of State, to define exactly what is needed, and developing an action plan to renew the NPWS and ensure it is equipped to respond to Ireland's biodiversity emergency now and in the decades to come. I look forward to working with the Department on this exciting new chapter for the NPWS.

As a *chapeau* to all of that, I will also publish Heritage Ireland 2030 in the coming months. This, Ireland's first heritage strategy, will set the backdrop to realise our full set of ambitions for our built, natural and archaeological heritage, as we enter our second century of full nationhood. In the meantime, I commend the heritage budget 2022 to the House.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Rural Independent Group made a series of submissions to this budget which were, by the look of it, rejected out of hand. One of the first proposals was the budget should be rural-proofed. Certainly, this budget has not one shred of rural-proofing written into it. As a matter of fact, it is an anti-rural Ireland budget. I will tell the Minister of State how it is going to affect the people and how it is going to put more cars on our roads, which is going to affect our environment far more than at present. I was talking to a private operator, West Cork Connect, who had the decency and respect for the people of west County Cork to take several buses to Cork every day. We are talking about three or four buses, maybe, from Skibbereen and three to four from Bantry, passing through Dunmanway, Drimoleague, Ballineen and Enniskeane, all the way to Cork. On the other side, there is Clonakilty-Skibbereen, Rosscarbery and Bandon. It was costing the operator €110 to fill the bus to fill the bus every day. It is taking loads of cars off the road. This is exactly the dream the Government has; it is what its intentions were.

*2 o'clock*

It used to cost €110 but in the past 12 months it has risen to €165. He is wondering if it will pay at all but if he pulls the plug, what happens? Cars, cars, cars and this is where the Government is going wrong with its carbon tax. All the carbon tax does is hit rural Ireland. That is all it does. It generates a pocketful of money so that beautiful projects up here in the capital can be sorted out but, as I keep saying, we cannot keep carrying Dublin on our back. It will not and cannot work. The people of rural Ireland are livid about this budget because it was nothing but an attack on them. Imagine a jump from €110 to €165 for one trip. That has to be fed back to the customers, the people travelling on the bus. The bus operator is now in a difficult situation because the Government's carbon tax dream is going to scoot his costs up through the roof and I would say he is going to pull the plug if this keeps going. I do not know where the Government is going. It is going to force more cars back onto the road and cause a far bigger crisis.

On the 50% rebate for students, one would think that everybody should welcome that. I would welcome it but the problem is that we do not have public transport down our way. The devil is in the detail because if students are not on a PSO route, they do not qualify. This is another attack on rural Ireland. The young people who travel on the Luas and the DART, and I do not begrudge them one bit, will qualify for the 50% rebate. However, the man I spoke about a while ago, who carries 70% of the young people leaving west cork from places like Bantry, Skibbereen, Bandon, Kinsale and Clonakilty, will not qualify for this. I presume this is because the Minister for Transport and his colleagues at the Cabinet table from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael forgot that rural Ireland should have been included. Why were these people not included? I raised this with the Tánaiste earlier. Maybe I speak a bit of Japanese or something because he did not know what I was on about. He told me he was going to talk to the Minister for Further

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and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, but this has nothing to do with him. This is the responsibility of the Minister for Transport. This is his mistake. This is a shocking and glaring mistake and this is an attack on the young people of my constituency and many other constituencies. Apparently there is no PSO route in Wexford either so the young people there will get no advantage from this. If you are a Dublin Deputy, this will suit you fine and perhaps the Government is trying to bring them on board.

The Tánaiste said earlier that farm organisations should not worry because the Government will give them something in 2023. That is kicking the can down the road, of course. Kick the can down the road for the usual lads, the farmers of rural Ireland. The Government will give them a kick in the arse and expect that will sort the whole matter out. It will sort them out in 2023. How are they going to survive? Somebody asked earlier if there is a scheme for farmers who are going out of business. It would want to be a massive scheme because they are running out of business. The Government is leading them down one road. They will not get a brown cent extra in 2022. They have been left there but the Tánaiste said that they should not worry; the Government gave a few extra bob for farm assist. That is it now. I will go back to west Cork and tell the farmers on the way home that I have great news for them and that farm assist is their future according to the Tánaiste. I can tell Deputies from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that if they go back to their constituencies and tell farmers that, they will be run from the doors. That is what they are facing. The livelihood of fishermen was also forgotten in this budget. They were forgotten about.

I could speak for the next hour but I have only 30 seconds left. I want to touch on some of the issues raised by the Minister of State, including activity in regard to the protection of rivers. I fully respect that but the biggest offenders in the State in terms of polluting rivers are local authorities and Irish Water which have not resolved 34 sewerage systems in towns and villages, with raw sewage seeping into rivers. I could take the Minister of State around the most beautiful part of Ireland, west Cork, and show him just that.

On the issue of monuments, he should remember that the centenary of the death of Michael Collins falls on 22 August 2022. A monument must be put in place in the capital city to commemorate the greatest Irish man who ever lived. That must be put on the top of the Government's agenda. We must show respect to one of the greatest people who ever stood in this nation.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** On Tuesday, I had the opportunity to respond to budget 2022 and I branded it the “lousy fiver” budget because that is exactly what it is. It is a lousy €3 budget, a lousy €2 budget, a lousy €5 fuel allowance budget at a time social welfare recipients are feeling the pinch because of inflation, particularly energy price inflation. These are the people who have borne the brunt of the Covid pandemic and the budget was an opportunity for this Government to repay them by putting a few bob in their pockets.

I did not make any pre-budget submission due to a lack of resources but Age Action Ireland said that social welfare payments for older people should be increased by €15 per week because the purchasing power of their pensions has been reduced by €10 due to inflation. It advocated giving them an additional €5 and also called for a €15 increase in the fuel allowance. The Government has missed an opportunity. People are saying that the additional fiver will be gone in a second. As others have said, every cent of that money will go back into the economy. It always does but it could and should have been more.

This budget was also a lost opportunity *vis-à-vis* low-paid workers. The Government missed an opportunity to show respect to retail workers, cleaners and those in the arts and entertainment sectors who lost a lot during the pandemic. When reference is made to low-paid workers, people immediately think of cleaners and those in retail but 20% of transport and warehouse workers are also on low pay, as are 15% of healthcare workers and 13% of manufacturing workers. These figures come from a report by Mr. Michael Taft on low pay in Ireland. Again, this was an opportunity that the Government missed.

In terms of tax cuts, there was a €50 increase in the PAYE threshold, as well as an increase in tax credits and a raising of the USC band. Workers earning more than €33,000 will benefit to the tune of approximately €450 per year while low paid workers will only gain €150 per year or €2.21 per week. These are people who worked through the pandemic; they got on buses or walked to work and faced difficult situations in their workplaces on a daily basis. They will get an extra €2.21 per week, which is just lousy. Again, this was a lost opportunity for the Government to target money in respect of what has happened to people in their communities and their workplaces, as well as to determine what was needed to back up businesses and so on. The bulk of the money should have gone into that area.

Yesterday the Tánaiste said, in the context of the 30 cent increase in the minimum wage, that the minimum wage has increased by €1.85 or 17.6% since 2015, running well ahead of the CPI rate of inflation of 3.6%. It is derogatory to say something like that to workers who are dependent on the minimum wage. We know that the CPI figures can be distorting because they do not take housing into account but do take into account many unnecessary items. Calculations should be based on minimum essential budget standards because that is what people are feeling on the ground. It was very disingenuous of the Tánaiste to make those remarks.

Finally, there was no mention of funding for the drugs task forces in the budget. There was no increase in the allocation between 2014 and 2018. In fact, funding has been cut by 35%. Funding has not increased at all for those organisations dealing with the most vulnerable in terms of drugs and alcohol. The Government missed an opportunity to show respect to people in workplaces and communities and that has not gone unnoticed.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I am delighted to share my thoughts on the budget but in five minutes it is difficult to cover the full depth of the various areas of life that this budget will impact on. I will, therefore, try to limit my remarks to three issues of particular interest not just in my own constituency of Dublin Rathdown but also in areas where I have worked and in the committees on which I serve. I look forward to speaking further on the finance Bill, the social welfare Bill and during the Estimates process in due course.

Something I immediately took away from the budget when I went through the documents as the two Ministers took to their feet the other day is the widening of the tax bands. This is the absolute definition of ensuring better levels of equability through our society, by ensuring people will be able to keep more of their own money in their pocket. The fact that people will be in a position to earn more before they pay income tax in the first place and before they go onto the higher rate is a progressive move. We are classed as having the most progressive taxation system in Europe. However, we also have the lowest threshold for people paying the highest tax and, therefore, increasing that and giving that incentive is important. That will be particularly true as we look to lure more people back to the labour market and harness every attribute of what is predicted to be a fast-growing economy in the calendar month ahead.

The second area I wish to raise is the public expenditure side of the budget and the Brexit supports. We are fortunate in this member state to have received the largest amount of the Brexit Adjustment Reserve fund announced by the European Commission earlier in the year. In excess of €1 billion will be allocated to this State to address those sectors of the economy that are most acutely exposed to the truly awful impacts of Brexit. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. However, there are opportunities for many in our society and there are also challenges that need to be addressed. That is why I welcome the announcement by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform that more than €500 million of that fund will be spent this year in areas that are acutely exposed throughout our economy. It does not matter if these issues affect individuals directly in someone's constituency, regardless of what part of the country someone comes from. They impact on us all and we have to continue to use that fund smartly to look for those opportunities, be they in the higher education sector, financial services or the smart technology sector where we can lure investment into this economy. That might come from the UK but we should also consider alternative markets in continental Europe or beyond in the wider world, where existing EU trade deals give us great opportunities. That potential for newer, more skilled and more highly-paid jobs are what will drive this economy. Although I am a Dublin Deputy, we need to make sure there is a regional balance in the allocation of those funds. Parts of the country are simply more acutely exposed by Brexit, particularly the Border region where my family hails from originally. That is where the supports need to be driven into, to make sure those areas can reach out and have all those opportunities, in as wide a way as possible.

I will again touch on the public expenditure side of the budget, and the moneys allocated to the shared island fund. The Taoiseach announced at the outset of the formation of this Government that €500 million would be provided for the shared island fund and within that, €50 million will be spent in 2022. This is a crucial investment in the future of our entire nation, not just this State and not just the *status quo*, because we need to get people north and south of the Border engaging at every level. Never mind politicians like us; the more we get businesspeople, students and ordinary members of society, particularly those in the younger demographic who have known nothing but the post-Good Friday Agreement era, meeting each other, hopefully in person now as restrictions continue to lift and at every opportunity, the more we will break down the existing border that is on this island. We talk about an open Border and about it being seamless compared to what was there before but there is still a massive emotional and psychological border, unfortunately. Too many people in our State do not go up to the North for their holidays, do not go to sports matches, do not do business North and South and teenagers have never met people of their own age working in the same area.

I greatly welcome the statements of the Ministers the other day and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, here this afternoon. This is a good budget, a responsible budget and a sensible budget that has been put forward by a Government that wants to make life easier for every person in this society.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** As Deputy Richmond said, it is quite difficult to comment on the budget in five minutes. We need to recognise the positives. We are good at accentuating the negatives in here all the time. Listening to some of the previous speakers you would swear this was not a progressive budget. There are things happening in childcare and education that must be acknowledged. I will focus on a few issues that need to be highlighted.

Over the past few days, Adam Terry and his mother, Christine, have been in the limelight with regard to scoliosis. I listened to the case of another family this morning on "Today with

Claire Byrne". This budget commits to an extra €250 million to tackle waiting lists. That is fine. That big headline figure sounds great and it might do great things but, at the same time, it is quite clear that there is a specific problem as regards scoliosis. Covid has contributed to waiting lists and scoliosis waiting lists alone have increased by 32% because of the pandemic. There are now 172 children on those waiting lists who need urgent medical attention and need those appointments to proceed. If that requires extra units to be set up or utilising the National Treatment Purchase Fund or whatever the case may be, that needs to happen. I am led to believe that many of these operations can take place in Cappagh Hospital. It was said earlier that there is capacity in the hospital but the information we have from on the ground is that there is not. There is a requirement for additional theatres there to provide for these operations. At best consultants can do a couple of operations a week and that is not going to tackle the waiting list. As I said previously, and as I have said to my own parliamentary party, it is great to hear about hundreds of millions of euro for this and hundreds of millions for that but if that does not translate to tackling issues such as this that have dominated the airwaves over the past two days, then people on the ground will not feel the benefits of what budget 2022 has brought.

The second issue I would like to raise is SNAs, teacher allocations and special education teachers in particular. An additional 1,165 SNAs and 980 special teachers are to be provided for in this budget. That is great in that some of our most vulnerable children and those with special educational needs will be catered for. However, I would flag a specific issue relating to Irish Sign Language and deaf children or children suffering from profound hearing difficulties. Approximately 20 kids in mainstream schools are not currently being facilitated by the Department with an Irish Sign Language teacher, as is their constitutional right. There are a number of cases before the High Court on this issue but this allocation of 980 special teachers can provide for those 20 or so children nationally and deliver on that constitutional right.

I acknowledge again that there is a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio from 25 to 24, following on from last year's reduction. This is a progressive measure that is going to be phased in over a number of budgets. That is very welcome in that we will get closer to our EU counterparts in that regard.

School transport is an issue, particularly for rural Deputies. Every year we face the prospect of children not being able to get to their schools and while there was some tinkering done this year to get additional seats on buses, the overall scheme needs a dramatic overhaul. There is a review under way, but in the current climate where we are offering a 50% reduction on public transport to students aged between 19 and 23, that scheme should be extended to all children of schoolgoing age. Ultimately, I would like to see that lead to fully-funded and free school transport for all.

It is heartening that initiatives such as the school meals programme are being expanded every year. It will lead to further phases and, ultimately, there will be a point where we will have free school meals for all kids who need them. It is good to see that we are going in that direction but, again, I hope we can make further progress on this and get it done sooner rather than later.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Tugaim aitheantas don Rialtas faoin mbuiséad. B'fhéidir go bhfuil an buiséad forásach. Cinnte tá deacrachtaí ann ó thaobh na dúshláin, na deacrachtaí agus na fadhbanna atá i gceist sa tír seo faoi láthair maidir le costais. Mar shampla, luaim fuinneamh agus na rudaí atá daoine ag fáil ó lá go lá. Cinnte tá an brú ar dhaoine ach rinne an Rialtas jab faoi na rudaí agus na dúshláin sin a bhaint amach agus níl achan freagra ag an Rialtas faoi sin. The Government does not have every answer for the real costs that are looming. As history

has a tendency to repeat itself, we only have to look at the roaring twenties and what happened throughout the 1920s in terms of inflation. We have, therefore, a real job on our hands to try to tackle that. We cannot do it on our own as a country. The European Union is looking at that question and at what we can do as a collective and as a European Union in terms of energy costs and, obviously, if there can be a common understanding between countries in terms of their own taxation responsibilities. That must be looked at for the for the short to medium term.

I also want to mention the issue of mica. It is good to see the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, back in the Chamber again. I hope it is a lucky charm as we glide ever closer to a decision on this. I know the Minister for Housing, Local Government, Deputy O'Brien, and his officials are working hard to try to bring this to a conclusion. It is very important that this decisiveness is kept on the radar. The Taoiseach said the first part of the job is to get the budget over the line. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, also pointed out recently that the next big job to do after the budget is the mica issue. I know the Government is looking at it collectively. It is an issue that needs a common understanding within different Departments as well as an understanding of the havoc it has created and that will ensue if it is not done in a complete way.

I will use this opportunity to make this point. Nobody is more disappointed than me and my colleagues in the previous Government that the 2010 scheme did not work. It did not work because once people started delving into the detail, it became an economic impossibility for so many families. My message is that whatever the detail, there must be vigilance. There will be much detail, whether it is more than 1,000 local authority houses and the innumerable individual private houses that will be in question, not just in County Donegal but throughout the country, for pyrite and mica. Whatever the detail is, we must be vigilant and we have to have a mechanism in place. The campaign has done one thing in creating awareness and understanding. When the memo is brought to Cabinet and the detail is finalised at an official level, however, we must have eyes and ears on that. Having spoken to one of the members of the Mica Action Group, there is a concern that history will repeat itself with this scheme if there is a rollback through the detail. Whatever mechanism is being brought forward and whatever memo is being presented to Cabinet, the days and weeks after will be as important as those that lead up to that point to keep an eye on exactly what is being decided upon and what the Cabinet has decided at an all-government level, and to ensure the accessibility and affordability questions are ticked at all times. I am using this opportunity in the short time I have in this debate to do that.

