



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 9 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 9 November 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have bent over backwards for cuckoo funds. The catalogue of advantages they have given them include sweetheart tax deals, fast-track planning and reduced apartment design standards. Their support for cuckoo funds pushes ordinary people out of the housing market as they gobble up family homes in bulk and rent those homes back to families at extortionate rents.

Public anger came to boiling point earlier this year when a cuckoo fund was set to sweep up the majority of homes in a development in Maynooth from under the noses of ordinary home buyers. Instead of taking real action to clip the wings of these funds, their response was very limp. The stamp duty increase of 10% is easily absorbed by wealthy funds, which continue to pay zero tax on the hundreds of millions of euro they make from the outrageous rents they charge. Of course, they excluded apartments from the stamp duty increase, which means it is still open season for cuckoo funds on more than half of the homes that are built in this city. They literally hung the flag of surrender over Dublin for these investors. Then the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, dropped the stamp duty increase for funds that bulk-buy family homes if they lease those homes back to local authorities. That decision will see the State hand over €1 billion to cuckoo funds.

That was not meaningful action to put manners on these funds. Indeed, it showed them they really have nothing to fear from the Taoiseach's Government. When it comes to a choice between showing up for those in housing need or maintaining the power of wealthy investors, the Taoiseach has made it very clear whose side he is on.

Now it is a case of here we go again because on Sunday we learned the Taoiseach's Ministers, Deputies Darragh O'Brien and Paschal Donohoe, are looking to dust off the red carpet again and roll it out for these funds. As house prices continue to soar beyond the reach of ordinary workers and as extortionate rents continue to spin out of control, the Taoiseach's Ministers set out on a mission to attract in more of the very funds that wreck the housing market and rob people of an affordable roof over their heads.

There is no public support for this insanity. People want a change of direction. They want a Government that will take the lead and build homes that workers and families can afford to buy or rent. This is where the Taoiseach's focus and that of his Ministers should be, not on cosying up even further with cuckoo funds.

Tá tacaíocht an Taoisigh do na cuach-chistí ag spreagadh na géarchéime tithíochta seo. Ní féidir leis dul ar aghaidh. Tá daoine ag lorg rialtais atá chun tithe a thógáil a mbeidh oibríthe agus teaghlaigh in ann iad a cheannach nó a chíosadh. Did the Taoiseach know about this roadshow and approve of it? Can he tell us whom his Ministers intend to meet? Does he know that? What new sweetheart deals or incentives are they offering to these investors to bring them to Ireland? It is in the public interest that details of the Ministers' proposed cuckoo fund roadshow be published urgently. I want the Taoiseach to commit to this.

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, arís, níl an fhírinne a rá ag an Teachta. Níl an ceart aici. Go bunúsach, is í an aidhm atá ag an Rialtas ná tithe a chur ar fáil do dhaoine ar fud na tíre, na gnáthdhaoine agus cosmhuintir na tíre. Is í sin an t-aon aidhm amháin atá ag an Rialtas. The Deputy's attempts to portray Government policy as being almost exclusively about institutional investors are very wide off the mark, disingenuous and dishonest. The fundamental tenet of Government policy has been to provide the largest allocation in the history of the State to house construction. Capital housing funding of more than €4 billion will be provided in 2022. That is a fact. We are looking at providing 1,580 cost-rental homes next years by approved housing bodies, AHBs, local authorities and the Land Development Agency, LDA, at 25% below market rate. That is what we are interested in - making sure people can either rent or buy a house at an affordable rate and, in addition, providing very substantial amounts of social housing.

We have introduced the new national first home affordable purchase shared equity scheme, the Rebuilding Ireland home loans scheme and the help-to-buy-schemes. The Government has already introduced five rental Acts to help to deal with rent issues during the Covid emergency. In addition, the Minister is bringing in legislation to reduce the level of rent increases in rent pressure zones, RPZs, to 2%. That has been approved by Government. Again, the aim is to seek to protect tenants in every way possible, including students, having previously dealt with the upfront payments students have to pay. The Government has approved that Bill to cap rent increases in RPZs to no more than 2% per annum *pro rata*. Project Tosaigh, providing €1 billion, will enable the LDA to deliver approximately 5,000 affordable homes. Budget 2022, as the Deputy knows, provides for the delivery of more than 11,800 social homes in 2022, of which 9,000 will be new builds. In voids alone, 5,500 social homes have been brought back into use over the past 18 months by the Government. A further 1,500 voids are to be remediated and brought back into use next year.

Why do I say all of that?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Because you do not want to answer my question.

The Taoiseach: No. The question is meant to be a propaganda spin, designed to portray Government housing policy as being exclusively about one thing and one thing only, which, of course, is far from the truth. I have outlined the facts to the Deputy. As far as the Government is concerned, and Fianna Fáil has been in government for approximately a year and a half now with Fine Gael and the Green Party, we are very committed to enhancing public housing supply and also providing affordable housing in a very substantive way for the first time ever.

In regard to institutional investment and private housing development, there has to be a private sector dimension to all of this as well. We want private sector activity in the market but the primary intervention from Government is public housing. The provision of record numbers of public houses is what we want to achieve. We have sent out the mandates to the local authorities to do that. We also want to assist in the construction of affordable housing in order that ordinary people can afford to buy houses, releasing them from the significant rent pressures which many are under.

Maynooth was not purchased. We have banned bulk buying by investment funds. Two recent An Bord Pleanála decisions have supported Government, which means homes have to be sold to individuals.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Nobody is against investment and Ireland is open for business. We all know that-----

The Taoiseach: I do not think we do.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----but the Taoiseach's treatment of cuckoo funds and putting their needs over those of ordinary citizens has made an international laughing stock of Ireland. Now the Government is trying to take an entire generation, which is locked out of affordable housing, for fools. There are no fools out there. That is the truth. The Taoiseach had a lot to say, but he did not answer my question so, if I may-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Sinn Féin supported the affordable housing legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----I will attempt to ask it again. Can he confirm the Ministers, Deputies Darragh O'Brien and Donohoe, will meet with and make a presentation to these cuckoo funds? Will that roadshow happen? Did he know about it and did he approve it? Who are his Ministers proposing to meet? What are they offering to these funds to entice them to Ireland? I would like the Taoiseach to answer those questions because those are the important matters that arise when we discover that far from learning any lessons, here we go again, with a Fianna Fáil-led Government and cuckoo funds.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is the sound bite nonsense.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald said the country is open for investment. What does she mean?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: There is a lot of bluff and bluster repeatedly coming from Deputy McDonald on housing, with nothing to back it up-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is a very simple question.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is making a show of himself.

The Taoiseach: Every time the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, brings in legislation on affordable housing, we get this repeated negativity and opposition-----

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: -----from Sinn Féin to the legislation until the division bells ring. What

happens then?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It supports it.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin meekly goes in and supports the affordable housing legislation, despite all the bluster, hype and all of that.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy opposite said we are open for investment, but by the way-----
(*Interruptions*).

The Taoiseach: -----we do not want any institutional investment whatsoever and wants a no-go area. That is the point.

(*Interruptions*).

The Taoiseach: The Deputy asked who we were taking for fools.

(*Interruptions*).

The Taoiseach: Who is the Deputy taking for fools, given the extraordinary repeated and consistent opposition to housing projects all over the country, denying ordinary people access to housing development after development? Rank hypocrisy is going on in this House for far too long. There is no roadshow to attract any cuckoo funds and-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is considerably over time and is not answering questions.

The Taoiseach: -----the Government agreed today on the owner-occupier guarantee-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Are the Ministers to meet with these funds? Yes or no?

The Taoiseach: It was agreed by the Government in terms of legislation and so on.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has not answered.

The Taoiseach: This intervention is totally out of order-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Well, many things are out of order.

The Taoiseach: -----and is being facilitated by policies in the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is out of order is the Taoiseach's Ministers running and cosyng up to cuckoo funds in the midst of a housing crisis.

The Taoiseach: That is not true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not true. Deputy McDonald should withdraw that remark.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked the questions and they have not been answered.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy takes everything from the *Daily Mail*.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Deputy should get his boss to answer the questions then. How is that?

Deputy Alan Kelly: I raise an issue to do with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. It does not relate to his double, strange PCR tests. We know we are dealing with a Covid crisis and, potentially, a Brexit Article 16 crisis. However, if the Taoiseach and his Government colleagues cannot keep the lights on or the houses warm this winter nor plan for industry and inward investment, that is the rock on which they will perish. I have serious concerns about this, which I have repeatedly raised. We are facing a perfect storm in energy supply. More than a decade ago, bad, horrendous politics and a lack of regulation in banking destroyed this country. I have a deep concern, and I do not say this lightly, about how our energy market has been regulated over the last number of years. I would like the Taoiseach to listen to this and I would like him to look into it.

Information given to my colleague, Deputy Seán Sherlock, shows there were seven amber alerts on 28 October. In September, I asked the Taoiseach if he would guarantee he could keep the lights on. He could not answer that question. Two months later I ask him the same question. There are a number of issues he needs to be concerned about.

Under direction from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, in May, EirGrid put out a call for 200 MW of emergency power. That will cost €110 million. The plan was for these emergency gas operators to be in place for 22 weeks. The contract was awarded to ESB, but EirGrid messed up the tender. Another company, Tynagh Energy threatened to go to the High Court, claiming that the procurement process run by EirGrid was anti-competitive, so the plan was abandoned. This whole process was raised in the Dáil by the Taoiseach's Member, last week, Deputy Barry Cowen. I want to acknowledge that he raised the process. There are serious issues here. The Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, who responded to Deputy Cowen last week had not a clue, basically. We need to find out more information about how €10 million was paid by EirGrid to ESB as a down payment for these emergency generators. How did this happen? Was it sanctioned by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan? Where is the money now?

We also understand another tender is now being run for the same power. This is on top of the issues raised by Mick Clifford the *Irish Examiner* regarding Equinor calling out of offshore wind generation. It is on top of the fact that the marine area planning Bill that is so delayed; the fact that we cannot get solar farms onto the grid; we have not made progress on microgeneration; and new technologies, such as the Silvermines hydroelectric plant in my constituency, has not proceeded.

I want to ask the Taoiseach these questions. Will he now, two months later, guarantee that we will not have any outages of power over this winter? Can he confirm details about the €10 million paid to the ESB by EirGrid for a contract that was then pulled? When was it paid and has the money being refunded?

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

Deputy Alan Kelly: Finally, can the Taoiseach give some comfort to those renewable energy projects, such solar and offshore, that the regulatory system will be fit for purpose? To date, and over the last five years, it seems that has not been.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy opened his remarks quite properly about talking about the need

for regulatory frameworks and the importance of regulation. That is exactly where we are on energy security. There is a regulatory framework governing the provision of a secure supply of electricity.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It does not work.

The Taoiseach: This is by the CRU and EirGrid. Government no longer has legal powers to intervene directly and do what it likes with the energy markets.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Excuses.

The Taoiseach: The Commission for Regulation of Utilities and EirGrid have advised - as the Deputy knows because I have said this already in the Dáil - that there was a short to medium term risk to electricity security of supply, and that there was an increased likelihood of more frequent system alerts, system emergencies and potential for some electricity customers to lose power in winter of 2021 to 2022 if action was not taken. The Department and the Minister are working closely with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and EirGrid to take the necessary action to address the issue and to ensure continuous secure supplies of electricity in Ireland for the coming winter and the years ahead.

We know about the two gas stations that were out of commission. They have been brought back into commission. A group has now been established at assistant secretary level, again including the Commission of Regulation of Utilities and EirGrid, to continue to monitor the national response. It has been identified for additional temporary generation. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities and EirGrid are working on that basis to procure additional supply.

On the specific issue that the Deputy raised about the tender that went out, I will secure and provide any information that he requires. I would not jump to conclusions until-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am not jumping to conclusions.

The Taoiseach: Well, the Deputy said it was “messed up”.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It did not go ahead.

The Taoiseach: It did not go ahead. Again, let us wait for the full, transparent presentation of information to be made----- For example, a recent shift from the Thurles ambulance base started at 8 p.m. That night crew was dispatched from Thurles to Nenagh, then back to Cashel. The next call was to Ballingarry and they were then sent to Tullow, County Carlow, diverted to New Ross and from there to Gowran and Thomastown. They were then sent back to Carlow town. This involved seven and a half hours of non-stop driving and only one patient to be transferred to hospital. While all this frantic driving was happening, Thurles was left without a service.