In terms of the money allocated, €40 million with an extra €20 million for pyrite is a lot of money; €60 million in the budget is, therefore, a lot of money but it does not go anywhere near what will be needed. It was, therefore, good to hear the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, reference the fact there are other contingencies within the budget in terms of spending.

Arís, gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle as an am seo. B'fhéidir go mbeidh cinneadh déanta gan mhoill ar son úinéirí na dtithe uilig atá ag titim, na fadhbanna atá ann leis na teaghlaigh, na girseacha, na gasúir, na seandaoine agus na seanmháithreacha agus na sean-náithreacha agus na glúine uilig. Táim ag dúil go mór leis an gcinneadh sin. Gabhaim buíochas arís.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** It is fair to say that this week's budget was a huge disappointment for most people in this State. If people were expecting leadership, solutions or, indeed, any sense of urgency, then they were left very disappointed. The fact there was absolutely

nothing - zilch - in the budget for renters is disastrous for tens of thousands of people who are struggling to pay rent or find a home they can even afford to rent.

Is it that the Government does not understand the crisis for renters or is it that it simply does not care? Telling renters to hold on for another few years while they wait for houses to be built is not acceptable. In fact, it is nauseating. People are in dire straits in this moment and they need support now. They need some security in their lives and this budget gave them nothing. The Government is either completely out of touch with the reality of people's lives today or it does not care. Both options are reprehensible.

The Government did manage, though, to bring in a tax break for landowners, namely, the zoned land tax. It will not come into effect for several years - there is no hurry, is there? - and it is half the rate of the vacant tax levy, which it is replacing. Sinn Féin would have increased the vacant tax levy to 15%. Fianna Fáil, in its manifesto, said it would raise it to 14% but the Government put it to 3%.

It is not just rent that is putting pressure on ordinary working people. Energy prices are skyrocketing. The price of electricity has risen by 19%, gas by 12% and oil by a whopping 39% in the 12 months to August. Instead of helping people to deal with these increases, the Government raised carbon taxes. They have already risen in the past year by €3 for a tank of petrol and up to €40 for a fill of oil. The Government made a decision to make life harder for ordinary working people at a time when energy prices are skyrocketing, knowing full well most people have no alternative but to buy these fuels. They either buy oil, gas or coal to heat their homes or they freeze.

On the subject of the cost of living, childcare is in a state of disarray between outrageous fees and poor pay for childcare professionals. That has been flagged up to the Government repeatedly by the sector. In terms of tourism and hospitality, there was much talk in the weeks before the budget of a pandemic bonus, that is, a voucher for people to spend in local businesses and a bank holiday. Both of these were included in Sinn Féin's proposal but there is absolutely nothing in the Government's budget. Yet again, there has been no stimulus for the sector other than the frankly disastrous stay-and-spend tax rebate last year.

The budget did not offer much in terms of health either. Free GP care for children aged under eight years of age is very welcome but under Sláintecare, we should all have had free GP care by 2022. We are, therefore, clearly a decade, if not more, behind where we need to be. I cannot count the number of times Fine Gael governments have announced various versions of free GP care. In 2013, it was free GP care for every man, woman and child within three years and in 2016, it was free GP care for the under-12s. None of it was ever delivered.

More than 900,000 people are on waiting lists. People cannot get dental care if they hold a medical card. When is the Government going to wake up? The budget will not deliver any new acute hospital beds above those pre-committed last year. It promises 19 additional ICU beds, which is just over half of what Sinn Féin would fund. Sinn Féin in government would also fund 600 additional new public hospital beds.

Sinn Féin would have put workers and families first. We would have invested where it is most needed to address the crises we have in health and housing and the cost of living. We would have guaranteed the right to retire on a pension at aged 65. Alongside that, we would have delivered the largest investment in mental health in the history of the State, significantly

increased investment in disability supports and begun the work of introducing free public transport, starting with the under-18s. The Government's budget delivers none of that and does not address any of the major issues affecting people in Ireland today. It is a Government out of touch with the people.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to respond to budget 2022. My colleague, an Teachta Doherty, summed this up quite well when he said never has so much been spent in the pursuit of so little. The Government budget has failed, by all accounts, across the pressure areas in our society and economy. We were told this budget would deliver for workers and workers' rights. However, two days have passed. I have been looking at and examining it and I cannot see where workers or their rights are represented or their interests furthered by this budget. There is no sign of the much-promised bank holiday, the bonus for front-line workers is also absent, and the delivery of a living wage is mentioned but in the context of being long fingered. Likewise, there is nothing for student nurses in this, though they worked tirelessly. Maybe we will have another round of applause. Maybe we will all stand up and have another round of applause for our student nurses and midwives, because that is all there was for them in this budget.

An increase of €500,000 in current expenditure for the Workplace Relations Commission is a derisory amount. The constant underfunding of the WRC is a political decision which I can only assume is aimed at trying to hamper the work of the main State organisation delivering workplace relations services for workers. The money put against the WRC shows this Government does not give a damn about workers or their rights. Budget 2022 again showed this Government is happy to continue turning a blind eye to employment law and workers' rights being ridden roughshod over. That does not surprise me when we consider that two out of three of the parties in government, when their backs were to the wall, cut the minimum wage. It did not create a single job. All it did was make people on low incomes even poorer, but we know that is the ideology that drives this Government. Workers' rights are not a feature, not an issue and not a part of the Government's budget.

There was some movement on an increased tax deduction which amounted to 30% of the cost of vouched expenses for heat, electricity and broadband for days spent working from home. The inequality in such measures for employment-related expenses between remote workers and those who have to travel to their place of work was mentioned on a number of occasions on the Claire Byrne show on RTÉ yesterday. Pitting workers against other workers like this is really unfair, but it is straight out of the Government's playbook, so I do not know why anyone would be surprised. The solution cannot be the State picking up the tab. It has to be legislating and empowering workers and their trade unions to ensure workers are paid decently by their employers and additional expenses are hammered out in that way.

Small and medium enterprises are another sector which can feel aggrieved. Many of their representative groups in this area have said as much. Another budget has passed without the establishment of a new Irish enterprise agency to assist SMEs trading domestically. This has been called for by SMEs and their stakeholders for many years. Almost 70% of people employed in Ireland are employed in small and medium businesses. Speaking to these businesses, they often feel like they have been left behind and that successive governments prefer to focus on foreign direct investment instead of helping to grow and nurture indigenous industry. There are many opportunities for our SMEs to access and exploit, but to do this they need help, advice and expertise on securing investment, expanding their domestic trading ability and looking at expanding into the European market, especially to capture the market share of any available

opportunities created by Brexit. This is where an Irish enterprise agency could step in and help grow jobs and the economy in a sustainable and regionally balanced way, which is another one of the things the Government says it is interested in, but when it comes to fronting up, it does not do it.

Childcare changes do not address affordability for parents or help the future sustainability for childcare providers. It has been relayed that, in advance of the budget measures which were leaked last week, some childcare providers increased their fees the very day before the budget. Parents are paying extortionate fees and having those fees increased once again on the eve of the Government coming out and saying it will freeze them. We all agree crèche fees are too high and the Government's answer is to freeze them at the current rate and lock them in at the high rate. What Sinn Féin has proposed and what we want to see is a new model of publicly accessible and affordable childcare provision, with fees reduced by one third in 2022 and a further third in 2023. In addition, this must go hand in hand with the improvement of pay and conditions for workers in that sector.

The most glaring issue with this budget is the failure to help lift the burden for renters. I am thinking in particular of people in my constituency. If you are renting in Fingal, you are paying an average of €1,800, and yet we see house prices in Swords, according to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, at an average of €350,000. That is way above the national average. There is nothing for renters and no hope of them being able to save a deposit and buy their own homes.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I welcome this debate and budget. There are many good things in it, and I refer in particular to tangible improvements, especially for families who are caring for very sick children in acute and long-term care for a significant period of time. Up to now, you would get your three months' carer's allowance but this would be cut after three months, and your three months' domiciliary allowance would also disappear. These are parents or guardians of children who are very ill, in acute hospitals, often far away from where they live because they are receiving special care, and this is the worst time of all for families. It is very difficult because they have the childcare and travel costs, and if you are on a lower income and so on, it makes it very difficult for you. What is socially just, beneficial and good in this budget is the fact you will now be able to keep your carer's and domiciliary carer's allowances for six months while your child may be, unfortunately, in medium- or long-term care. That is excellent, progressive, positive and very welcome. I also welcome the increased disregard of the capital allowances and the weekly income people are allowed to earn before they can get carer's allowance, which is beneficial, good and the right way to go.

The Sinn Féin speakers have ignored the significant increases in social welfare across all benefits. The Minister has a package of €850 million this year in social welfare. It is additional funding, which has to be welcome, especially as we come out of these Covid times. The attraction for younger people to travel, with the halved costs for people under a certain age, is positive and good, as is the increase in third level grants. The distance for the non-adjacent grant has been reduced from 45 km to 30 km, which will make a huge difference to people who live in places such as my home town of Drogheda. They are important, beneficial proposals and they are on the way.

Things are improving and, despite what Sinn Féin - I almost said Fianna Fáil - says, things are getting better, but we need to do more. We need to do more, especially in Drogheda, where there is a significant problem for people who have serious problems with their teeth and mouth hygiene and who wish to benefit from dental care under the General Medical Scheme. We need

significant changes there. The Government needs to pay the dentists more to make it more attractive for new dentists to opt in, because dentists are leaving the scheme. According to a reply I have to a parliamentary question, unfortunately, 250 contracted dentists have left the dental treatment service scheme this year, which means an awful lot of highly skilled and important people who are needed to help people's dental health are no longer available. That is obviously unacceptable, but I welcome the progress made.

The one thing missing in this budget and for which I campaigned is the empty homes tax. It is a critical mechanism. If a house is not a principal private residence and is lying empty, it should be taxed to the hilt to make sure it is put on the market and families are in there and it is not used as an investment property, which is, sadly and unfortunately, still done by many people. I welcome the commitment to do something about that next year.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** This budget comes as we slowly emerge from a once-in-a-century pandemic. It is a positive, progressive budget which will underpin economic recovery and get people back to work. The solid economic foundations laid by former Minister, Michael Noonan, and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in establishing the national reserve, or rainy day fund, have played a huge role in enabling us as a country to bounce back. Who would have thought we would have needed this reserve so quickly? This reserve allowed us to introduce the most radical of financial supports for our workers, families and businesses throughout the country. It allowed us to steer a safe and secure path through the worst effects of the pandemic until a safe vaccine arrived.

One of my key priorities in this Dáil has been recovery of the aviation sector, which is not only essential but is vital to the recovery of the tourism sector for the entire mid-west and west. I very much welcome the €126 million aviation package and the €60 million of capital investment. We must ensure this package is invested in a fair and regionally balanced way, in line with the aims of the national planning framework that suggests that 75% of growth should take place outside the east. Therefore, in my view, allocation of these funds should be on the same basis. If the east has over one third of the population of the entire country, it should never again have 86% of passenger traffic travelling to and from Ireland.

I welcome the inclusion of Shannon Airport in the regional airports funding programme. This is a welcome measure and it will free up funding to assist Shannon in recovering the routes and frequencies that have been lost during the pandemic, especially the three times daily return route to Heathrow Airport and the transatlantic routes to New York and Boston. It is important that Shannon continues to be part of this funding programme into the future.

One of the victims of the pandemic in recent days has been Lufthansa Technik Shannon Limited. This company has been in Shannon for more than three decades and employs 480 people. A strategic review of its operations was completed this week, and the company is to be sold to the Shannon-based Enterprise Ireland company, Atlantic Aviation Group, which will be taking on 300 employees from Lufthansa. This is a welcome development in ways, but my thoughts are with the 180 people who are to lose their jobs. I have engaged with both companies' CEOs. I have spoken to the unions this week. I met with the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, and I impressed upon him the need to ensure the best possible redundancy package is made available to these people. I also impressed upon him to need for his Department and for Government agencies to provide retraining and upskilling opportunities. It is important that, throughout this process, workers and their representatives are engaged with in a positive way. I look forward to that happening when the

30-day consultation period will begin next week.

To return to the budget itself, I also strongly support the package designed for business and tourism, including the extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the extension of the 9% VAT rate and the extension of the rates waiver. I have consistently called for these measures, including here in this House in last week's debate. The reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio by one, together with the recruitment of nearly 1,000 additional teachers and more than 1,000 SNAs, are all welcome investments in our children's futures. The changes to the tax bands and tax credits will allow workers to keep more of their hard-earned cash. The €5 increase for the pensioners, jobseekers and other welfare recipients, together with the increase in the minimum wage to €10.50, are all welcome measures. I also strongly support the extension of the help to buy scheme and look forward to more people getting on the housing ladder with its assistance. I welcome the commitment in this budget to recruit an additional 800 extra gardaí to the force next year.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** The constituency of Dublin North-West, which I represent, is a diverse constituency with varying needs and requirements among the constituents. It has its share of social problems, yet with a sizeable population, Dublin North-West is one of the most under-resourced constituencies in the country. We have a growing young population in the constituency. With that comes a need for increased services and resources. However, the reality on the ground is individual families, community organisations, and young people are struggling to avail of what services exist at the moment. While the constituency has many issues to contend with, some of the main issues are, for example, the urgent need for proper housing, proper healthcare, a decent transport infrastructure, climate change measures, good mental health and addiction services, additional Garda resources to tackle increased complaints of antisocial activity, and additional supports for those with special needs.

However, for many in my constituency, this budget would prove to be a major disappointment. Despite the spin from the Government, the budget fails to tackle the core issues affecting most people. This budget does nothing to alleviate the housing crisis, the rental crisis, the hospital crisis and the soaring cost of living.

Dublin North-West has seen scandalously insignificant numbers of social and affordable housing being built. It is an area that is densely populated and crying out for such housing. The cost of a new home for the vast majority of people is way out of their range. We are seeing ever-increasing numbers on the housing waiting list. It is not uncommon to see many waiting a decade or more for a house. It is even more important that priority is given to building more social and affordable housing. The housing and rental crisis has resulted in many families and individuals in Dublin North-West unfortunately falling into homelessness, through no fault of their own.

The constituents of Dublin North-West can rightly feel neglected, as they now have to wait until 2034 for the completion of the MetroLink. This project should have been completed and up and running by 2027. As I said here only recently, this project has a history of promises made and promises broken, with delay after the delay in its construction starting time. This has huge implications, not just for the areas the MetroLink passes through, but the whole of Dublin North-West. The population growth across the constituency has a number of obvious implications. It would give rise to increased demands for more housing, more health services, additional school places, and better transport services and infrastructure. This new delay to the MetroLink will have a huge knock-on effect across the constituency, adding to congestion and

affecting housing projects which are dependent on good transport links.

Dublin North-West also has a sizeable ageing population and this budget does not improve their quality of life. The paltry €5 increase in the weekly State pension is not sufficient to meet the increased cost of living for older people and it does not keep pace with inflation. For many older people in my constituency, the State pension is often their only income, as they have no other income supports. Similarly, for those on welfare, the small increase they received in the budget will not make them better off. They will continue to struggle to make ends meet, especially with escalating fuel costs and increases across the board to the cost of living. Once you get past the Government spin, it is clear this budget is ineffective and does not help those in society who are most in need.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I am sharing time. I will narrow my focus, because I just have three or four minutes, to a specific aspect of the budget. Then, in the context of the finance Bill I will talk about other issues.

One of the policy issues close to my heart is the issue of special needs education, as well as the provision of many facilities, supports, backup, teachers, and hours to those children who have special needs, and meeting the requirements of these children's parents. I am very happy, therefore, to welcome that there are a number of measures in budget 2022 that go a long way towards building on my own party of Fianna Fáil's tradition of measures for children with special needs. We were the party that introduced special needs assistants, SNAs. There were no SNAs in this country or system until Fianna Fáil introduced them many years ago. I welcome the fact another 1,065 SNAs will be added to the system, bringing the total number of SNAs in the system to close to 20,000. That is some achievement, although we will continue to need more. As we provide these, the need for additional supports is clearly becoming recognised. Certain supports are floating to the top of the system and we will have to address that. One of these is the issue of outside hours for childcare for children with special needs, to afford their parents basic time to do shopping and things like that. We need to look into funding that.

There are almost 1,000 new special education teachers to be introduced, working not just in special schools but also in special classes in mainstream settings, which is a positive development. The budget also proposes to increase the number of schools and children benefiting from supports in the DEIS programme. DEIS was introduced by my party a number of years ago and I am thrilled to see its expansion in many schools in my constituency. In addition to that, we have the extension of the school meals programme, a vital service which is provided to schools and is availed of in areas that have many challenges. It ensures that children get a warm breakfast and a lunch. It ensures that they come to school and are well nourished and in a good position to learn during the school day. The provision of additional administrative principals in special and mainstream schools is welcome.

My colleagues and I, including Deputy Jim O'Callaghan who is here today, pushed the issue of special needs education in the last Dáil. We were able to highlight that special autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units were not available in parts of our constituencies in Dublin. This has been addressed since we came into government. That measure and the provision of more SNAs to serve these schools means that traditional schools that provided ASD units, such as St. Dominic's and Scoil Mhuire in Ballyboden in my constituency, are now being joined by schools such as Bishop Galvin National School and Bishop Shanahan National School in opening ASD units. I have learned that schools which have opened these units welcome additional units to provide collaborative, professional supports to teachers. There is good news for both the par-

ents of children with special needs and those pupils with special needs in our schools.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I am glad to say as a Fianna Fáil Deputy that it is not that our fingerprints are on this budget but that our hoofprints are all over this budget. A number of core policy issues for my party have been addressed well in this budget. The first matter that I want to focus on in the short time that I have available is the provision of SNAs. Some 1,000 extra SNAs are being provided in the education system.

I have lobbied unsuccessfully on the issue of working principals in previous budgets but there has been a strong recognition of their plight in this year's budget. Angela Dunne, who has led the working principals' action group, is the principal of Loughmore National School. There has been a major improvement. Any working principal with two autism units in his or her school will now be treated as an administrative principal. That is a major step forward. More needs to be done for these working principals, who find it extremely hard to teach as well as to deal with a substantial amount of paperwork. I hope that in next year's budget, any principal who has an autism unit will be treated as an administrative principal, and that working principals will get extra allocations.

The national childcare scheme is a core principle of Fianna Fáil. There is €78 million extra for it in this year's budget. I have been lobbied by SIPTU in my constituency about this issue on numerous occasions. Pat McCabe is a strong lobbyist for it. It was a grand to get a text from SIPTU on Tuesday evening recognising the achievement in the budget. There has been a serious problem with the retention of staff and staff conditions. This €78 million will go a long way to ensuring the retention of staff in the childcare system, which is essential, and also to stabilising fees for parents, another core policy issue for us.

Another important issue is the change to qualify for carer's allowance. It is the first time in 14 years that this has been addressed. That is linked to the €90 million for housing adaptations and means that many families will be able to consider looking after their older family members at home. While it is our policy, a shoulder needed to be put to the wheel to ensure that families could achieve their objectives. That change in the criteria for carers and the money for housing adaptations will be important for families who want to try to keep senior family members at home and look after them there.

The €30 million extra for high-tech drugs is most welcome. I ask the Minister of State to take this back to the Minister for Health. I and others have lobbied for a drug called Epilex, an essential drug for people suffering from epileptic fits. I have dealt with the case of a young lady with cancer who badly needs this drug, which is expensive. Hopefully, with the extra €30 million allocation, we will be able to reimburse that drug. I would like if the Minister of State would bring that to the attention of the Minister for Health.

This is the largest welfare package in a decade. The Opposition says that we have not looked after older people in the budget. That is not true. A person living alone will be €13 a week better off. If you examine what was put forward by the Opposition in their alternative budgets, it did not measure up to what was introduced by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, on Tuesday. I am proud to say that we looked after social welfare recipients in this budget well.

I am glad to see the mention of infrastructure projects in my constituency, such as the Balina-Killaloe crossing, the Cork to Dublin railway line and the Waterford to Limerick Junction

railway line. They are all essential infrastructure projects. Some need improvements and others need to happen as quickly as possible to improve transport infrastructure in my constituency.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I have listened to many speeches in the last few days. The Government is out of touch. It is not listening to what is happening outside this box, which is crazy. If you are a renter, this budget does nothing for you. The energy prices, with the carbon tax, have gone off the scale. There will be probably the most expensive childcare system in Europe. If you are trying to get to school, you will not get there because school transport is a disaster and I did not see anything to address that. The previous speaker mentioned social welfare and spoke about a few bob here and there. A pat on the back is only a foot and a half away from a kick in the backside. It is patronising people.

I want to concentrate on health. I see the additional €24 million, in real money, that will be invested in mental health. I have just listed housing, rent, carbon tax and childcare. A measly €24 million will not even keep the system ticking over where it is. Our alternative budget was going to put in €130 million, the biggest investment in mental health in the history of the State, because we know people are struggling. The excuse of Covid is used but we had all these problems, including housing and health, well before Covid. As people start to come out of that, we are seeing more and more demand for mental health services. Recently in west Cork, in Ballinadee, a farming family lost their father to suicide. They have been raising money for Pieta House because the farming sector is struggling and there seems to be little support. I spoke to two elderly people yesterday. They were talking about the measly fiver and the little bit of fuel allowance and living alone allowance. That will all be eaten up. The minute petrol and diesel prices have tax applied, they will become more expensive. I feel that this year of all years would be the best time to start putting billions into the economy. Paying people real wages to build proper houses would alleviate the housing demand. The knock-on effect of that is that renters can have a decent job and afford to get a mortgage, which frees up space in the rental sector, alleviating that. Covid has exposed how bad our health system is. We should invest in it and hit this hard.

*3 o'clock*

I do not know if Government Members have read our alternative budget but there was a will there to tackle this head-on. We are here to serve the people outside this Chamber. It is not Government funding. It is taxpayers' money and we are not even giving it back to them in the services they need. I hope in a short time we will be sitting on that side of the House and we will present our budget. Then we will provide for the people and ensure everything that can and should be done will be done.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Next is a Solidarity-People Before Profit slot. There is nobody in attendance. Next is the Government slot. Deputies Jim O'Callaghan and Francis Noel Duffy have four minutes each.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** There is a tendency during political debates about budgets for politicians and political commentators to concentrate on individual measures that have been introduced. That is understandable and I will do that presently. However, it is important we also take into account the general economic condition of the country at the time of the budget. That is what experts in economic departments refer to as the macroeconomic outlook. The budget presented by the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, showed the State believes it will generate €94 billion in revenue next year. That is an extraordinary amount of

money for the State to take in. It will take it in mainly through tax revenue, but also non-tax revenue and appropriations-in-aid.

The job of the Government is to ensure this extraordinary amount of money, which is close to €100 billion, is spent prudently and efficiently. The budget that has been outlined proposes that it will be spent prudently and efficiently next year. It is planned that there will be voted expenditure of €88 billion and non-voted expenditure of €14 billion. That brings it up to a total expenditure of €102 billion, meaning there is a planned deficit next year of €8 billion. That is a remarkable achievement, given we have come through a pandemic where huge amounts of money have been spent by the State, correctly, in supporting citizens and businesses. It was believed the deficit for 2021 would be €20 billion. In fact, it will only be €13 billion. Significant credit should do go to the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, for ensuring the macroeconomic outlook is in a good condition and position. If we do not have that and the State is not raising revenues, we will not be able to pay for the essential services so many of us in the House want to see supported.

That brings me to some measures in the budget which I think will be of benefit to young people. As I have said previously in this House, the past two years have been difficult for young people, whether they are students starting third level education or couples married with children. Some of the schemes that have been introduced have huge benefits for young people.

First, we have a youth travel card for people between the ages of 17 and 23 which will result in a 50% discount in their travel fares. That will be of huge benefit to the young people who avail of it. Second, there will be 7,600 more places at third level institutions. There is huge demand for third level institutions. People want to go on after secondary school to educate themselves more and attain expertise in academic disciplines and the apprenticeships. That is why I welcome the 7,600 more places. Third, there will be a €200 increase in the maintenance grant. That is something my party, Fianna Fáil, has called for and I am glad to see it included in the budget. Those three measures will be effective and useful for students in third level.

For students in secondary and primary school, the addition of 1,165 additional SNAs will be of huge assistance. As well as that, there will be 350 additional teachers. Huge amounts of money are being invested in the education system. That is something Fianna Fáil has always prioritised and I am glad to see that it has been emphasised and achieved in this budget. The younger children are also being looked after. We will have free GP care for children of six and seven and the national childcare scheme universal subsidy has been extended to all children up to the age of 15.

This has been an effective and efficient budget. More important, the macroeconomic outlook is good, but we have to be careful of storm clouds on the horizon, which may arise in the form of rising inflation, energy costs and energy security.

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** As we recover from one of the most challenging times in the history of the State, it was important our budget aimed to restore livelihoods, rebuild the sectors destroyed by the pandemic and protect the most vulnerable as we mitigate the climate crisis. I believe this budget has succeeded in doing so.

The solution to the rental crisis is State-led affordable accommodation. That is what cost rental is. It provides State-led high-quality affordable housing with secure, indefinite tenancies so no tenant is at risk of homelessness. I welcome the budget target of 2,000 cost rental units

per year, a fivefold increase on last year's budget. We already know the demand is extremely high and we need multiples of this number. I have advocated and will continue to advocate for a figure of 10,000 cost rental units per year for ten years. This will make up 20% of our rental market at rents 40% and 50% lower than the market prices. This is the State intervention we need to stabilise our rental sector and bring down the cost of rents.

Critically, we need to ensure a just transition towards a climate-neutral economy by protecting our most vulnerable and creating sustainable green jobs and opportunities. I am glad to see a commitment of €300 million for residential and community retrofit schemes, of which more than €109 million is for free upgrades for low-income homes and €60 million is for low-cost retrofit loan schemes.

The purpose of the carbon tax is to deter people from using polluting CO<sub>2</sub>-emitting fuels. The tax is fully ring-fenced to assist families in the transition to renewable energies with Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland funding for solar panels, retrofitting, heat exchanges and geothermal utilities. Most important, the tax, as reported by the Economic and Social Research Institute recently, protects households most in need to the point where they are better off. To say otherwise is disingenuous.

As well as increasing our supply of new builds of social and affordable housing, we have thousands of vacant sites serviced and zoned for residential use but lying idle. I welcome the step to replace the vacant site levy with the new zoned property tax, which finally closes many loopholes that allowed sites to be exempt from the levy. This tax will be more effective, increase the number of sites subject to tax and, ultimately, increase housing supply. I support giving local authorities enough time to map the relevant sites before implementing the tax through the Revenue Commissioners. Ideally, I would like to see the 3% figure increase to 7% quickly in order to realise these vacant sites.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** For this budget, the public wanted to see urgency from the Government to address the crisis in housing, the rental crisis, the crisis in the health service and the cost of living. Unfortunately, as has been said, never has so much been spent and so little achieved.

This is a great budget for landlords, speculators and developers. A major issue in the housing sector is vacant land remaining unused and being sat on by speculators and developers. That land is needed to deliver affordable and cost rental homes. That is one of the big blocking points. Sinn Féin's budget would have increased the vacant site levy to 15% to incentivise developers to build homes on vacant lands. Instead, the Government scrapped the existing 7% levy and replaced it with a 3% levy on zoned land, which is essentially a tax break for speculators. What is worse is that it includes up to a three-year lead-in time before it takes full effect. Where is the urgency in that on housing? There are loopholes in it. We will watch that development to see how it pans out.

The budget offers nothing for renters. There is no rent freeze, no rent controls and no tax relief. Instead, an additional €168 million, on top of the fortune that has already been spent, will be provided in rent subsidies to landlords through the housing assistance payment, HAP, coupled with pre-letting expenses and tax breaks. It was a good day for landlords. If any sector needed relief, it is those who are renting - average and low-income workers who are in private rented accommodation with no rent subsidies and no HAP. Sinn Féin would introduce a three-year rent freeze and an 8% tax rebate for renters to put a month's rent back in their pockets. Renters are also going to be punished disproportionately by the carbon tax, as they are living in

accommodation that is mostly poorly insulated, with inefficient and expensive heating systems. Members can see that for themselves if they visit private rented properties.

Regarding health, there is a lack of focus in the budget. Not only does Sinn Féin's alternative budget invest more than the Government does, but we target our funding at the front line. We want to tackle waiting lists, provide additional ICU capacity, increase general hospital beds and expand primary care and GP capacity. We cannot make progress without expanding GP capacity. I welcome the progress that has been made on the carer's allowance and other supports, as these people work incredibly hard and deserve recognition. Such changes are long overdue.

Yesterday, low-income workers were left behind. Some 80% of workers will not benefit at all from the Government's proposed tax reliefs and higher earners will benefit disproportionately from the reliefs introduced. Similarly, struggling workers and families in rural Ireland, such as those in Laois and Offaly, are hit with a further increase in the carbon tax, increased home energy costs and increased motor costs. People need a car to get to work.

Likewise, farmers received nothing. I listened carefully to the Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. There was not anything there for farmers. What is in store is increased carbon tax. Those who own a home will most likely not be able to afford to retrofit it and the national retrofit grant scheme is moving at a snail's pace. Anyone who works out the numbers will see that for himself or herself. The working poor earning below €35,000 are now worse off. The alternatives are just not there for those who are hardest hit by the carbon tax and the cost of living increases. Speakers referred to the increases in social welfare. The problem is that they are gone before they are paid because of the carbon tax and other measures in the budget. We set out in our budget proposals how we would deliver change and begin to build a fairer system for workers and families. We are not naive, we know it cannot be done in one budget, but it needs to be done incrementally over a period. Workers, in particular the working poor, need relief, but they did not get it this week in the budget.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I wish to share time with Deputy Niamh Smyth.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** We have an extra few minutes due to the absence of speakers before us in the debate.

We came into government in difficult circumstances. It was about who could coalesce because of the nature of the result. It was about who could best put together an objective to address those issues that mattered most at the time of the election, which were housing, health, climate change and the associated just transition. We set in train a programme for Government seeking to deliver upon those areas. The pandemic, unfortunately, stopped much of that in its tracks. While it has been difficult and there has been much fear, consternation and worry on the part of many people throughout the country, we must acknowledge that the response to the pandemic has been phenomenal, especially in the context of front-line workers and the patriotic commitment they made on all our behalf. The people at large supported the measures exceptionally well. Despite the ups and downs, we must recognise the manner in which the Government saw fit to ensure, for example, that we had one of the best vaccination systems in the world. Despite the figures in recent days, I hope that will shortly become a distant memory. People are rightly impatient for delivery. They expect, want and demand results.

This budget, as with all budgets, must seek to be fair and to address inequalities in public

service delivery by steadily improving workers' incomes and rewarding work and investment. The budget has been particularly difficult given the continuing need to assist business and those sectors most impacted by Covid, and also against a background of the increased cost of living and inflationary concerns that are all too obvious. The budget had to be framed within a credible fiscal framework, conscious of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council's recommendations and our international responsibilities and credibility, especially following the recent increase in corporation tax. The Government has skilfully, insofar as it can, sought to ensure that is the case in terms of fairness and equality. That can be measured, for example, by the social welfare package in excess of €800 million, the continuation of the wage subsidy schemes, rates waivers for business and specific packages for the tourism, entertainment and hospitality sectors, while maintaining and improving access within the public service, especially in education, justice and health. That is in addition to massive commitments of €4 billion per annum made in the recent Housing for All document.

I especially commend the Government's efforts to help younger citizens *vis-à-vis* increased third level grants and increased eligibility for those same grants, which will see improvements for some up to a value of €2,000 with the costs associated with third level education. There are also most welcome commitments to transport discounts in the public sector for youth. It is the youth that we rely on and to whom we owe most in terms of the solutions we need to see become a reality in housing, health, climate change and the associated just transition.