This situation is being replicated every week as Tipperary ambulances are diverted to other regions. Last week, for example, the south-east region operated at 50% capacity due to long-term sick leave, exhaustion and lack of staff to fill rosters. Exhausted paramedics rush along the highways and byways of Ireland, their 12-hour shifts stretching to 15 hours and more. They have no food breaks or downtime. A recent study showed 50% of shifts run over their designated finish times. This is dangerous and unsustainable. Social media recently highlighted an ambulance crew who went off the road through fatigue at the end of their shift. Paramedics across Ireland feel ignored and frustrated. Many suffer from burnout and anxiety and morale

is at an all-time low. An independent review of the ambulance service is urgently required. It needs to be conducted from the bottom up and carried out without delay.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The concept of a national ambulance service has been developed for a number of years. I am told and have checked that dynamic deployment allows staff in the HSE's national emergency operations centre in Tallaght to see all available resources and prioritise allocation to the higher acuity calls that require an immediate emergency response. Judgment calls are made through a system as to which is the most severe incident and ambulances are then deployed.

That model represents international best practice. It has been highlighted by HIQA as a way to improve response time and national ambulance service performance generally. That said, we hear repeated concerns from Deputies and public representatives locally about situations that have emerged in their localities. It is always important to review how a system and service operates. In 2021, the service received an additional €10 million. For 2022, an additional €8.3 million on top of that is being allocated to modernise and build up the capacity of the service.

There is an acknowledgement in the service that lower acuity calls - in other words, calls deemed to be less serious - have longer waiting times but in the sad case the Deputy has articulated, it seems the woman did not meet those metrics on the face of it, but actually was in a much worse condition.

The service has provided huge backup and been involved in the Covid response. I thank them for that; they have performed heroically throughout the pandemic. Redeployment of approximately 45 paramedics from Covid-19-related work back to emergency ambulance duties is under way. A further 80 paramedics are due to graduate from the National Ambulance Service College this quarter and 200 student paramedics are at different stages of the programme.

There is a strong focus on getting the additional staff in place but the Deputy's point is about a wider review of the idea of the national service with national redeployment, as opposed to having people located in different stations around the country. The professionals and experts in the field of emergency care are of the view that the current service is better in terms of outcomes but the experiences the Deputy has outlined deserve to be put before the National Ambulance Service team and the HSE with a view to feeding into and getting a better service and better outcomes for people locally.

There is just one further point. The community first responders scheme is important as well, and that needs to be grown again. It was stepped down a bit due to Covid, but that also needs to be reactivated, strengthened and expanded.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I do not think the Taoiseach or anybody in the Government has the full facts regarding what is happening. For example, ambulances are criss-crossing the country. You do not have to be a genius to know that this is not efficient or cost-effective. I will give the Taoiseach another example. It has happened in recent weeks that an ambulance was sent from a base in Kenmare to Waterford. An ambulance that left Kenmare, arrived in Waterford and did a call in Clonmel on the way back. It left Clonmel for a three-and-a-half hour journey and arrived back at its base late at night. The crew on board had done a 15-hour shift. There is nothing logical about that. It is ridiculous and it needs to be addressed.

The Taoiseach must throw open the doors of the National Ambulance Service and scrutinise it. We can no longer turn a blind eye to what is happening. The current system is failing both

paramedics and patients. Together with an independent review of the service, we must also scrutinise the doctor-on-call system and look at the limited number of services provided at local injury units. The entire system is a total fiasco. Ambulances are waiting around with patients in them who cannot get access to hospitals and there are other patients waiting for those ambulances to arrive. A delay in ambulances means a delay in patient services, and that must be addressed.

The Taoiseach: I will relay this matter to the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. I will discuss it with him, the CEO of the HSE and the head of the National Ambulance Service. It would also be useful if the Joint Committee on Health received a presentation from the National Ambulance Service. I do not know if that has happened, but it would be very useful. It would be an opportunity for Deputies and Senators to present their perspectives and relay the experiences of constituents and people on the ground. There is a lot in what Deputy Lowry says, but we need to hear the overall perspective on what is the optimum model for the provision of emergency care and emergency medical practitioners. This is a key service in terms of those who provide it being first on the scene. A professional paramedic can be critical in terms of the outcomes for any person and must also make the right decisions on the spot.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist leis na hárais mháithreacha agus leanaí, agus go háirithe leis an scéim chúitimh atá beartaithe nach bhfuil tásca ná tuairisc uirthi in ainneoin na ngeallúntaí sollúnta ón Rialtas go mbeadh scéim chúitimh ann. Ceangailte leis sin ná an suíomh i dTuaim agus an gá práinneach le tochailt iomlán ansin, agus na hiarsmaí daonna a nochtadh, agus tar éis anailíse a dhéanamh, iad a chur arís le dínit.

My question relates to the promised redress scheme. There is a different name on it, but there is not a sign of it. I ask this question in the context of the finite group of people who are waiting patiently for the Government's action. Notwithstanding their courage and fortitude, former residents of mother and baby homes are becoming more anxious, worried and vulnerable with each passing day, not to mention angry. The Government has a duty to act expeditiously, particularly in view of the background to this matter and the delay to date.

On 19 January last, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, said that the redress scheme would be drawn up by the end of April. An explanation was then given for the delay to the effect that there were many submissions. Again in July, we were told that the interdepartmental group had effectively completed its work. There was still no sign of its report, however. Then we were told it would be in the early part of the new term. We are now in the middle of the new term, and there is not a sign of the report. Will the Taoiseach tell me when details of the redress scheme will be published and accessible to those who are waiting, Uimhir a haon, and; No. 2, what communication has the Taoiseach had with the religious orders regarding their participation in the amount of money needed to fund the scheme?

We have seen the report on television on Sunday night, to be broadcast tonight on RTÉ, in regard to Tuam, which is intimately connected with this question. More than four years ago, an expert team went in and looked at it in response to the commission of investigation, which had a press release saying there were substantial human remains there. The expert team went in and one member is quoted in the documentary as saying: "I have never walked away from human remains in that context." Their work was a scoping exercise to see what was there. They temporarily protected the site for six months and nothing has happened four years later.

We are sitting here today after a series of mistakes and delays. A report from the commission that was in the Government's offices from October last year was only published in January of this year and was never given to the former residents until afterwards, and so on. There is a whole list of other delays and obfuscations, not to mention the tapes and the press release saying they had been destroyed when, subsequently, it was found they had not been.

I am conscious I am over time, but given that background, it is extremely important that the Taoiseach gives us a date today so we can have confidence and hope.

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo a ardú ó thaobh máithreacha agus leanaí, na scéime cúitimh agus an tsuíomh i dTuaim. Tá gach iarracht á dhéanamh ag an Rialtas ó thaobh reachtaíochta de do Thuaim. Mar is eol di, foilsíodh é sin, bhí sé os comhair na Dála agus tiocfaidh sé ar ais os comhair an Tí sar i bhfad. Tá Bille eile ann a bhaineann le heolas, the birth information legislation, os comhair na Dála chomh maith agus foilsíodh é go luath sa bhliain.

In the context of the restorative recognition scheme, I can say to the Deputy that the inter-departmental group set up to develop detailed proposals for the scheme, taking into account the recommendations of the commission and going beyond that, has made recommendations. It was informed by consultation with survivors which took place during March and April, with a very strong response received to that consultation process. The Minister then considered that further and made proposals. The development of the scheme is a key priority for us. The Minister will be bringing a scheme to Cabinet shortly and there are consultations with the leaders of the parties now, and with the other Ministers, and I expect that this will be brought before Cabinet fairly quickly now, within the next number of weeks, if not sooner.

We are anxious to get the balance right and to devise and approve a scheme that would be responsive to the survivors of mother and baby homes and county homes. I accept the delay is one to be regretted but, nonetheless, since the decision was made by Government to develop such a scheme, the Minister has applied himself to this very diligently, has worked with the groups concerned and has interacted with Government Departments and with external bodies as well from a human rights perspective. We do understand the importance of this and it will come to Government very shortly.

In regard to Tuam, as the Deputy knows, the Minister and I would view it as imperative to afford the children buried at Tuam the dignity in death that has so long been denied them. He did prioritise the drafting of the proposed Bill. It is a very complex piece of legislation. That said, it went for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, in January 2021. Numerous submissions were made to the joint Oireachtas committee and a number of people gave powerful and moving testimony. The committee published its report on the legislation in July. The Minister is now carefully considering the recommendations from that process. His intention, following that consultation, is to publish the Bill by the end of the current parliamentary session and bring it through the legislative process as quickly as possible. He is going to do that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Third, I just want to make the point on the proposed legislation on birth information and tracing. Again, that legislation was published. It is quite radical. It is a major evolution in the legal situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Minister has written to the committee as the Bill is still in pre-legislative scrutiny before the committee. We need that expedited and all three aspects would be welcome if we could get them over the line.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: While I welcome that the Taoiseach talked about it being in the next few weeks, I have heard that since January so I ask him to forgive my reluctance to believe that. On the scheme, we have had ample time to learn from previous schemes. In the redress institutional scheme we created an offence such that if somebody disclosed what they got, they committed a criminal offence. Then we set up the Magdalen scheme and the Ombudsman told us there was maladministration. Then we set up Caranua, which was an insult to the Irish language because we talked about a new friend when it was the old enemy in disguise. We go on perpetuating the abuse, delay and obfuscation. I want an exact date for when the redress scheme will be published. I want the Taoiseach to answer me about Tuam and the archaeologists. The specialist forensic archaeologists protected the site for just six months and four years later, that site is not protected. We know from the sterling work of Catherine Corless that there are 796 death certificates but we do not know if that number of children and babies are buried there. We do not just need to excavate the site to rebury them, which is extremely important; we also need to excavate to examine. It is time we grew up in this country and analysed and examined what happened so that we can look and learn from it.

The Taoiseach: The legislation was published and it went through pre-legislative scrutiny. It is intended to complement the Coroners Act 1962, in that it does not seek to undermine the authority of the coroner and prevent or prejudice any coronial investigation into what happened at Tuam. The Minister has acted assertively and proactively on the Tuam site with legislation. To be fair, what is envisaged is somewhat unprecedented but he is going ahead and doing it. Likewise, in respect of the birth information and tracing legislation, this is the first Government to produce such radical legislation in terms of access to information without hindrance and that no one can prevent. No one person can prevent access to any information sought and that would mean an awful lot to an awful lot of people out there. It has been in pre-legislative scrutiny in the Oireachtas for a fairly lengthy period and the Oireachtas joint committee is meeting people and so on. That is important legislation.

On the Government's intervention by way of the restorative recognition scheme, that will be before Cabinet within a matter of weeks. We were not hearing that all year because we could not. That was because the interdepartmental group had to deliberate on it for quite some time, which it has done and the scheme has come to Government. There are serious issues that have to be addressed by the Government in respect of the scheme. We will do so and the scheme will be back in the House.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: It has been agreed that the rapporteur's report will be taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for business this week agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed. There is real concern about the manner in which the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, appointed two close colleagues to the Climate Change Advisory Council. There has clearly

been no formal public appointments practice involved with those two appointments. We have been through the Katherine Zappone affair and the Oireachtas was scandalised by all of that for months.

An Ceann Comhairle: What does that have to do with the Order of Business?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We need the Taoiseach to tell us when the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will come before this Dáil and make a statement outlining the process that led to those two appointments. We need to know if he will come in at the earliest opportunity and if the Taoiseach will ask him to come in.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that the Deputy and the party opposite did not raise this issue at the Business Committee.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It only came to public attention over the weekend in newspaper reports.

The Taoiseach: I am enthused by the Deputy's concern on close colleagues being appointed to positions of authority. He might look within his own party, where many close colleagues were appointed to many positions on a whole lot of bodies in Northern Ireland. I would say that it is wrong to impugn the two individuals concerned. They are people of considerable expertise in the field.

Deputy Michael McNamara: They just happen to be cronies, is it?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How were they appointed?

The Taoiseach: They are involved in the field. The Government made the appointment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the business for the week agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposal for dealing with this week's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 20; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	

<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Please note that in relation to the above division, Deputy Mick Barry inadvertently voted in the seat of Deputy Gino Kenny, thereby recording a vote against the name of that Deputy, instead of recording a vote against his own name.

Question declared carried.