In the coming months we must see radical efforts in these areas to ensure our aspirations are realised. Pumping money alone will not necessarily work. It will help, but we have seen in the past it does not necessarily deliver upon the commitments that are made. Strong and effective government must push the boundaries in these areas. It must overhaul the areas of governance that are holding up and delaying the sort of delivery we want to see become a reality. For example, in housing, supply is impacted most by planning. The Government is bringing forward a planning reform Bill in the autumn. It must be transformative and statutorily put time periods in place for how An Bord Pleanála delivers its responses to planning appeals. It must seek to restrict the appeals process especially in the area of judicial reviews.

I am also conscious that development plans involve a prolonged process with much consultation, deliberation and commitment by local authority members, together with the public. I regret to see planning held up for four or five years at a time of national crisis, despite commitments and applications for development being in sync with county development plans, regional guidelines and plans and the criteria on design, density and environmental and traffic impacts. That cannot be allowed to continue. Bold decisions must be made in that regard.

Regarding health, we have seen in the past that the fear of change is the greatest barrier to change. During the course of the pandemic, we have seen the impact, effort and commitment of the workforce, the Government and everybody concerned and how much could be done to assist in the national effort. We would like to see Sláintecare implemented. For the first time, a health strategy involves cross-party support and commitment. It is a worry that in recent times we have lost many of the members of the board that was put in place to be innovative and to implement the change. I am not sure I agree with the appointments of Paul Reid and Robert Watt at the head of the new board. The success of the new board must be measured quickly and honestly in order to impact the change that is necessary.

In regard to climate change and just transition, the efforts that have been made are, unfortunately, not compatible with increased fuel and energy costs while the target of a just transition

has not materialised as originally envisaged. I call on the Government to soon, if not immediately, publish the territorial plan which it will shortly submit to the European Commission to draw down a further €84.5 million from the coal and peat regions in transition fund. That funding must be better targeted to benefit those most impacted by the acceleration of decarbonisation, particularly in my own county of Offaly and other counties in our region.

Neither are the efforts on climate change and just transition compatible with the management of EirGrid and ComReg in regard to energy and the increased competition we had expected to see in the energy sector. I am conscious in particular of something I have mentioned in recent weeks in this Chamber, and that is the failure of EirGrid to adequately police the situation whereby the ESB can win four contracts or tender procedures over the past four years to the tune of 430 MW, and then to withdraw from them during those four years, pay the penalty and allow the grid to remain challenged. At the same time, power stations in my region were closed on the understanding that renewables would be forthcoming on the grid. Another 270 MW was lost there, which brings the total loss to 700 MW. At the same time, there has been no increase in competition, the grid remains challenged and costs continue to rise.

We have seen regulators in the past asleep at the wheel and we suffered because of it. No way should this be allowed. No way should the same regulator, ComReg, be expected to come up with all of the solutions over the next ten years when it was very much responsible for the failings over the past number of years. That is something I hope to be addressed in the short term if we are to be serious about creating an atmosphere where renewables can compete on the national grid and where competition is such that our grid is not compromised. When it is not compromised and when that sort of competition is alive and well, there is the prospect of lower prices and lower impacts on those who are left to pay because of the failures. Those who are left to pay are those who put us here, and we have to respond accordingly.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** As there is no one present from the Rural Independent Group, we move to the Independent Group. I call Deputy Michael McNamara.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I listened to the budget speeches on Tuesday and have been reflecting on them since. It seems this budget is a little bit of everything and very little of anything. It lacks any particular strategic direction. It is pretty much a case of continuing with the way we are - give a little bit to everybody and let us not change the *status quo* because there could be an election soon. That is what I take from this budget. Maybe I am wrong, but we will see.

I want to return to a couple of initiatives in the budget. In doing so, I am mindful of a conversation I had last night with a constituent with a great deal of experience of management in our health service. As our conversation concluded, he said that throwing money at dysfunction does not stop the dysfunction; it just wastes the money. Unless systemic problems are addressed, throwing money at them is not going to matter. There are two issues I want to focus on, one of which is the money for aviation. I welcome it to the extent that our aviation sector is in a difficult place and something needs to be done. However, unless the root causes of the problems in our aviation sector are addressed, throwing a little bit of money at it is not going to help.

I welcome the additional money for regional airports and I particularly welcome the fact Shannon and Cork will be able to draw money from that fund into the future. However, we do not have an aviation policy in this State. There is a lot of talk, particularly from Sinn Féin, about the necessity to bring Shannon Airport back under the ownership of the Dublin Airport

Authority so there is one airport authority. That may well be, although I am not particularly convinced by it. However, unless and until we have an aviation policy in the State, it does not matter. Dublin Airport was competing with Shannon Airport when they were in the same group, and Dublin Airport is competing with Shannon Airport now they are in different groups. Therefore, the ownership structure is secondary to the fact Dublin Airport is doing everything possible to take out Shannon Airport. To compensate for that, the State, which owns Dublin Airport, is going to give Shannon Airport a bit more money while it continues to be undercut by Dublin Airport in any of the deals it tries to make.

The €90 million of funding, as I heard the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, say on radio, will go towards landing fees. That is something that is transferred on to passengers, and it works out at perhaps €14 to €20 a passenger. It is a sizeable sum that people look at when they are determining where they are going to fly to because it is going to add to the cost of their ticket. Of course, people who do not have a vaccine passport, which is a larger proportion of the population in any other European country than it is here, are the people we are trying to attract to the country. We require them to have a PCR test to come into Ireland, just like Irish people who go abroad are required to have one on their return. That is unique in Europe. Other countries work with an antigen test and have done since travel was reopened.

This PCR test costs between €100 to €150 depending on where people are. Of course, they have to go to a particular institution to get a PCR test in those other countries because it is only used to confirm a clinical diagnosis in most countries. Therefore, they have to go and queue up with people who have been clinically diagnosed as having Covid. They queue up with them to get this PCR test that costs €120. As it is a contagious disease, we are told, that greatly increases their risk of getting it. They have the test and it is negative because they have just got Covid, and they come back and they produce this PCR test, which costs them €120. That is not seen as a disincentive to coming to Ireland but the €20 landing charge is. It is utter nonsense.

According to the local authorities, there are only 1,000 derelict sites in the country. That is nonsense. There are 1,000 derelict sites in County Clare alone and I am sure there are 1,000 derelict sites in County Carlow and 1,000 in County Louth. There was a local authority staff member in County Louth who was very active in dealing with derelict sites, although, in response to his activity, he got moved sideways out of his job. Local authorities are doing nothing to combat derelict sites, just as local authorities were doing very little to combat vacant sites. Now, there is a new tax on zoned land. The land on which that tax is going to be levied is going to be identified by the local authorities, which did nothing to use the infrastructure or the measures they had at their disposal to combat vacant sites, and which are doing almost nothing to combat derelict sites, yet the Government is doing nothing at all in this budget about derelict sites.

I called for two measures. One is a reduction in capital gains tax on those selling derelict sites for a short period, that is, a window in which to sell them – to use them or lose them. The second is that the help-to-buy scheme would be extended to include people buying a derelict site and bringing it back into occupation. There should be time conditionality or a window on that. No matter what incentives the Government brings in around housing, it is going to be five to ten years before we see results, but we could bring back derelict sites as they do not have to go through the planning process in many instances, and they could be brought back into use very quickly. Yet, the Government has done nothing about that. I am disappointed that was not in this budget.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We move to the Government slot. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, who is sharing time with Deputy Cormac Devlin. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** B'fhéidir nach n-úsáidfidh mé an t-am iomlán but I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak on budget 2022 both as the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs and as a Deputy proudly representing the people of Meath East. It is a great privilege to represent the people in this Chamber, and I think about that every day. Many of us may be feeling that privilege and responsibility even more, following our time in the convention centre, now that we have returned to representing the concerns and issues of our constituents in this Chamber. We are all rooted in our communities and we must consider the budget with the lives of our constituents in mind, while always, of course, having the national interest to the forefront. This budget is focused on health, housing, education and public services. It will reduce the cost of living and support hard-pressed families. Every household in Meath East and throughout the country will benefit in some way from the measures introduced in the budget.

Working families are stretched. Childcare costs have continued to rise year-on-year, with no meaningful policy change to tackle the issue. This budget marks a turning point in the State's approach to the early years and childcare sectors. An enhanced funding stream for childcare will improve pay and conditions for those working in the sector and prevent fee increases for parents. The eligibility criteria for the universal childcare subsidy is being extended to all children aged up to 15. The budget will extend GP care to six- and seven-year-olds. There will be increases in maternity and parental leave payments, and parent's benefit will be extended to give seven weeks' cover.

This budget shows Fianna Fáil's strong record on, and commitment to, education. The allocations in the budget will ensure smaller classes, with the pupil-teacher ratio going down again. There will be more and better school buildings, as we are seeing throughout Meath East, and more teaching staff to support our children's learning. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has secured an allocation to hire new teachers and SNAs, which will result in average pupil-teacher ratios in primary schools reducing to a record low of 24:1. There is provision for significant funding for ICT grants for schools, which is important, as well as the school transport scheme and school building projects. The delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, programme will be extended, and an additional €4 million has been allocated to extend the hot school meals programme to more DEIS primary schools.

For those in third-level education, there are serious changes in the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant scheme. The qualifying income threshold has been expanded by €1,000. For a large proportion of students in my constituency, the qualifying distance for the non-adjacent grant rate has been reduced from 45 km to 30 km. This will take a significant number of students in Meath East up to a much higher level of grant support, whether they are going to college in Dublin, Maynooth, Dundalk or even Athlone, and will have an enormous impact on people's lives in the constituency. Previously, students had to live at least 45 km from campus to qualify for the non-adjacent grant; that has been reduced to 30 km, as I said. This will mean grant support of up to €2,000 for all eligible students in receipt of SUSI grants.

The housing situation was at an all-time low before the pandemic. As we come out of the Covid period, that bad situation has been made worse. I know many people in Meath who have moved back to live with their parents because they are priced out of the housing market and

unable to save while renting. Housing for All is a serious plan containing workable tasks that will change the situation completely. The budget starts the roll-out of that plan. We are providing the largest-ever multi-annual funding for a housing programme, amounting to in excess of €20 billion over the next five years. This unprecedented level of spending provides us with a massive housing budget.

Our healthcare system has been under enormous pressure over the past 18 months. There are more than 400 people in hospital with Covid-19 at this time. The pandemic has led to many people having their procedures cancelled or delayed. The budget will tackle that backlog. A total of €350 million has been allocated to help clear waiting lists. There will be 8,000 new full-time, permanent staff in the health service. There are also a number of new initiatives. For too long, we have failed the women of Ireland when it comes to healthcare provision. This budget marks a turning point in that regard. There is free contraception provision for those aged 17 to 25. There are plans to tackle period poverty, and funding for the national maternity strategy. A total of €16 million is being allocated to women's healthcare through budgets for cancer care, mental health provision and social inclusion, including funding to develop a perinatal model of care.

In his speech on Wednesday, the Taoiseach acknowledged the work of the EU in delivering on its promise to give Ireland fast and fair access to vaccines on the same basis as larger countries. The pandemic has not gone away but our vaccine roll-out has played a major role in allowing us to move forward with this progressive budget, which will underpin our economic recovery from the Covid crisis. I am proud of the role I played in this regard as Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, working on the General Affairs Council in Brussels.

I want to comment briefly on the budget commitment to support A Career for EU. In the programme for Government, we committed to bring forward a strategy to increase the number of young Irish people working in the EU institutions and agencies. I published the A Career for EU strategy during my first year in office and I am delighted that the budget has committed to providing €1.25 million towards its implementation, specifically to double the number of seconded national experts working in the EU.

The Opposition should give an honest appraisal of the budget. It makes fools of the people to suggest that somehow the Government can meet every need immediately, we do not need plans and we can do it all in one day. Money does not grow on trees and the public understands that. Choices have to be made, and the choices that were made in this budget are ones that overwhelmingly favour those who are struggling, people in the poorer sectors of society and those who most need the help of the State. We are spending money in a way that supports economic recovery, opportunity and our future prosperity. As the Taoiseach said in his address, political cynicism and opportunism is the defining characteristic of Sinn Féin's approach to politics. The public will see past its rhetoric. Closing hospitals in the North of Ireland while campaigning for the opposite to happen in this State is one of many examples of its cynicism. I am proud to be part of the Government that has brought forward this budget. I have no doubt it will be of great benefit to the people of Meath East. I support it and commend it to the Dáil, which is the House of the people.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss budget 2022. The underlying macroeconomic forecast for next year is positive and the outlook strong. The State expects to take in approximately €94 billion in revenue, which has given the Ministers for Finance, and Public Expenditure and Reform scope to invest an extra €4.7 billion in public services. The

Government proposes to focus this extra investment in education, health, childcare services, increases to social protection payments and a modest tax package for workers, all of which are welcome.

I particularly welcome the investment secured by the Minister for Education. It includes provision for 350 new teachers, which will see the pupil-teacher ratio reduced to 24:1. Funding to hire an additional 980 special education teachers and 1,165 SNAs will make a real difference to children who need that support. The extra €18 million to support DEIS schools, and €4 million to expand the hot school meals programme, shows the focus of this Government on supporting the most disadvantaged.

We have all seen the impact of Covid on hospital waiting lists. I welcome the extra €250 million in funding to deal with that issue. Additional funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund is particularly welcome in this regard. Expanding free GP care to children aged under eight will be welcomed by parents and this measure should be expanded as soon as possible. I welcome the extra funding secured by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, particularly for mental health provision, and the moneys secured by the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who is present, to support disability services.

Increases to social protection rates, carer's allowance and pension payments are all welcome. The increase in the fuel allowance is very positive. However, the price of fuel will need to be monitored closely to ensure that payment is sufficient. I would like to see an expansion of the fuel allowance scheme, with the introduction of a partial payment for people earning slightly more than the current threshold, particularly pensioners with a modest occupational pension who live alone.

Young people will benefit from the 50% discount on public transport, increased SUSI grants and changes to health treatment benefits. The increase in the minimum wage is welcome. I also commend the investment in childcare, as highlighted by my colleagues, Deputy Lahart and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne.

The continued investment in the Housing for All programme is welcome. Next year, the State will deliver almost 50% of all new housing, including 9,000 new social homes. Funding for 11,000 grants to adapt homes for older people and people with disabilities is an important commitment in the budget. It was clear that the vacant site levy was not working. The new zoned property tax, which will be administered and collected by Revenue rather than local authorities, is an important change. I expect it will have a significant impact. A rate of 3% is a good start but it will need to be ramped up if people and organisations are sitting on valuable serviced sites.

In a context where we have seen an increase in antisocial and criminal behaviour in Dublin, funding for an additional 800 gardaí and 400 civilian staff is particularly welcome. I also commend the €5.2 million in funding for victims, including vulnerable witnesses, and to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The tax package for working people is welcome. A €50 increase in tax credits and changes to the tax bands will mean someone on the average industrial wage is €500 better off. Increases in the working from home tax deductions will assist people with the cost of energy and broadband. Should the economic environment continue to improve, I would like this project expanded next year.

Ireland has faced extraordinary challenges over the past 18 months, yet this budget has

still delivered the largest welfare package in years. This includes unprecedented investment in health, housing, education, childcare and justice, while also delivering a modest tax change.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I was extremely disappointed by what the Government provided for mental health in this year's budget. It has provided just €24 million in additional funding. This is a decrease from the additional €50 million that was provided last year. This is woefully inadequate and shows the Government is out of touch with reality. It has not recognised the mental health challenges ordinary people are facing.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, announced an additional €47 million, which is still down on last year, yet the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, said in his budget speech that there would be an additional "€37 million to fund the expansion of mental health services". The expenditure report stated that only €24 million in new funding is provided for mental health so let us drill down into these figures. Of the €47 million announced by the Government, €10 million is one-off funding that is unspent from last year. This €10 million cannot be used for new services or the employment of staff; it must be spent in the next 78 days. This is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Some €13 million is for existing services and this funding was pre-committed so it does not represent additional funding. It is standing still money. We are left with a €24 million increase, which is a 52% drop on last year's increase. This is another smoke and mirror tactic by the Government. In the midst of a global pandemic and reports of people who are desperate for mental health supports, it has failed. It is out of touch, ideas and time.