Please note that in relation to the above division, Deputy Mick Barry inadvertently voted in the seat of Deputy Gino Kenny, thereby recording a vote against the name of that Deputy, instead of recording a vote against his own name.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Dublin's MetroLink is now postponed for another decade. This is a huge blow to the people of this city which, as the Taoiseach knows, is gridlocked with traffic. The postponement makes a mockery of the carbon reduction commitments given by the Taoiseach at COP26. This was big talk for the international audience while back at home key public transport schemes get kicked down the road. The truth is the Government cannot deliver infrastructure projects on time and on budget. It certainly has plenty of form in this regard; I could cite the national children's hospital, broadband and many other projects. Why has this happened? After waiting almost 20 years, why will Dubliners have to wait another decade for the metro to be delivered?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is not correct. MetroLink has not been postponed for another decade. In fact, the national development plan, - it is €165 billion and 2:1 in favour of public transport - illustrates our commitment to public transport under three key priority areas. These are BusConnects in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, in addition to light rail in those cities, DART+ in Dublin and MetroLink. The focus right now is on getting all three projects to Government for approval under the public spending code and, at a project level, getting their planning application documentation ready for submission to An Bord Pleanála in

early 2022.

These projects are coming before the Government very quickly so I do not know where the Deputy got the notion that MetroLink is postponed for ten years. She should not have said that. The projects will require the co-operation of everybody in this House, and on the local authorities, to ensure we get these projects through. There will be planning processes and public consultations and the Deputy will want those to be adhered to.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Unions representing the community and voluntary sector have lodged a 3% pay claim and are seeking improved terms. As I am sure the Taoiseach appreciates, these workers are the glue that holds our community together. Section 39 organisations, and home help and home care workers, represented by SIPTU, Fórsa, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, have all launched a campaign, Value Care and Recognize Work, looking for a fair future for them. Their work is very precarious. Many of them are usually on fixed term contracts and we all rely on them for the vital services they provide. They have not had a pay increase since 2009 but there is no collective bargaining mechanism, as the Taoiseach knows, to help these incredibly important workers to resolve the problems they are facing. They have written to the Taoiseach seeking a meeting. Will he commit to meeting them to discuss this? Of all the groups of workers they deserve a hearing from him.

The Taoiseach: A considerable process has been underway regarding this issue long before this Government was formed. In 2018, the former Minister for Health requested that the HSE engage with Section 39 organisations to establish the facts on what cuts were applied during the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, period. The HSE conducted a data-gathering exercise on an agreed list of 50 pilot organisations. I will not go through it all, but an agreement was reached by the parties in October 2018 on a process of pay restoration for staff employed by the 50 pilot agencies. Pay restoration commenced in April 2019 with an annual pay increase of up to €1,000 and an outstanding balance was paid in 2020 and 2021. A further Workplace Relations Commission engagement followed in December 2020 relating to a final phase involving 250 organisations identified as part of the earlier agreement. A payment arrangement consisting of three phases was agreed, with the first two payments to be made in 2021 and the third and final payment due to be made in 2023. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is due to meet a delegation from ICTU by the end of November to discuss these issues.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will you meet them?

Deputy Gary Gannon: One in six people testing positive for Covid-19 over the last month have been children of primary school age. I have raised this issue with the Taoiseach several times during this session. We need infinitely stronger mitigation measures in our schools. Over the weekend the Taoiseach started to talk about antigen testing, as did the Minister for Health. The Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, started talking about it in October. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, stated that antigen testing may be needed in our schools in the summer. That report was released in July. We need antigen testing and we need air filtration devices in our schools. We need them now. We do not need them coming up to Christmas or after Christmas. While we are dithering, Covid-19 is surging through our school population. We need these measures. Can we enforce stronger mitigation measures now? We need antigen testing and air filtration devices so when the CO2 monitors beep we can clean the air as opposed to opening the windows and having our children freeze. We need to clean the air.

The Taoiseach: The process involved in reopening our schools in the context of Covid has been informed from the very beginning by public health advice, and overall that has worked in respect of schools. I visited a paediatric ward in Clonmel, Tipperary last week. What I am hearing from public health and hospitals is that the bigger challenge they are facing in hospitals is RSV and other non-Covid respiratory illnesses among children. That is the biggest issue they are facing. Their very strong advice is that where there are symptoms, or if one has symptomatic children, they should not be sent to school. In respect of Covid-19 and antigen testing, the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, has said that in light of recent ECDC advice, they are looking at certain circumstances-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They are looking at it.

The Taoiseach: -----that would apply in terms of where would be optimal to apply antigen testing. He was strongly of the view-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. I call Deputy Barry.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last week at COP26, a deal was signed by 20 nations, as well as some financial institutions, halting finance for new overseas fossil fuel development projects and pledging to divert all such moneys towards green energy. Ireland was not one of the signatories to this deal. Why not? Given the way Irish banks were used in the cum-ex and cum-cum scandals, is the Taoiseach concerned that finance might now be channelled through the Irish Financial Services Centre for fossil fuel development projects overseas? Were the Taoiseach or his Government lobbied by any financial institutions with footprints in this country before the decision was taken not to sign this agreement?

The Taoiseach: I certainly was not lobbied and the Government was not lobbied. The climate action plan sets out the need to deliver circa 2 GW of new flexible gas-fired power stations by 2030. These power stations will be needed to provide security of electricity supply and support an electricity system with a high level of variable renewables, such as solar and wind. The delivery of the majority of this gas-fired generation is expected to be via the capacity remuneration mechanism, which is part of the all-island single electricity market. This is an international market spanning both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The regulators and system operators are actively seeking to incentivise the development of gas-fired power stations in the all-island market over the coming years, in line with Government policy. The agreement the Deputy referenced proposed ending new direct public supports for international projects, which would include gas-fired power stations. Given the nature of the all-island single electricity market and the need to develop gas-fired power stations to ensure security of electricity supply, it would not have been appropriate for Ireland to be a party to the agreement. We just heard Deputy Kelly's questions earlier on security of electricity. We have to be balanced in our approach to all these issues because otherwise the Deputy would be in here giving out about electricity supply.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some 10,000 people marched in the streets of Navan to tell the Government not to close the accident and emergency department in Navan hospital. It is the most important piece of infrastructure in the county and closure of that department and the ICU during the Covid crisis, while there are 1 million people on hospital waiting lists and 11-hour waiting times in other accident and emergency departments in surrounding hospitals, would be an enormously dangerous act. I have spoken to senior clinicians in the region and they agree it would be an enormously dangerous act. I understand the RCSI Hospital Group, which manages

some of the surrounding hospitals, has been excluded from the decision making on our accident and emergency department. We have requested a meeting with the Minister for Health, Mr. Paul Reid and the Ireland East Hospital Group. None of them has come back to us to say they will meet and engage and we are now forced to picket the offices of the Ireland East Hospital Group next Tuesday in support of the hospital. Will the Taoiseach direct the HSE, the Minister and the Ireland East Hospital Group to meet us and stop the process of closing down the most important health facility we have in our county?

The Taoiseach: I am assured the HSE is clear that the transition of Navan hospital to a model two hospital is, first, driven by patient safety considerations but, above all, it is designed to improve the hospital's ability to meet the needs of its population and also the future vision for Navan hospital involves more, not fewer, services

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Like Roscommon, Nenagh and Ennis and all the other accident and emergency departments that were closed around the country.

The Taoiseach: I suggest the Deputy visits Roscommon hospital. The feedback I have got from it in recent years is that the range of services is far better there now than was the case.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Deal with the issue.

The Taoiseach: That is very important. I said the Deputy should visit Roscommon. I know about the accident and emergency department. I have no issue with the Deputy asking for the HSE CEO to meet-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The HSE and the Ireland East Hospital Group.

The Taoiseach: -----the Deputies in the area. I would appeal to the Deputy in this regard. I have been through 20 years of campaigns, which are not always about health outcomes, and other matters-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: When I ask for the meeting we should engage with-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach talk to the RCSI Hospital Group also as it has a different view?

The Taoiseach: I will, yes.

Deputy Michael Collins: On Saturday, 23 October last, at the Michael Collins Centre on the Timoleague Road, Clonakilty, owned by Tim and Dolores Crowley, all Oireachtas Members from across the political divide met the Michael Collins 100 committee. The purpose of this requested meeting by the national non-political committee was to help with its urgent search for a site for a Michael Collins statue in our capital, Dublin. Next year marks the 100th anniversary of the death of one of the greatest politicians this country has even known. It is astonishing, in its own right, that no stand-alone statue has ever been erected in his memory in our capital, Dublin, for the public. This committee will commission, fundraise and gift the statue in the memory of Michael Collins with his bike similar to the likeness of a sculpture that was erected in Clonakilty 20 years ago. All it wants is for the State to find a suitable site, measuring 2 m by 1 m, for this fabulous proposed monument. I heard the Taoiseach was in Woodfield yesterday. This proposal must have been raised with him there. Will he help honour the 100th anniversary

of the death of General Michael Collins and work with this group and find a suitable site in Dublin for the first statue of its type here?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. We have a very pleasant day yesterday in Woodfield, which is just outside Clonakilty, to receive of invaluable diaries Michael Collins kept for five years right up to the treaty and during the treaty negotiations, which were being presented by the Collins family to the National Archives. I thank the Collins family for presenting such invaluable and primary source material in order that future historians and the general public can access those documents once they are digitised by the National Archives and so forth. In the course of that informal ceremony, the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, raised the very issue the Deputy has raised in the House and was told by the mayor of the council, Gillian Coughlan, that the council was engaging with Dublin City Council with a view to securing a site for such a suitable memorial to Michael Collins. The Minister of State, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, was there also and he indicated he is examining that and other issues pertaining to that period.

Deputy Michael McNamara: When the national broadband plan was agreed by the previous Government it was to have connected 115,000 homes by next January but that was revised downwards to 60,000 homes. However, we know only 2,700 homes have been connected. We both know this is very important. If I ask the Taoiseach about the delays he will say they are due to Covid. My specific question is how much Exchequer funding has been spent on the broadband plan since he became Taoiseach?

The Taoiseach: I do not have that specific amount but I will seek that figure for the Deputy. I would be concerned about that. The national broadband plan is a contract that was developed some years ago and it is being delivered by National Broadband Ireland. Obviously, Covid impacted its initial work. There is no point in pretending it did not; it did. It has made steady progress on the delivery of the new high-speed fibre broadband network under the broadband plan. It states that more than 30,000 premises are available for order-pre-order across 12 counties, including Cavan, Cork, Galway, Limerick, Monaghan, Roscommon, Wicklow, Tipperary, Kerry, Clare, Carlow and Louth. As of 29 October, National Broadband Ireland has advised that almost 273,000 premises have been surveyed and build works involving more than 125,000 premises are ongoing across the country in 30 deployment areas covering townlands in 23 counties.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Will I have the figure by next week?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Deputy McNamara anticipated what I was going to say and I may be able to be of some assistance to him. Many of my constituents, both businesses and people working from home, in the periphery of Limerick city, in places like Castletroy, Castleconnell, Drombanna and Ballyneety, have been seriously discommoded by the lack of a fast broadband service. I did some research on it and have been informed that National Broadband Ireland, the company commissioned to do this work, has been operating for almost two years. It has received €133 million in Exchequer funds and so far it has only directly connected 2,700 houses to high-speed broadband. The commitment it gave was that at the end of next January, it would have 115,000 houses passed for that purpose. That was reduced to 60,000 because of Covid. According to the information available to me, the number at present is approximately 17,000. My question to the Taoiseach is: what does the Government propose to do to expedite this process? At this rate of progress it will 100 years before broadband is extended to the rest of the country.

The Taoiseach: Approximately €225 million was allocated in budget 2022 for the roll-out of the national broadband plan. That is a massive investment in the regions and will address connectivity issues faced by rural Ireland. Some 260 direct employees and 815 indirect employees are working with build-design contractors on foot of that investment. Broadband connection points are a key element of the national broadband plan providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre to the home network. As of 29 October, 388 broadband connection points in total have been installed by the National Broadband Ireland and 227 of the publicly available sites are now connected with high-speed broadband services through a service provider contractor with Vodafone. As part of this, broadband connection points are also being provided to primary schools. To date, 141 schools have been installed, out of a total of 388 broadband connection point sites installed, with high-speed broadband for educational access.

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

The Taoiseach: I just want to say the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to the Deputies with more detail on that.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Threshold is running a campaign for a statutory deposit protection scheme. Such schemes protect renters and have been shown in other countries to work quite well in protecting renters and their deposits. Such schemes are also promised under the programme for Government. The obvious home for such a scheme would be the Residential Tenancies Board. However, anyone who has dealt with it will have experienced delays and frustration in doing so. I am sure it would claim it does not have the resources to deliver this. When will we see the legislation for a deposit protection scheme, as promised under the programme for Government? Will we be resourcing the Residential Tenancies Board to properly protect tenants?