The Government is banging the drum that €1.1 billion is allocated for mental health this year. To put that into context, this is almost the exact same amount that was allocated in 2008. It has taken 13 years to get back to 2008 levels. Budget 2022 means that only 5.1% of the health budget is for mental health when Sláintecare recommends that 10% of the health budget should go to mental health and international best practice recommends that up to 16% should be allocated. The State is in the grips of a mental health crisis that demands an emergency response and substantial ongoing funding commitments. This is a lost opportunity to significantly increase funding for mental health services. It again shows the lack of understanding by the Government of the shortfall in our services and the extent of the growing demands for mental health services.

I am constantly asked what Sinn Féin would do and it is simple. If I was a Minister for mental health, I would just put the needs of workers and families first. I would make it easier for people to access the mental healthcare they need when and where they need it. Sinn Féin not only produced an alternative health budget but we also produced an alternative mental health budget. Sinn Féin proposed an additional €114 million for urgently needed investment in child and adolescent mental health and primary mental healthcare services; expanding counselling to universal coverage; investment in dual diagnosis supports; access to 24-7 emergency mental healthcare; eight additional eating disorder teams across the State; a comprehensive perinatal service for the entire island; and other measures. It would have been the biggest investment in mental health in the history of this State.

Not only is this alternative budget fully costed by Department, it also has to go through the offices of my comrades, Deputies Doherty and Mairéad Farrell. The level of scrutiny Sinn Féin put into this means that if one decimal point was out of place, Deputy Doherty would have sent me back to the drawing board. If I was Minister for mental health, I would deliver on these promises and people would start to get the mental healthcare they need when and where they

need it.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We all recognise that the mood music on the pandemic is not as good as we thought it would be. The mood music from our neighbours in Britain has also not been particularly helpful in recent times, particularly on the Irish protocol. It has given succour to some of the more extreme elements within unionism but in fairness the European Commission has shown a willingness to offer solutions to those in the North who may have difficulties with supply chain issues. That is where the emphasis needs to be.

When we talk about a budget we talk about laying out a framework on how we deliver services and we talk about a plan for the future of how we see our society. I think of those workers in Horseware Ireland in Dundalk, which was a flagship clothing company in the town. We had official confirmation that 33 jobs will go and the company will be relocated to Cambodia. I will let Members decide for themselves why that has happened. This is a follow-up on a similar number of jobs that have been lost through redundancies and relocations. I have made contact with the offices of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Tánaiste. I request that the Government use all the powers it has to ensure these workers who have done their damndest in a company that was synonymous with Dundalk are given the protections they deserve. We must ensure they get the best result possible. We are talking about a company that is not unionised and, therefore, there is a necessity for Government to take a step in this.

I will continue with what has been said by many of my colleagues. It has been said to me on the street that the budget was a scattergun effort to cover all the bases. The checklist is covered but insufficient resources have been put in where they could make a difference. It was said that it was an attempt to make something that was inoffensive. On housing, from a renter's point of view, this budget is utterly offensive and we have a failure to do anything for renters. I even bore myself when I speak about what Sinn Féin has proposed for renters. That is a cap on the ridiculous rents we have and putting a month's worth of rent back into renters' pockets through tax credits. That is a necessity as people are in a bad situation and that is what we need to do as we move forward. There has been abject failure in offering supply of housing, including council houses, affordable mortgages and affordable cost-rental. We need to cover all those bases and we are failing miserably to do so.

We also have an energy crisis. I get that some of these matters are out of the control of the Government and the European Commission and others are required to engage to improve on this. The fact that we are allowing another increase in carbon tax is piling further pain on people who cannot afford it and who do not have alternatives. This is not a solution to the climate change difficulties we have. Childcare is another issue. People are paying high rents and large mortgages and then they have secondary mortgages to pay for childcare. We need a paradigm shift and a system that will involve greater Government spending and deliver a service that is fit for purpose. That would take the sting out of the cost of childcare for our people.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** Dublin city and county seem to be moving from one crisis to another with attempts by developers to turn this city into one big hotel, while killing off more and more of the city's character, whether it is Merchant's Arch or The Cobblestone, and a lack of sporting facilities being provided for those living in the city and calling it their home.

Considering the height and density of new developments in this city there needs to be an increase in the 10% green and sporting space required in developments. We have seen the hardship that Ranelagh Gaels GAA has faced as it struggles to find adequate grounds for its club,

which gives so much back to a wide range of people in the community. Government needs to empower and aid clubs such as Ranelagh Gaels GAA so they can find new and adequate spaces, not stand by and idly watch as they struggle. Large green sites such as the Jesuit grounds in Milltown, which are planned for development, represent another missed opportunity to incorporate sports facilities for the community. In Dublin Bay South, we have the cricket grounds on Claremont Road. Its gates are locked and the local club has been pushed from the grounds. People have spent more than 100 years playing on the grounds, but they will be sold off for more build-to-rent developments.

People ask what Sinn Féin's proposals are. Last August, I published Sinn Féin's strategy for sporting facilities, which would allow for effective and long-term planning by the Government and local authorities to meet the need for facilities where it arises in future. The Government and local authorities need to start showing some vision for the future and put an end to the failed *ad hoc* process that sums up this budget.

Debate adjourned.

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** 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 Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss an update on the implementation and oversight of the Irish Sign Language Act; (2) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss understaffing and resources in the ambulance services in Cork and Kerry; (3) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss pay and conditions for school secretaries; (4) Deputies Paul McAuliffe and Cormac Devlin - to discuss the return of the night-time economy in Dublin; (5) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss funding from budget 2022 for the refurbishment and maintenance of mental healthcare facilities; (6) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the urgent need in the community for the reopening of St. Odin's Wood Day Care Centre for older persons; (7) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss the €90 million strategic air route support scheme and how it will apply to strategic routes at Shannon Airport; (8) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the childcare crisis, where it is almost impossible to get a place for a child; (9) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss what progress is being made on reducing the number of patients being treated on hospital trolleys at University Hospital Limerick; (10) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the shortage of school bus transport places and the prospect of removing the current 50% loading limit; (11) Deputy Richard Bruton - to discuss the pathway to establishing a development agency for early childhood services in Ireland; (12) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss lengthy delays being experienced in the arrival of paramedics and ambulances to calls in Tipperary; (13) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss new regulations to limit the maximum number of cigarettes in packets to 20; (14) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss a departmental report regarding a new campus for Cavan Institute, County Cavan; (15) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss plans for ensuring the opening of the Group Home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (16) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss plans for the regeneration of social housing-flat complexes in Dublin; (17) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the employment regulation order for the security industry; and (18) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss the difficulties faced by families who need to access credit or short term loans for Christmas or unexpected costs.

The matters raised by Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan, Bruton, Michael Moynihan and An-

draws have been selected for discussion.

## **Financial Resolutions 2021**

### **Financial Resolution No. 2: General (Resumed)**

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

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

- (Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment)

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Deputy O'Donnell is sharing time with Deputy Flaherty.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I am delighted to contribute on this debate. In the limited time I have, I will concentrate on a few matters. It did not receive much highlighting in the budget, but I sought it a number of months ago and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, has included it, namely, an increase in the hourly rate of the disability wage subsidy scheme from €5.30 to €6.30. It is for people who are working and have disabilities. The amount now comes to 60% of the minimum wage. I feel strongly about this and campaigned for this increase, and I thank the Minister for following up on my request. It may be a small measure in the overall scheme of things, but it could be of major significance. I encourage employers to avail of this subsidy and to take on people with disabilities. They have a great contribution to make. The increase got lost among the other measures. I worked with Rehab workers in Limerick. This is about real people's lives.

I wish to discuss Shannon Airport. As Chair of the Committee on Transport and Communications, I welcome the appointment of Mr. Pádraig Ó Céidigh and the management team. There are two measures specific to Shannon in the budget. First, along with Cork Airport, Shannon Airport will now be included in the regional airports support scheme. This will make a considerable difference. Second, €90 million has been set aside by the Government to provide supports for the activation of key strategic routes. The three such routes at Shannon are Heathrow, which is now up and running but which we want to see extended to three daily flights, Boston and New York. All of these routes are flown by Aer Lingus. I want to ensure the funding's allocation is not based purely on a simple measurement of numbers. It has to be about the impact for the region. Dublin is exponentially ahead of the other airports. If we are serious about balanced regional development, the basis on which this funding is allocated must have a weighting that benefits the Shannons and Corks over the Dublins. The first two types have a larger hill to climb, so we must get the strategic routes back.

This is a post-exit budget, as it were. It is a budget that seeks to ensure everyone can come out as undamaged as possible. There is a large income tax measure of €500 million which will ensure workers can at least keep up with the cost of inflation. An increased package of approximately €370 million will provide for increases across all social welfare sectors, including payments for adult children dependants.

I want to see people returning to work. There are categories of people who, through no fault of their own, for example, a disability, are unable to find work and the State must support them. One way of doing that is by ensuring we have jobs. That the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, is being extended to April will be of considerable benefit to businesses. This should not get lost among the budget's main components. However, we must approach this in a way that ensures the economy is sustainable into the future. We must balance the books. It is an old-style term, but for someone who is running a business or even a household, what comes in must meet what goes out. People can borrow for capital purposes, of course. For example, we borrowed €48 billion to get us through the pandemic. That had to be done and the economy is now doing well, but we must return the economy to a trajectory that is sustainable and where we can be honest with people about the long-term future for themselves, their children and the country.

Some €11 billion is being invested as part of the national development plan. These are all very important projects. The M20 project continues. It is a project that I feel strongly about. If we are serious about balanced regional development, it must be done. It will not cost €3 billion. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is putting that figure out there blandly. There is no basis for it. I challenge him to give us the details of where he is getting that €3 billion figure from. It is creating a great deal of confusion but I deal in facts. If we are serious about balanced regional development and there is to be a counterpoint to Dublin, it cannot be the case that the two major cities outside of Dublin are not linked, including up to Galway. It should not be the case that I can drive my car from Limerick to Dublin faster than I can drive to Cork. There must be practicalities. We must have certainty in terms of travel. The M20 has to be a key project. I fought for it to be retained, and it has been, but we must deal in hard facts. This project will not cost €3 billion. That figure is now in the lexicon and out in the media, so we need to hear from the Minister. He must give me the basis for his claim because I do not believe that is the actual figure.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** I welcome budget 2022. It is an important first step in many key areas, namely, health, housing, education, social protection and mental health. Budgets by their nature are incremental and, over the coming years, we will start to see the full impact of budget 2022. It will be seen for what it is, that being, a real budget for change and a budget for a better Ireland.

A key request for County Longford in the budget was a continued commitment to compensation for Longford County Council for the loss of €1.3 million in commercial rates arising from the closure of the ESB power station. I thank the Ministers, Deputies Darragh O'Brien, McGrath and Donohoe, for honouring this commitment.

Much has been made of the commitment to climate action in the budget. The commercial rates compensation reflects the Government's commitment to working with a community that has been adversely affected by the rapid decarbonisation of the midlands and the closure of our peat-powered power plants. On the other hand, commitments were given to the people of the midlands and we were assured we would not be forgotten and that and all the necessary measures to compensate the region, local services and economies would be put in place. Yesterday, though, we saw many families affected by the closure of commercial peat production protesting yet again outside the gates of Leinster House with the IFA. When I first sat on the then Committee on Agriculture and the Marine at the start of this Dáil, I was naive enough to believe think a solution to the blanket ban on peat harvesting was imminent. Unfortunately, it seems we are no closer to a solution and thousands of tonnes of peat are now being imported to sustain our

beleaguered horticultural industry. We have missed a season of harvesting and all the soundings are that, while a solution might be in the offing, we look set to miss another.

Budget 2022 is an ambitious and laudable statement and the just transition is fine in theory, but at a practical level it simply is not working for the midlands. Groups are battling to draw down their funding and the ESB, arguably the biggest winner in the escalation of decarbonisation with the emergence of its new, slick and clearly very profitable business model, is simply not engaging with or supporting our local communities.

*4 o'clock*

You could go as far as to say it is behaving disingenuously at this point. Through the midlands regional transition team, MRTT, we have asked for a meeting with ESB management to discuss issues with the community compensatory fund. The company has a fund of €1 million to divide between the two most impacted communities, that is, Lanesborough, County Longford and Shannonbridge, County Offaly. A request for this funding can be presented to the ESB board but only at such time as the ESB has developed new projects in each location. This means it is not a compensatory fund but a form of a dividend linked to a semi-State company that is on its way to transitioning successfully to a new activity. In other words, if it does not work for the ESB, the community gets nothing. This was never the proper interpretation of this funding and it breaks a precedent that was set with the closure of plants in Ferbane and Rhode where a compensation fund was provided to the local communities.

The ESB may argue it has already given €5 million to the just transition process but it knows it has an added responsibility to the two most impacted communities and it urgently needs to put in place funding and supports for Lanesborough in County Longford. To continue to leave that on the long finger is an affront to this community, one that has powered the generation of electricity in this country for the past 60 years. It is time for all agencies of the State to start singing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to climate action and just transition.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Budgets have always been about priorities and choices. This budget is no different. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil made their choices. It is clear they do not favour working people or families who are overwhelmed by the cost of living crisis. This is the sixth budget under Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, another in a long line of budgets that have not delivered for ordinary people. Instead, the coalition has spread itself thinly and tried to be all things to all people.

Those in need of Government support got crumbs from the table. The Government could have given relief to renters in this budget, but it provided them with nothing. Once again, they have been left behind. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, was scrambling on Tuesday last trying to right the wrongs. People in Dublin Bay North are paying crazy rents. Following on from this budget, they will still be paying crazy rents. The additional couple of euro they will gain from the tax changes will not cover the cost of half a day's rent on their homes. Sinn Féin would introduce a ban on rent increases and we would put money back into the pockets of renters. The choice of this Government was to give tax relief to landlords. It is clear where Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil priorities lie.

The Government could have helped people struggling with the ever-increasing fuel costs they will face this winter. The carbon tax increase will result in more people struggling to heat their homes. The Government could have supported families who are paying through the nose

for childcare, but it did not do that. This is another blow to families already smothered by high fees.

This budget is more of the same from the usual suspects. Big business, developers and high earners had smiles on their faces on Tuesday. Sinn Féin's alternative budget would deliver for people. We would deliver for renters, parents, workers and those on hospital waiting lists for years. Sinn Féin would deliver for those struggling to buy a home and for those living on the breadline who do not know where they will get the money from to pay their next bill. A cost of living crisis has been staring Ministers in the face but they decided to turn a blind eye.

The Government may try to ignore the realities of the lives of the people living in my constituency, but I will remind it at every opportunity that it is not a Government that is putting the interests of workers and their families first.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the budget. I want first to compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, on her extraordinary work over the past 12 to 15 months in regard to the disability sector. It is fantastic to have a Minister of State with an in-depth knowledge of the sector apply her considerable strengths in that regard to address the challenges within the sector. The budget provides for approximately €135 million in funding for the disability sector. That is desperately needed funding. It comes on top of the €140 million provided in last year's budget to bring the disability sector back into view. The Joint Committee on Disability Matters, which is a cross-party committee, meets weekly to consider issues related to disabilities and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. We hear each week of the challenges and lived experiences of those with disabilities. Each week, new issues come up that need to be tackled.

An issue about which I am passionate and desperately concerned is the lack of speech and language therapists and occupational therapists within the public health system. A number of therapists are leaving that system to set up private practices owing to their frustrations with the public system. This is leading to extreme frustration among parents as they scramble to access services elsewhere for their children who, without them, are hampered in terms of best possible outcomes in their lives. We should be focused on putting in place measures targeted at the recruitment of occupational and speech and language therapists for the public health system. We should be looking across the globe to find them. There is an urgency in this area. It is a huge challenge which, if not dealt with soon, will challenge us into the future. As I said, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has considerable energy in regard to this area. I ask her to look specifically at this issue.