The Taoiseach: The Minister has already introduced legislation to protect tenants on a range of fronts not least students in terms of upfront deposits covering rent and he has put limitations on that. I will revert to the Deputy on the timelines of any further protections that are on the way.

Deputy Mark Ward: The programme for Government seeks to reduce the waiting time for children accessing assessments of need. The feedback I have got from people in Clondalkin and Lucan is that children are getting partial assessments of need under the standard operation procedure but they are not getting the treatments they need such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and child psychology. Children are being moved from one list to another without reaching their developmental milestones.

I received a reply to a parliamentary question in respect of a child, Jake, whose original application for an assessment of need was made in January and he got an standard operation procedure, SOP, assessment in June. The completion of Jake's final assessment of need paperwork has been assigned to a private provider. Who is that private provider? How long is it place? What is the purpose of that private provider? This process has been under way from January to November and whatever is going on it is not working.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I will take that

question.

Deputy Mark Ward: I had a feeling the Minister of State would do so.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is right that we have 554 outstanding assessments of needs that need completion at this time. He is also right that some of them were outsourced because we did not have the skill set. That was done with part of the allocation of €7.8 million in Sláintecare funding.

In regard to Jake's care, if the Deputy wants to take the matter up with me afterwards, I have no problem speaking to him.

Deputy John Lahart: Yesterday, the Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force published a document, The landscape of substance misuse and its impact on the communities of Tallaght Drugs & Alcohol Task Force. I have a hard copy for the Taoiseach to peruse in his own time. I know he will agree when he has read it that it is a worrying and deeply concerning account and assessment.

The previous Government invested huge resources in Dublin's north inner city area. A senior public figure was appointed to investigate, report and make recommendations on what is needed in that part of Dublin. Significant policy resources were invested, key statutory bodies gave their support, agencies were established especially and exclusively to deal with the issues, and key personnel were appointed and seconded to assist in the work required. All of this was driven by the Office of the Taoiseach.

In Tallaght, we look on with envy. Does the Taoiseach agree that a similar approach is needed for parts of Tallaght?

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

Deputy John Lahart: How might the Government propose to replicate that process?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important and serious issue. The report to which he referred highlights this serious issue, which has also been well profiled in media assessments of the report. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, will shortly be announcing funding of €1 million to increase access to, and the provision of, community-based drug and alcohol services. That will support the work of drug and alcohol task forces, with a proportion of it to be allocated to community healthcare organisation, CHO 7, which includes Tallaght and south-west Dublin. In budget 2022, the Minister provided an additional €6 million for new measures to support the implementation of the national drugs strategy and strengthen the health-led approach to drug and alcohol use, as set out in the programme for Government.

The Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force receives annual Government funding of €1.2 million. Officials in my Department are working with the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, with a view to looking at an area-based approach again to the issue of drug misuse in areas of disadvantage.

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

The Taoiseach: We need a more co-ordinated approach, not just doing it one area by one area.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: At the weekend, Councillor Bobby O'Connell and I met with Michael J. Kearney of the Castleisland Chamber Alliance to view the now closed Bank of Ireland building on the main street in the town. This branch was one of 88 Bank of Ireland branches that were closed recently. I also met in recent weeks with Shane McElroy of the Killorglin Chamber Alliance, that town having also lost its Bank of Ireland branch on Market Street. It is a huge blow to both towns. Both branches served huge hinterlands beyond Castleisland and Killorglin in the mid-Kerry area. Both chambers now have ambitious plans for those buildings. Will the Government engage with Bank of Ireland to ensure a co-operative and community-focused approach by the bank, working with community organisations that have plans to re-use the buildings as community hubs, office spaces, visitor information centres or exhibition spaces?

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

Deputy Brendan Griffin: It is the least the bank could do for these communities given what the State has done-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: -----and also what these communities did commercially for the bank over the years.

The Taoiseach: These are often key buildings in key locations within town centres. Through the various mechanisms we have at our disposal, whether rural funding or town centres first policy funding, we certainly are interested in working in partnership with any organisations to facilitate the provision of such buildings for the benefit of communities, including, for example, in the form of hub activity that could create new microbusiness start-ups in those towns. We are very open to doing that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The ability of schools to function well is a priority for us all. However, pretending there are no problems helps no one. Three weeks ago, I asked the Government to introduce a revised form of contact tracing. That is still not in place. We also have an extremely serious substitution crisis, which is debilitating schools. One principal gave an example of 11 rejections from the substitute seeker programme in nine days. Principals are cancelling board of management meetings and continuous professional development training. All the local solutions that are being talked about have been exhausted by principals. There are other options. Banked hours can be reinstated, lengthy block booking of substitutes can be discouraged and panels can be extended to the whole country. Does the Taoiseach accept there is a crisis in substitution in schools - that is my primary question - and what actions will the Government take to resolve it?

The Taoiseach: First, in regard to Covid-19 and schools, we have followed public health advice from the very beginning. I do not know whether the Deputy and other Deputies are suggesting we should suspend that approach. Deputies and public representatives seem to be assuming upon themselves the role of public health advisers in regard to schools.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Come on now, Taoiseach, in all fairness.

The Taoiseach: Hold on a second, Deputy. I am not finished yet.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This is important.

The Taoiseach: It is very important.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We have given the Government a lot of space and worked with it on schools. Be serious now, Taoiseach, and answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please resume your seat.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Show some respect for the support you have got from all parties on schools. That support is a fact.

The Taoiseach: What support? The Deputy's party has been the most divisive party in regard to Covid-19 for the past 12 months.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: You have been opportunistic.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Talk to the Minister, Deputy Foley.

The Taoiseach: I am not talking about the Deputy personally; I am talking about his party. You have been opportunistic, divisive and you have played it on both sides all along.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On education and schools, the cross-party support has been enormous.

The Taoiseach: You have not even allowed me to finish replying to you.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: You are answering a question you picked yourself. It was not the question I asked. I asked about substitution.