Another area of concern is respite services. Additional funding is provided in the budget for respite but there is need for greater roll-out of respite placements. We have a chicken and egg situation in that respite units have been built but they are awaiting inspection by HIQA under various regulations. We need a co-ordinated approach in getting respite further into the public health system to alleviate the stress and strain on families and the lived experiences of people with disabilities. I have strong views on this matter, which I have spoken many times. If the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, takes away or on board anything from my contribution, I hope it will be the urgent need to recruit occupational and speech and language therapists. I commend her on the work she has done to date.

I welcome the changes to the carer's allowance, in particular the change in regard to the income disregard. Every year at budget time I make the point, and I will continue to make

it for as long as the good people of Cork North-West elect me to speak here on their behalf, that the carer's allowance needs to be care tested as opposed to means tested. There are many families wherein one or other partner has given up a job to mind an elderly relative, sibling or child but that partner is not eligible for the carer's allowance because of the income of the other partner. The carer is eligible for carer's benefit for two years but nothing after that. There is a cliff. The care need has to be considered. Family carers save the State a huge amount of money while sacrificing their jobs and careers to look after a parent, sibling or child. We need to make sure that is considered by the Department. It is the next big challenge we are going to have. It should be in the here and now but not everything happens immediately. We need to look at it and ensure it is in the melting pot.

In budget times past, we would get 20 minutes to talk on any issue of importance to us in it. There are a few issues I am looking at. Deputy O'Donnell spoke about the M20 and the gateway between Cork and Limerick. It is sacrosanct. It is hugely important to open up the south west, the part of the country I am so honoured to represent. We must move at pace to ensure that happens and that strategic piece of infrastructure, which has been delayed for quite some time now, is put in place to open up the entire south west, give connectivity and allow us to grow that part of the country.

Everybody has discussed the last year and a half and how rural Ireland has changed and how the mindset of the public has also. It has changed ahead of the politicians in Leinster House and indeed the policymakers. People are working from home. They have moved out of the cities and found a better quality of life. We must ensure we are providing the digital hubs in the villages and towns across the country. We must ensure they are resourced properly, funded properly and that people can work there on a part-time or blended basis. It is vitally important that the Government, and the Departments especially, take heed. People have been working from home and have been doing an absolutely excellent job in their roles over the past 18 months. The Government should take a number of spaces in the rural digital hubs for its employees. It should take three, four, five, ten or whatever the percentage is of the space in a digital hub and the rest of the space can be used by the private sector. It would give the backup to ensure communities will come on board. A huge number of people are working from home on behalf of the State right across the country and if those digital hubs had a guaranteed income, it would be important. It must be looked at.

I have been dealing with a number of organisations in relation to community employment, CE, schemes, some of which have places available. We must look at that because CE schemes and people working in them are providing a massive service throughout the country in urban and rural areas. They include work in meals on wheels programmes, community centres and GAA clubs. We must look at that to ensure they keep rolling and that the regulation or the challenges there are eased up to ensure there is availability of people. We also should not forget the CE supervisors, whose pension schemes we have discussed and debated at length.

I also wish to address broadband and the importance of our agriculture industry as we go forward. It is the indigenous industry and the backbone of our rural communities. We must ensure we have a vibrant agriculture community as we go into the next decades and ensure we are producing food in an economical and environmentally sustainable way, as we are. Moreover, we must ensure that we can challenge any country in the world in how we are producing it and stand over that, as well as making sure that our place in the markets is secure.

I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on the budget.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** As a notice for those Deputies contributing to the Topical Issue Debate, which is scheduled for 6 p.m, we are going to finish these statements considerably earlier than that. To advise the Deputies who are on standby for that debate, I estimate we will finish the statements within 40 minutes at the latest.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** The Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, was wondering would Sinn Féin give an honest appraisal of the budget. I am certainly willing to do that. This budget, like somebody who has been in a job too long, has managed to look very busy while not getting very much done at all. Post budget, millions are still waking up to crippling rents, which are the highest in the EU. The cost of living is still spiralling, with every weekly shop and bill that comes in the door costing more. People have no chance of a hospital appointment for themselves or an operation for their children, despite being on waiting lists for months and years. In my own constituency, the outpatient waiting list for Naas General Hospital is enormously long, at 11,292.

Carers saw that what the Government gave them was in direct proportion to how much they feel valued by this Government for their 24-7, 365-days-a-year work. That value is nothing, *nada*, zilch. In contrast, Sinn Féin would raise the annual carer's support grant to €2,000, increase the threshold for the carer's allowance and at long last provide a long-term carer's pension in line with the State pension. All of that will still be a drop in the ocean, given what all our carers do for the people they love. Their work frees up vital services of nursing, physiotherapy, personal care, education, geriatric care, special care, feeding, cleaning, washing, hoisting, picking up and dropping off. I am exhausted just listing all they do and they are doing it relentlessly every single day. My constituency of Kildare North is heaving with these wonderful carers. They are people all too often forgotten but I remember them today, here in their Dáil.

This budget also did diddly-squat for our renters, including our young people, who wonder if they will ever be able to leave home and get a place of their own. I tell them with Sinn Féin's housing plans and with Deputy Ó Broin in charge of housing, they will. Working couples are camped out in parents' boxrooms with their own children. The plan was to get a deposit together and now there is absolutely nothing they can afford since the Government put the cuckoos, the vultures and the idea of property before the basic human need for a home. We in Sinn Féin have a carefully costed plan to change all that for the better because change is not only about money; change is about priorities. We are getting those priorities right by ensuring people will have a chance at an affordable home, can get public healthcare in a public hospital, can get help with their mental health when they need it and can rely on their Government to give them a hand when they need it, because that is the purpose of Governments. There should be no more abandonment of the people, no more saying "You are on your own pal", sink or swim, shape up because the markets demand it, or ship out. It is time for a better, kinder, bigger and more ambitious Government. Sinn Féin will be that Government and I look forward to that day.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** We have no Solidarity-People Before Profit speakers so I call Deputy Durkan.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak on this budget. I have spoken on a number of budgets over the years and have seen speeches from the Government and from the Opposition. There is a certain similarity. Mr. Denis Reid, a former employee of the Houses of the Oireachtas, used to advise as to what the various spokespersons would say and predict it in advance. Normally, from the Opposition it would be "Too little, too late" or "Opportunities missed". I am sure he is smiling as he looks at these debates.

I do not propose to go over the budget in detail other than to simply say it is a good budget. It touches the right spots. There are issues that still must be dealt with and there will be issues that must be dealt with. We cannot deal with them all at the one time. However, I must remind people of something. This is not personally targeted at the Opposition. They are nice people and I know they mean well but I must remind them they are erring in their ways at this stage. It is simply this: we hear on a regular basis that Fine Gael has been in government for ten years. What has it done? Why has it not done something about these things? Why has it not solved them? I will tell the House why, for those who have a short memory. It is true Fine Gael has been in government for ten years, but not in power. The first seven of those ten years were spent trying to find money to pay the day-to-day requirements of the Government, that is, the current expenditure. After the 2011 general election, the Taoiseach of the day had to go across the globe with begging bowl in hand, calling on various people, including Bill Clinton and everybody else in order to encourage people to come to this country, show an interest in it, invest in it and think of how good we were and how good we would be in the future. At that time, we heard various spokespersons, both inside and outside the House, predict Ireland would have to default on its debts. We had no credit rating anywhere. Nobody wanted to lend money to us except at a very high interest rate. We were then told by various other experts outside the House that not only that, but we would have to have a second bailout. Does the House remember that? It was common knowledge we would have to have a second bailout.

When the then Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, and his colleague, the then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, predicted that Ireland would get out of the programme much earlier than anticipated, people said it was rubbish, nonsense and palaver coming from the Government side. It was not, because we did. What they had to do then, their parties, Fine Gael and Labour, have paid for since. There was a lot of heavy lifting to be done. Many things had to be done standing up. Some parties not present in the House at the moment actually left this country to advise other countries, including Spain, Portugal, Italy, Iceland and Greece, but, fortunately, they did not take on board the advice they were given. Maybe Venezuela did, and we know where that country is now.

We must differentiate between reality and fiction and acknowledge that we are in a far better place than we were. The three parties in government were in a position to produce a budget that is good and stable. It will create stability in the future. It does not give anything away and serves to remind us that there are inflationary tendencies, which we must recognise. We need to be careful in terms of what we do from here on in. Otherwise, we could find ourselves back in that old spot, looking around and wondering where we are going to go next. It is common for members of the Opposition to say that if they were in government they would do an awful lot better. It is easy to fantasise. It is like the guy sitting outside the boxing ring talking about what he would do if he was in there. Unfortunately, when some of the guys get in there, they make a quick exit. I am not a great boxing fan but I can cite quite a number of cases that ended up in disaster.

I want to warn against making promises, perhaps with the best of intentions, which could lead this country into disaster. If we go down that road, we are going to a very dangerous and lonely place and nobody will come to our aid the next time. Nobody will offer to assist us the next time. It will be on ourselves and we can depend on all the sages and wise people that we want, on all of the people who quote various economists and so on who tell us to listen to what they have to say and we will have no fear. All I have to say about that is that I am long enough around to have seen it all. When we see so much of it over a period of time and see the things

that have happened and the things that should not have happened even though the writing was on the wall, then it is good for us to think and make sure that we do not allow these things to happen again. That is what I have to say in general.

Points have been made by colleagues in respect of climate, an issue with which we must deal. Several years ago, I suggested that there would be a serious campaign to develop renewable energy, particularly wind energy. It did not happen at that time and it has not happened yet. It certainly has not happened to the extent required, which is the real problem, but I hope it will. I am looking forward to it and I hope it will happen. There were wild predictions from people who told me at the time that I was ridiculous and stupid, that I did not know what I was talking about and that they knew better. They did not know better and events have since proven it.

As previous speakers stated, there is one thing we can boast about in the context of climate change. On our current carbon footprint, we provide food for almost 50 million people. This does not happen anywhere else across the globe, and it cannot happen. It is due to our climate and our grass-based production of beef and dairy, and we should be given credit for that. Importing peat moss and peat products from other European countries does not make sense. It is very hard to tell our farmers and those in the horticulture sector that this is in accordance with international policy. It is not; it is a pretence to ourselves that we are making a major inroad in that area. We have a lot more to do in that area and we can do it but we must invest now. We must spend money now on providing for renewable energy in the future. We must do that now and while we are doing so to the best of our ability, it must be followed by more and more investment.

A Member from the other side of the House said that the Government had choices. That is right. The Government did have choices and it chose stability and looking after the people as best it could in the circumstances. When Fine Gael went into government in 2011, it had no choices. There was nothing from anywhere or any quarter. There was nothing but misery. When the Cabinet door closed with a clang, the only thing that could be heard was ominous silence and the threat that the future carried. It took a lot to stand up to that and provide for it but at least we were able to come through the economic crisis, Covid and Brexit. We still have more to do. As someone once said, a lot done but more to do.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I do not know if we are living in the same country at all. I have listened to the passionate plea of Deputy Durkan. He is rolled out at the end of debates all of the time. Fair play to him, he is a likeable rogue. Fine Gael puts him out there to defend the Government at the very end but to borrow his boxing analogy about those outside the ring, perhaps it is time for this Government to retire, move out, let us in and judge us on our record.

Spending in budget 2022 is focused on making it seem like the tough issues are being tackled when really the Government has just stuck with the old Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael way of doing things. We see the disastrous results of those policies today. We are in a housing crisis, waiting lists are through the roof and people are faced with a rental market that is either non-existent or overpriced. This budget did nothing at all for renters. Sinn Féin proposed to cut rents through a refundable tax credit and to ban rent increases for three years but the Government chose to continue its old ways by prioritising landlords. However, it does not stop there. The lack of rental properties means that many renters are living in unsuitable accommodation. Of the 765 private rental properties inspected in my own constituency of Tipperary last year - an inspection rate of only 10% - only 91 were compliant with minimum standards. That is the result of the failed policies this Government is intent on continuing to pursue. These people will join

countless others struggling with soaring rents and energy prices, as well as the added burden of the increase in carbon tax. There has been barely any expansion of the eligibility criteria for the fuel allowance, leaving many people struggling to heat their homes without support.

This Government is obsessed with the optics rather than the substance of the budget. Instead of benchmarking spending against the cost of living, the Government hopes that we will be duped by increases that will prove worthless in light of the rising cost of living. The €5 increase in core payments for lone parents, jobseekers and carers will not help to meet rising costs. It just keeps those rates well below the poverty line. People need to be able to cover the cost of basics and live life with dignity. Sinn Féin wants to get everybody to at least this level as fast as possible.

I welcome the fact that the carer's allowance income thresholds have been raised, having remained stagnant for 13 years, but where is the increase to the carer's support grant? Where is the introduction of the long-term carer's pension as Sinn Féin had proposed? On the cost of childcare, the Government's plan will only reduce fees for some families. Our proposal would have reduced fees for all parents, while also ensuring a living wage for all workers.

We constantly hear that mental health is a priority for this Government, but the level of increase in this area has actually fallen. Of the €37 million announced in additional funding, only €24 million represents real additional funding. This compares poorly with the additional €113 million that Sinn Féin committed to spending on mental health. That would have been the biggest increase in the history of the State. I am right in saying that the budget only commits the Government to two child and adolescent mental health services next year. This is despite the fact that in April there was no clinic room large enough in the Tyone health centre in Nenagh to allow an occupational therapist to facilitate developmental assessments and interventions. This has only contributed to growing waiting lists. In the overall health budget, I see mention of building up the capacity of our National Ambulance Service. What is the plan in this regard? The term "enhancement" is used in reference to plans for community and rehabilitation beds. What does that mean? Is this the same enhancement that led to the closure of St. Brigid's District Hospital in Carrick-On-Suir and the loss of beds at Roscrea's Dean Maxwell community nursing home?

In the context of agriculture, there are no new supports for suckler farmers, sheep farmers, areas of natural constraint, farmers or recipients of farm assist. Our budget would have provided an increase in spending of 12% as opposed to the Government's meagre 1% increase. This budget is further confirmation that this Government is totally out of touch with the needs of people in Tipperary and across the country. Earlier today, a Fianna Fáil Deputy said he was happy that Fianna Fáil's hoofprints were all over this budget. Let me remind him that these hoofprints are stamped all over renters and ordinary families who struggle with childcare, health and carbon tax. They have been forgotten again but his hoofprints and those of this Government will not be forgotten at the next election.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I always make the mistake of responding to the debate instead of just reading what I have prepared. Yet I find myself compelled to respond to the debate again.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Do not do it.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** On one side of the House we have the Opposition talking about the problem of inflation and spending more in order to tackle the it. Does the Opposition not

realise that one of the principal causes of inflation is injecting more money into the economy? The more the Government injects more money into the economy, the more inflation increases. It is about striking a balance between Government spending and inflation increasing. It is a basic economic principle, going back to the French Revolution or the Weimar Republic. Government spending has to be balanced with inflation.

On the other side of the House, we have Deputy Durkan talking about fiscal corrections as a result of too much spending. Of course, he left out the fact that not all of that correction was made by Fine Gael. It was made first and foremost by the Irish people, but two thirds of it was made in advance of Fine Gael ever coming into government. Where Fine Gael went wrong, which shows the difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, is with all the small projects that really help people and have a major impact on their lives. They need to be the priority. They are the priority in this budget and have been absent from previous budgets. Despite attempts to suggest that this is a tired, out-of-date, exhausted Government, there is nothing exhausted about the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, or the Ministers, Deputies Stephen Donnelly and Norma Foley. For many of us in Fianna Fáil, this is the first real opportunity we have had to inject our priorities and choices into a budget. Last year, we were dealing with Covid, which was understandable.

Education, disadvantage and special needs were my primary priorities and I know they were also the priority of many at the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party meeting last week. Speaker after speaker spoke about higher education, special needs, disadvantage and schools. Budget 2022 was a record priority commitment for higher quality and inclusive education. The budget delivered for schools in disadvantaged areas and expanded investment in special education to its highest amount in the history of the State. The DEIS programme received a 20% increase in funding and will be extended to more schools. DEIS urban band 1 schools will also receive further targeted funding. I know the difference that will make to schools in my community. In places like Ballymun and Finglas, DEIS schools do a fantastic job with some of the most disadvantaged children in our country and in some of the most challenging circumstances. Expanding the DEIS programme ensures that as many children as possible who are at risk of educational disadvantage will benefit from targeted supports.

The programme for Government commitment to reduce class sizes continues to be delivered as well, with an extra 350 teachers being provided to further reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. Unlike in previous years, this improvement will also be extended to DEIS schools.

I particularly welcome the investment in special education. Over 900 special education teachers will be provided, alongside nearly 1,100 special needs assistants, SNAs, who will work both in special education and in mainstream schools. That is 2,000 people to give these children the helping hand they need. My area has a shortage of special education and autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes. I regularly speak with the Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Madigan, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and families who are impacted by those shortages and waiting lists and are travelling long distances to get to those schools. These children deserve a school place in their own community and to go to a school with their siblings and neighbours. The difference it makes to these families when classes and places are available in their local area is huge.

The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, recently met a number of parents in my area who are campaigning for more places and the Minister for Education recently opened a new ASD class in Virgin Mary Girls' National School in Ballymun in my constituency. The benefit of that

inclusive approach to education delivers for the whole school community. In fact, it delivers for all of our communities. The funding in the budget for extra teachers, SNAs and administrative principals will allow me schools to open classes with confidence and they will receive that support. I also thank the Minister for Education and the Ministers of State, Deputies Madigan and Rabbitte, for their commitment to this issue and for working with me and the parents concerned. I look forward to more classes opening and more local children receiving a school place nearer their homes. That has to be a priority for this Government as we go forward.

In higher education, student grants have also been increased for the first time in a decade. Not since Fianna Fáil was last in power have higher education grants been increased. The fee contribution for post-leaving certificate, PLC, courses has also been abolished. That will affect 10,000 students, as will the establishment of an apprenticeship office. Students will also benefit from the half-price public transport scheme. That is a very welcome measure to address both the cost of living for them and their families and our climate action targets. Higher and further education will be critical to our recovery from this pandemic in providing the skills we need to tackle the housing crisis. I welcome the wide range of measures in this budget that will help the sector to expand.

This is a budget that supports all sectors of our education system, with a focus on the most disadvantaged communities and on children with special education needs. I make no apologies for that. It continues Fianna Fáil's history as a party that recognises education as the foundation of our success as a country and demonstrates a clear commitment to a system that delivers for all learners. It follows the example of our party set by Donogh O'Malley many years ago, as well as by the many people who have followed him.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** That was a nice political broadcast for the Fianna Fáil Party

Debate adjourned.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Irish Sign Language**

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I am glad the Minister of State is here to take this matter because I know she understands it. She and I have met a number of groups to discuss it over the last few weeks. I would like to speak to her this evening about the Irish Sign Language Act and seek an update regarding its implementation and oversight in her Department. This Act places a statutory duty on all public bodies to provide Irish Sign Language, ISL, users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services provided for under statute. In addition, the Act provides for specific obligations in the areas of legal proceedings, educational provision and broadcasting. By its very essence, and the reality of the interactions users have with the State, these obligations the State has to the deaf community overlap many different Departments.

I know the Minister of State will not be allowed to comment on a lot of what I am about to say as it is subject to litigation in the High Court. That is my first point. Why are we, as a State, subjecting people to that kind of torment and anguish? The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 is

quite clear. These children have an educational, and now constitutionally supported, need and it is not being met by the State. These views are not mine. They are contained in a yet to be published report by the National Disability Authority. It states:

Overall, consultees generally agreed that the current ISL supports provided in schools for children whose primary language is ISL are not effectively addressing the needs of these children in terms of access to the curriculum, access to language models, language development, peer interaction and psychological support. Consultees emphasise that without effective supports in these areas, children whose primary language is ISL will struggle to achieve their full potential.

Deficiencies in the education system for these deaf and hard-of-hearing children are listed in the report. It found there were issues with inconsistent or inadequate teacher qualifications in ISL, children learning incorrect ISL at school due to limitations on teachers and SNAs, teachers mixing up ISL with Lámh, which is a different form of communication altogether, and deaf children interpreting for deaf peers because some teachers lack proficiency in ISL.

Some teachers who contributed to this yet to be published report acknowledged that they felt they did have the adequate training or knowledge of ISL to get their students to a standard equivalent in any other language such as English or Irish.

Now we come to the nub of the issue. At present, there are ISL degree courses in both Dublin City University, DCU, and Trinity College Dublin. These are four year courses. Students on these courses are among the most - if not the most - competent ISL teachers and interpreters in the country yet they receive a rate of pay equivalent to that of a special needs assistant, SNA. This is in no way to detract from the excellent work our SNAs do on a daily basis in our schools. Believe me; I know. I spent 15 years working with some of the best SNAs in the country. ISL graduates from Trinity College Dublin and DCU will find far more lucrative careers in other fields and this is the travesty of all this.

Three or four weeks ago, the Minister of State and I met with a group of ISL language interpreters who love their jobs and the kids they help daily, both in and out of school. They want to stay in that profession yet they cannot. They cannot afford to raise families of their own and pay a mortgage or whatever the case may be when the harsh reality is that they train for nearly as long as a fully qualified teacher yet receive far less when it comes to pay. This is wrong. We are subsequently finding that schools are getting by with upskilling SNAs or teachers in mainstream classes as a stopgap.

To go back to where we started, however, these children have a constitutional right and the State has an obligation to provide appropriately trained personnel to impart knowledge and teach these wonderful children. I will quote again from the yet to be published report:

The remuneration on offer for ISL communication support workers, which is at the same level of SNA, is considered to result in the employment of workers with insufficient ISL skills.

It is quite apparent that we, the State, have failed and continue to fail these families. The *ad hoc* arrangement that exists at present in our schools does not require the SNA to have ISL qualifications. Anyone involved in teaching knows and will tell us that language development and fluency takes hundreds of hours. I will quote again from the report:

Neither the qualifications nor the available upskilling time for the SNA roll provides capacity for this. The question could be asked whether language interpretation is a role that can be easily integrated with the SNA model at all.

I will allow the Minister of State to respond.

**Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I thank the Deputy for raising this question this evening and welcome the opportunity to address the House on the issue.

Irish Sign Language is a matter of significant importance to me. I will put on the record that I met with families and with ISL interpreters. I have engaged with users of ISL and know how important it is to them that they can use ISL when accessing key services. There are an estimated 5,000 deaf people in Ireland. An additional 40,000 people rely on ISL to communicate.

The Irish Sign Language Act was signed into law in December 2017 with the aim of addressing the extreme marginalisation of sign language users. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I jointly signed the commencement order for the Irish Sign Language Act on 23 December 2020. Through the Act, Ireland recognises ISL to be a native language of the State and users of ISL have the right to develop and preserve it as their native language.

Implementing the Irish Sign Language Act requires a whole-of-government approach. As such, all public bodies have obligations to fulfil. To monitor the implementation of the Act, as required under section 10, my Department this year arranged for a report on the operation of the Act to be prepared. The National Disability Authority, NDA, was commissioned to produce the report and the NDA has submitted a draft to me. The report is based on the views and experiences of stakeholders, the lived experiences of ISL users and survey responses from public bodies.

Let us be very clear. It was my ambition to have that report produced approximately three to four weeks ago. It was also my ambition to have it form part of the NDA annual general meeting, AGM. Unfortunately, it has gone out to the various Departments for observations. It is regrettable that I am still waiting on the observations from those Departments to come back in. It is remiss of them to be so slow in facilitating their return.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Deputy has two minutes for his response. He might try to stay on time.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Acting Chairman. I will always concede time to the Minister of State, if she wants it. I appreciate her frank response. To follow up on how she finished in terms of the delay of Departments in coming back to the Minister of State, it is quite apparent from the report I cited earlier that a number of Departments are not compliant with the Act, which was established in 2017. It is also quite obvious that a number of State bodies and even a number of Departments did not bother to even respond to requests in terms of the NDA report. To be honest, that type of behaviour is a travesty. We are at a point where, if one peruses the report, a number of education and training boards, ETB, did not bother to respond to say whether they were compliant with the Act. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science did not respond to the request to see if it was compliant. A number of city and county councils, An Garda Síochána and the Office of the President did not respond to the request from the NDA. There is a problem here with communication. There is a problem with people having the manners and grace to respond to requests from the NDA to

say whether they are compliant with the Act.

Of those people who did respond, a number of Departments in government are only partially compliant or not compliant at all. That will all come out when the report is published. I am hoping that report will be published in the coming weeks. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could elaborate on whether she has a date or a timeline of when that is going to come before us.

I will finish on this point. I take the Minister of State's point that we must be realistic. This cannot be done overnight and that is fine. The Act came in in 2017 and, fine, it only came into effect last year but that is still a significant period of time. The Minister of State and I have met, and I know she cannot comment on this individual case, people such as the Geary family in Cork. Their child has now been in school for the last four years without a properly trained and qualified language interpreter, as is his constitutional right. That is what we are talking about here. People are being lost in the system and falling through the cracks. That is four years of his education that he will never get back.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Yet again, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Anybody who is listening to the debate this evening might not realise the relevance of the Irish Sign Language Act that was signed into law 2017 and the commencement order that we brought forward in December 2020.

It was not just one Department, however. It was a whole-of-government approach across all Departments and all public bodies. The Deputy referenced the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. To me, that is only a newly-formed Department. I am, therefore, prepared to be very reasonable and say that I understand why it could not contribute in the way it should have. However, the Deputy referenced other Departments and public bodies that should know better. They should know the value of communication and of allowing people the opportunity to be the very best they can be to perform in their roles and responsibilities and integrate with services and peers, but also to recognise that ISL is a form of communication. It is their first language, no different from how I speak. This is my first language. When a person uses their hands to communicate or understand, we have said, as legislators, we recognise that. We recognise it to the extent we asked the public bodies and the Departments, for the past three years, to work with us. I look forward to bringing it in before Christmas. I hope all Departments will return their observations. I also hope that when it goes to the Cabinet, it will be accepted warts and all because we need to be honest. All the people want is to be honest. If we are honest with the people, we can start to make it better. I have run over my time and I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this matter. I am pleased to have been associated with the establishment of a Fine Gael policy lab, which is essentially policy research that deals with first-hand experience. In the case of childcare, we spoke to more than 2,500 providers, parents and staff in the system. The conclusion was resounding. The message was that the underdevelopment of early childhood policies in Ireland is hampering the progress and well-being of our society. It is stifling opportunity in childhood, putting parents under huge stress, leaving providers struggling to fill the yawning gaps and damaging the capacity to attract and retain well-qualified staff who will commit to

this vital sector in the long term. We need a step change in the approach to the early childhood sector.

I will be the first to congratulate the Minister on the significant achievements in the budget. More than €1,000 is to be provided in respect of those aged four to 15 on the universal subsidy and up to €2,500 is to be provided in respect of those on the enhanced subsidy who have children between the age of two and three quarters and 15. A new stream of more than €1,000 for each child will be available to fund quality improvement. This is a really important first step. However, there is much more to be done and structural reform is urgently needed. I look to the early childhood development agency as being key to delivering that structural shift in the way we look at it. There are big gaps and we need a new mandate for the county childcare committees to start to assess where those gaps are and systematically fill them.

I have been fortunate enough to have represented the enterprise sector. We have 4,000 exporting enterprises. They have specialised bodies for training, management, marketing, innovation and capability building. A range of six agencies serve those 4,000 companies. When it comes to the 4,500 providers of early childhood support, no agency offers support to their capacity to build and fill those gaps. That has to change. I see this agency as a significant move in starting to create opportunities to innovate, build capability, have demonstration projects and build campuses within our communities where people can access a range of services. The pilot for the delivery of therapeutic services to early school settings, which is now in a range of 75 early school settings, should be the model for the future.

We can do that and we need to build on that model but we need to do so much more in this area. We need a new careers structure. We need apprenticeships in this field, which have not been developed to allow on-the-job learning. We need an even start. Many people say it should be like the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools scheme, known as DEIS, but I think it needs to be much more targeted than DEIS, which has now reached 900 schools. That is nearly a quarter of all schools. We need to focus on the acute areas of disadvantage and stop children coming to primary school already so far behind that they will not be able to compete in the modern environment. We need to make many systematic and structural changes in this sector. I have great confidence that the Government will adopt this approach. As a backbencher, I want to work with the Government to make sure this is the best we can make it. We have set out a draft functions structure of how that agency could work.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and compliment him on the videos he has produced in the past number of weeks. They are simple and snappy. I also thank him for his comments on the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and his Department and the work he has put in for the past number of months to support all our parties that have made this happen. There has been a step change in the past number of days. The programme for Government commits to:

Establish [a dedicated] agency, Childcare Ireland, to assist in the expansion of high-quality [early learning and] childcare, ... best practice and innovation, and professional development in community and private settings. It will also be tasked with developing career paths for [early learning and] childcare staff.

The new agency will also be responsible for the expansion of the early years curriculum, Síolta.

As a precursor to establishing childcare Ireland, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is carrying out a comprehensive review of the operating model for early learning and childcare in Ireland. This follows on from the commitment in First 5, the whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-28, to undertake this review with a view to developing more consolidated and streamlined planning, funding, administration and quality support for this sector.

This sector has grown substantially in the past decade. The current operating model emerged over a decade ago, prior to the significant development of policies, schemes and investment that has taken place in recent years. It operates across multi-level structures and organisations. The objective of this review is to ensure that the operating model is fit for purpose to implement early learning and childcare policy relating to quality, affordability and access, to the scale and standards required in an evolving and expanding sector with the citizens of Ireland, at its heart, as core beneficiaries.

The key criteria informing the review are that the operating model operates in a manner that delivers maximum public benefit, best value for money and most effective use of resources; operates in a way that ensures that robust governance, accountability and quality assurance structures and processes are in place to manage the budget, which currently amounts to approximately €640 million annually; operates in a transparent manner and is in compliance with all relevant legal, regulatory and governance requirements; meets the needs of early learning and childcare providers and staff; establishes the provision of high-quality service for children and families; aligns with the strategic direction set out in First 5; and is equipped to support the major early learning and childcare reform initiatives that are committed to in the strategy.

An independent external contractor is undertaking this analysis and considering options for reform. The review is overseen by a group, chaired by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, comprising officials from relevant Departments and two external experts. The analysis of the operating model has involved significant stakeholder engagement to date and is due to conclude shortly. The review has identified both the strengths and weaknesses associated with the current operating model. It has also identified international practice principles in early learning and childcare, the principles and characteristics of a best practice operating model and a suite of options for reform. It will also signal the implementation challenges associated with each option for reform.

Depending on the outcome of the review, any change will involve significant planning, stakeholder engagement and a wide range of consultations. It will also be important to ensure any change management process avoids any interim break or gap in the services and supports provided to early learning and childcare providers and to children and their families. It is envisaged that the analysis carried out for this review will provide a robust evidence base to inform a decision concerning the establishment of childcare Ireland and the range of functions it may provide. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, will bring a report to the Government on the matter in this quarter.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I thank the Minister of State and am encouraged to hear about all that work. One thing I did not hear mentioned, and this should be the starting point, is the need to start with the well-being of children. We need to embed in any such agency what the well-being of children is and how it will be measured and monitored in order that all this activity generates an outcome, especially for children who start at a disadvantage.

*5 o'clock*

Second, I refer to the assets of the State, such as our schools. There must be an obligation on those who have substantial State assets to facilitate parents and providers to fill a gap that is urgently needed and is integral for successful education participation. That is difficult in the present system. There are many barriers to it and they need to be swept aside. We need to embed in this agency scope for innovation and leadership; not a rigid top-down model, which has featured in many of these sorts of reviews from experts. We need something that is flexible, but, of course, compliant and accountable. It has to be flexible to provide for development of innovation and leadership.

Finally, it has to be embedded in our communities. There has to be local capacity. That is why it is important that the role of county childcare committees should be expanded. We should expect that the five-year development plan would include an assessment of the gaps in provision for childcare. We consider all sorts of objectives in our development plan, but we do not consider one where we already have a county childcare committee. We should build that sort of responsibility at local level into this. Overall, I commend the Minister on his work. I look forward to engaging with him on that development as it unfolds.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Well-being has to be at the core of anything we do with the childcare model. We have the well-being of our children at the centre, along with the well-being of the staff, and the well-being of the families. It has to be embedded in the community. The Deputy mentioned disadvantaged areas. It is not embedded within our county development plan in rural Ireland. The city and county childcare committees researched whether they are too close to each other. We should have community childcare facilities in every parish and community right across the State. We should be sweating the assets off the State. The Deputy referred to the schools and community halls. I agree we should support whatever is needed within that community through the childcare model.

The innovative people of whom the Deputy spoke live in our communities. They have skill sets within those communities, whether they are accountants or solicitors. They can make up that task force to ensure that we develop and expand the range of services required within those communities. When that is put that at the centre, that will put life back into communities. In my area in rural Ireland and the Deputy's area in inner-city Dublin, communities will be kept alive and beating, with investment in their centres. When we do that, we will have development in schools, but also development in local clubs.

That is where the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, and his task force will go with the plan. It is not for me to say until it is completed. However, the vision is that we would involve all. The Deputy is correct about the role of the city and county childcare committees and I have made the same point for years. Currently they are in receipt of approximately €11 million a year. We should not overwhelm childcare providers with this enormous volume of paperwork. It should be the role of the city and county childcare committees to have the policies, procedures and paperwork to support our childcare providers, whether they are private or community. It should be streamlined, no different than when someone orders oil. It should be ordered through a central point to get best value for money and to support everybody.

14 October 2021

## Ambulance Service

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next item I have selected is from Deputy Michael Moynihan, which is to discuss understaffing and resources in the ambulance services in counties Cork and Kerry. It is good to hear that the Deputy is looking after Kerry as well. The Minister of State, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, will respond.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. The issues here have manifested themselves over the past number of months, in particular, in respect of the waiting times for ambulances. In the area I come from in Duhallow, ambulances come from either Tralee or Cork, but they also might come from Limerick. In one instance, an ambulance came from Clare. A number of incidents have been brought to my attention where there was a two and a half hour wait from the time that the GP called for an ambulance for a critically ill patient to be picked up. It is simply not acceptable in this day and age. We had many issues with the National Ambulance Service, NAS, and all the key issues that fed into that over the years. Nowadays, however, there is a long waiting time for an ambulance from the time someone calls for one. It might be different in the city or in the suburbs near the locations of the hospitals, but people are an hour from one of the major hospitals in the Duhallow region. Therein lies the problem, when added to waiting two and a half hours from the time the urgent call comes in.

I am referring to urgent cases that have been brought to my attention, not just the ordinary, run-of-the-mill issues that might need an ambulance; these were extremely ill patients. The GP and the medics decided that it was important that those people were taken to hospital immediately by an ambulance. While sometimes people can be taken by car, it was decided that an ambulance, paramedics, well trained staff, and so forth, were needed to take them to hospital.

Over the years I have been in the back of many ambulances to accompany patients. I could not speak highly enough of the paramedics and other staff and the dedication, commitment and professionalism that they demonstrate when carrying out their work. However, if a seriously ill person is waiting for an ambulance to arrive for two and a half hours after it had been called for, that is simply not acceptable. It is not a service. When it comes to major traumas or strokes, there is an important “golden hour” to try and get somebody into hospital setting.

I appeal to the Minister to get the HSE to target this. Today is 14 October. In the past number of months there was an urgent case where a patient waited for two and a half hours for an ambulance. Others waited for three hours. What will the waiting time be in the first week in January or the last week of December, when we are the height of the winter season? I do not think that there is an urgency in respect of the crisis in the ambulance services. Many of the fine people I know who work in the ambulance service constantly tell me about the difficulties they face, particularly in Mallow Hospital, which is a fantastic acute hospital. It does not take patients from the ambulances. To my mind there is no reason for that. Regulations should be changed. Two and a half hours is too long to wait for an ambulance. There should be ambulances within Duhallow and the wider north Cork region. Ambulances should be there and on call. There should be a basic ambulance service for critically ill people to get them to hospital in time.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** This is the second time I have had to reply about ambulance service in the House. The last time I replied to Deputy Ó Cuív and his colleagues. I am glad to report that they have since received their ambulance in Connemara. We have, therefore, made

a little progress on ambulances. I am going to read a script on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I will convey everything the Deputy said to the Minister. The Deputy might not have realised that I happen to know where Duhallow is. He had me down there over the summer. Once someone goes off the motorway it is easy to get lost around the place.

The Deputy has raised the question of resourcing and response times across the north-west midlands and southern region. I intend to give a national overview of the capacity and performance of the NAS. As the Deputy may be aware, the NAS does not operate a station-based deployment system. Instead, it uses dynamic deployment on a national basis. Dynamic deployment allows staff in the HSE's national emergency operational centre, NEOC, to see all available resources, to prioritise their allocation to the higher acute cause and require an immediate emergency response.

It is important to make Deputies aware that the issue is not the time it takes to get to the patient; it is how quickly the call is answered. If the call is answered within three minutes, that is considered deployed. It is not measured on when the ambulance arrives to the patient. It is important for us to be clear on that, because some Members might not be aware of that. While Deputy Moynihan talks about it taking two and a half hours for an ambulance to arrive, once the ambulance has responded prior to that, that is an efficient call.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is ridiculous.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Absolutely.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The poor person on the floor wants the ambulance now, not whenever they receive the telephone call

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Exactly. It is important for us to understand what we are talking about and where some of the gaps in the service are. This model represents international best practice and has been highlighted by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, as a way to improve response times and NAS performance generally. Using this model does mean that non-serious or non-life-threatening calls will sometimes experience a longer wait for an ambulance. The wait times for lower-acuity calls have presented a particular challenge recently, as the NAS has seen unusually high demand. This is in line with the current experience of many areas of our acute health service. As the Deputy may be aware, there is a shortage of qualified paramedics in Ireland, but the NAS has been incrementally building capacity in recent years through implementation of the Vision 2020 strategic plan.

In 2021 the NAS received additional funding of €10 million, which included further funding for additional paramedic staff. As part of budget 2022, an additional €8.3 million will assist in modernising and building up the capacity of our National Ambulance Service. To help to meet the immediate capacity challenges, the NAS advises that it has redeployed approximately 45 paramedics from Covid-19 related work to emergency ambulance duty. Over the short to medium term, I understand that a further 80 paramedics are due to graduate from the NAS college this quarter, which is significant. The paramedic programme is a three-year course, and there are over 200 student paramedics at different stages of the programme, with a further 100 students scheduled to commence in January. To support workforce planning over the longer term, the NAS has commissioned an independent analysis of demand. The results of the analysis will provide greater clarity about staffing requirements over the coming years. The NAS has highlighted the particular difficulty with service delivery in rural areas that was noted in the

2016 Emergency Service Baseline and Capacity Review. The review suggested that the most practical way of providing an initial response to many calls in rural areas is through voluntary community first responders. While that may be successful in certain cases, in critical cases, an ambulance and clinical diagnosis are required.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** Over the last decade, the ambulance service was removed and after much lobbying and negotiations, we got the ambulance back. I am talking about the time that a general practitioner, GP, arrives at a patient's door, assesses the patient and says that an ambulance is needed to get the patient to hospital immediately. It takes 2.5 hours from that call until the ambulance gets to the door. Let us be clear about what I am challenging. It is not about when the call is logged. It is from the time when the GP makes a medical assessment and says that an ambulance is needed. I could go into personal stories but do not want to bring them before the Houses of the Oireachtas. It is simply not acceptable. Some fine people in the ambulance service have said that when they come to retirement age, that is it. If people want to stay in the ambulance service, with the staffing shortages, why not bring retired staff back? Many have come to me to say that they would stay on for another year, or two or three years, but the date is set. I welcome that there will be 80 more paramedics.

I fear that the National Ambulance Service and HSE do not understand that there is a crisis. We are not getting the service that we deserve. We were getting a better service a number of years ago. In the last months in 2021, the crisis has erupted and the waiting times have been substantial. Mallow General Hospital and other hospitals need to be looked at to make sure that they can accept patients, depending on the medical need at the time. It is crucially important that we address the time between when it is decided that an ambulance is needed and when an ambulance comes. It is another hour in the ambulance to either Tralee or Cork from my region, which is not acceptable. I would like if the Minister of State could go back to the powers that be to say that what is going on is unacceptable and it needs to be addressed. There needs to be a proper ambulance service throughout the country but especially, as I am debating today, in my area in north Cork and the Kerry region, which the ambulance would also cover. We need to have a proper ambulance service, which we do not have at present.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I assure the House that the Government is committed to the strategic reform of the National Ambulance Service. I will take on board everything the Deputy has said. Let us have action and meet with the HSE and CHO 4 to see what plans they have to ensure that there are not repeated instances of what the Deputy has spoken about today. I know that Deputy MacSharry was also originally to be a contributor to this so perhaps we should have a meeting with CHO 1. We found it beneficial when we had a cross-party meeting regarding CHO 2, where we met with the National Ambulance Service to discuss how it could put an action plan in place. It knows the gaps and does the best that it can. It is coming under pressure. I have spoken with it. As we come out of Covid, the NAS is seeing a significant rise in the need for its services with an increase in frailty among older people. We have to see how we can work together. Eighty people will come on board. We will have to see how the investment can support the Deputy, Duhallow and the people in the surrounding areas.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State for being here to deal with all those matters.

## **Housing Schemes**

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** In budget 2022, the Government has effectively signalled that it has given up on inner city flat complexes. The Government has started waving the white flag. It feels to residents and me that the neglect will continue. The Government has turned its back on Dubliners living in flat complexes. I have consistently highlighted the shocking conditions that Dublin City Council residents have to live in due to that neglect. For me and the communities that I represent, the €23 million cut to State regeneration funding, despite the unacceptable conditions of older social housing and flat complexes, is devastating. Residents of flat complexes have been told by this Government that it is giving up on residents and that they can continue to live in the rat infestation, the flooding, dampness and decay. I am the first to hold Dublin City Council to account. However, the council cannot do the necessary work if it is not given the resources. The Government is using the council as a mudguard. This budget and the cuts to regeneration allocation highlight where responsibility lies. Residents know that it lies squarely on the lap of the Government. This budget shines a light on that.

I recently got a list of 23 flat complexes that Dublin City Council planned to regenerate. With a cut to regeneration funding, the reality is that most people reading this list will not be alive by the time the council gets halfway down it. Sinn Féin sees the dire circumstances that residents in flat complexes live in. We allocated increased funding for flat regeneration in our alternative budget. We did this because we know that no Government could or should stand over the conditions that residents are expected to live in. I have said many times here that Dublin City Council should set up a pilot scheme to tackle the extreme rat infestation in the flats. More intense levels of baiting and tackling nests of rats are urgently needed. The council also needs to carry out a repair programme immediately to fix the drains. The drains are a source of rats. They harbour rats. They are old drains and they need to be fixed urgently.

In 2017, a ruling was made by the European Committee of Social Rights that Ireland had breached Article 16 of the revised European Social Charter. The committee went on to say that the Irish State had failed to ensure the right to housing of an adequate standard for a not insignificant number of families. Four years on from this ruling, nothing has changed for the people living and paying rent in these State-owned homes and flats. Across the inner city, many flats are in a shocking condition. Tenants describe living there as a constant battle. Every day, they face a constant battle against the conditions inflicted on them by Dublin City Council, this Government and neglect. Why has the State not acted to amend its failings? Is it content to have its citizens living in such dire conditions?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I am glad to have an opportunity to discuss the European committee ruling and, in particular, the regeneration budget and the regeneration of social housing and flat complexes in inner-city Dublin. These housing complexes are intrinsic to the city and have huge cultural and heritage significance but should be habitable to modern and current standards. The Government and my Department, in particular, have given careful consideration to the report of the European Committee of Social Rights.

My Department is committed to ensuring tenants in social housing are provided with adequate housing that meets the standards most recently laid down in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019. To address the issues raised in the report, my Depart-

ment is actively engaging with the local authority sector to promote the preventative maintenance of local authority housing stock and provide significant funding for stock improvement works. In addition to funding provided by local authorities in respect of their housing stock, which is around €350 million annually, my Department provides funding across a number of programmes to support work by local authorities to maintain and improve their social housing stock. In all cases, it is local authorities that identify the priorities.

With regard to ageing flat complexes in Dublin city, following reviews of older flat complexes and based on the need to modernise and bring living conditions up to acceptable levels as part of its climate action plans, Dublin City Council is developing a long-term strategy for the redevelopment and-or refurbishment of these complexes. My Department has worked consistently with the council in support of the efforts to advance the proposals, including the regeneration of Pearse House, Oliver Bond House and Constitution Hill, which we will continue to do.

Capital funding was mentioned by the Deputy. A figure of €50 million will be provided in 2022 to support the national regeneration programme. This is not a reduction in funding but an increase of €4 million on the €46 million budgeted for in the programme for 2021. It is important to note that to date the regeneration-remedial subhead in my Department's Vote has provided funding for a range of important supports in addition to the national regeneration programme, including the remedial works programme and improvement works, extensions and adaptation programmes providing funding for local authority social homes to support the needs of older people and people with a disability.

Reflecting the critical nature of these supports in meeting the needs of some of the most vulnerable sectors of our community, it was agreed as part of budget 2022 that the funding for these programmes will no longer be reflected under the regeneration-remedial subhead. Instead, a dedicated and separate funding stream for these supports will be established next year. To that end, I am pleased my Department has secured capital funding of €25 million in 2022 to ensure we can continue to provide these important programmes which assist and maintain people in their homes for as long as possible.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** I thank the Minister of State. It is important to state the vast majority of the residents of the flats complexes are hard-working, involved, active participants in their community. A huge number of them were working on the front line during the pandemic. They are committed to their community. When someone is hurt, they get behind them and stand with them.

The new York Street apartments are only 12 years old. One entire block was flooded during the week. There was a major flood and residents had to be moved out to a hotel across the road. The conditions are so bad, residents cannot be left there in the apartments. There are ongoing issues. Some windows cannot open and some cannot close. There are rats nesting under the balconies. These apartments are 12 years old. They are not old. Residents are living in fear. One woman had her flat flooded seven times in the last couple of years. She is terrified.

Dublin City Council's treatment of the residents can only be called neglect. Someone living in a private tenancy can bring the landlord to the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and get some resolution to the various issues. Dublin City Council tenants have nowhere to go. The council is judge and jury. It is unfair and needs to be changed. I ask that the Department examine having an independent moderator or arbitrator where Dublin City Council tenants can be heard when there are issues like this. Dublin City Council is judge and jury and it is not ac-

ceptable.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** The conditions the Deputy has described are unacceptable. When the issue was raised in relation to Oliver Bond House by Deputy Bríd Smith, I had direct contact with the residents association there. It has been very active in Oliver Bond House and I give it great credit for that. That approach from a residents association is good but we have to make inroads in resolving these issues. To that end, the Department has given careful consideration to the findings of the European committee ruling and is committed to ensuring tenants in social housing are provided with adequate housing that meets the standards most recently laid down in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

My Department is working with Dublin City Council to progress a number of projects in Dublin's inner city, with 54 units at St. Teresa's Gardens completed in quarter 4 of 2020 and 72 under construction at Dominick Street on the east side. A number of projects are in the pre-construction process, including Pearse House, Constitution Hill, Dorset Street and Matt Talbot Court.

Dublin City Council has engaged with residents of Oliver Bond House on a number of short-term projects to improve outdoor common areas and on long-term proposals for retrofitting and refurbishment of the flats of Oliver Bond House. The council is working on proposals and design for an extensive programme that will see a total refurbishment of all 397 of the flats, which have huge architectural value. They are Herbert Simms-designed buildings. A stage 1 submission is expected imminently. The restructuring of the regeneration-remedial works subhead into two distinct funding streams demonstrates an increased commitment in this area, with an increase from €46 million to €50 million for regeneration and a separate budget of €25 million for remedial works, improvements and adaptations.

I hope this is of use to the Deputy. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is committed to working with Dublin City Council to resolve the issues that have been highlighted. The types of living conditions the Deputy described are unacceptable and need to be resolved.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.27 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 19 October 2021.