The Taoiseach: You mentioned two things, Covid and substitution, and I was going to deal with both of them, if you had the good manners to wait and get the reply.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are not one to be citing manners.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is this: on Covid-19, I will say once again that we have adhered to public health advice. If you want us to jettison public health advice, have the guts to say it and stop trying to hide behind blaming the Government.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: On the second issue, of course there is a challenge in regard to substitution. The Minister has put in place a range of measures and significant and substantive resources have been made available to schools and principals in respect of substitution. The Minister is open to doing everything possible to alleviate the pressures on principals in respect of substitution.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The next speaker is Deputy Harkin.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Is that the message to Deputies when they work with the Government? Is that the thanks they get?

The Taoiseach: Cut out the blackguarding now, you.

Deputy Marian Harkin: May I have a little bit of time to ask my question?

The Taoiseach: Yes. Deputy Ó Laoghaire should think of other people.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I want to raise the totally unacceptable backlog in local improvement scheme, LIS, applications in County Leitrim. I am not referring to applications that are one, two, three, four or even five years old. I am referring to applications from as far back as 2008 and 2009. As the Taoiseach knows, the scheme was suspended from 2012 to 2017. In County Leitrim, people are still dealing with applications submitted before 2012. There is no funding for new applications and it is a huge issue. Approximately €3 million would clear the backlog. Will the Taoiseach raise this issue with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan?

The Taoiseach: I am not sure which Minister this is a matter for, whether Deputy Eamon Ryan, Deputy Darragh O'Brien or Deputy Humphreys. If the Deputy can specify the applications she is referring to, we certainly want to be as responsive as we possibly can in respect of local improvement schemes in rural areas. Substantial capital funding has been allocated for a whole range of rural renewal projects. I would be interested in seeing the details of the applications to which the Deputy referred.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are running out of time. I will take a 30-second question each from the three Deputies remaining, beginning with Deputy Bríd Smith.

Deputy Bríd Smith: On 1 January 2022, the legislation governing the termination of pregnancies will be three years old and the Minister will be obliged to conduct a review of its operation. There are approximately seven weeks left to the end of the year, yet I have been told in the reply to a parliamentary question, as I read it, that the lead person who will conduct the review has not yet been appointed. There are three sections that must be focused on, namely, service users, service providers and a public consultation. How is all of that going to be done in the next seven weeks, given that one of those weeks is Christmas week?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: This is not good enough.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: We need that review because there are violations of human rights embedded in the legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Niamh Smyth.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The National Transport Authority, NTA, recently launched its plan and strategy for public transport. As a Border Deputy, I am heartened to see the rail line to Navan has been included. My focus is on the Border area and I will continue to be relentless in calling for a feasibility study on continuing the disused line from Navan to Kingscourt. I am delighted that the Government has committed to doing exactly that in the national development plan, NDP. The reason I ask is the obvious potential to improve connectivity and unlock a wealth of economic prosperity for the Border region in a meaningful and real way for public transport. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure money is allocated for the feasibility study.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are beyond time for a citizens assembly on planning for Irish unity. The British Government does not have a strategy on Brexit or the Irish protocol

other than maintaining absolute disorder. All we can hope for is that Dominic Cummings is correct and Boris Johnson changes his mind. This is not good enough. The conversation has started and even representatives in the Taoiseach's party are completely engaged on it. The British Government has to be told we cannot have any sort of renegotiation of the Irish protocol that allows for a hardening of the Irish Border. We need to deal with the reality that the only way we will deal with the British presence in Ireland is by introducing Irish unity. Is é sin é.

The Taoiseach: To respond to Deputy Bríd Smith, I will engage with the Minister for Health. He announced a review of the Act and legislation.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Nothing happened.

The Taoiseach: I will follow through on the points the Deputy has raised with me.

Deputy Niamh Smyth raised a fair point with regard to Kingscourt. I can confirm the rail line is on for Navan. It is time to get it built and developed. If we can get the line to Navan-----

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We have to plan ahead.

The Taoiseach: If we can get it to Navan, Deputy Smyth wants us to plan ahead and get it to Kingscourt and I fully understand that judging by the very warm reception I got last Friday in Cavan. The people there were very enthusiastic and I believe they would welcome with open arms the extension of the rail line. Deputy Smyth's enthusiasm for that is not in question.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised the issue of a citizens' assembly. We have about four citizens' assemblies to get to. A citizen's assembly is not the appropriate mechanisms for Irish unity, the subject the Deputy raised. We have to persuade people in Northern Ireland and engage with them.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I live with a plan.

The Taoiseach: We need to engage with people and work with them. We have been steadfast in our position on the protocol. We have to stress that no decision has been made on it. The negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom need to continue. I will be engaging with all the political parties on this over the coming period.

Special Meeting on Ireland and Northern Ireland Protocol: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders –

(1) the Joint Committee on European Affairs, the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the UK from the EU may hold a joint meeting to consider the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community;

(2) the quorum of the joint meeting shall be 10;

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(3) the Cathaoirligh of the three Committees shall agree the arrangements for the chairing and conduct of the joint meeting;

(4) Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, not being members of the aforementioned Committees, may attend and take part in proceedings of the joint meeting without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments;

(5) Members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland and Members of the Westminster Parliament elected from constituencies in Northern Ireland may attend the Joint meeting and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments; and

(6) for the purposes of the joint meeting, the orders of reference of the Committees shall otherwise apply only insofar as they are common to all three committees.

Question put and agreed to.

Establishment of Special Committee on Gender Equality: Motion

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I move:

That, in accordance with the recommendation of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform pursuant to Standing Order 118A(2)(b), a Special Committee on Gender Equality is hereby established, with Orders of Reference as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled 'Special Committee on Gender Equality: Orders of Reference', a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 8th November, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Social Protection, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Justice

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Citizens' Assembly

1. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide a report on the citizens' assemblies pledged in the programme for Government. [52334/21]

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline for the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [52452/21]

3. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach the plans for the establishment of the citizens' assemblies promised in the programme for Government. [52351/21]

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline for the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [53054/21]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [53183/21]

6. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress towards implementing the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [53389/21]

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline for the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [54392/21]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline for the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [54395/21]

9. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [54650/21]

10. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline for the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [54774/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 10, inclusive, together.

Under the programme for Government, the Government aims to establish citizens' assemblies to consider the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin; biodiversity; matters relating to drugs use; and the future of education. Consideration is being given to the appropriate methodology for future citizens' assemblies, but any decisions in this regard will be guided by the experience of the gender equality citizens' assembly which completed earlier this year.

An independent researcher was appointed by the assembly to monitor and record, among other things, the perceived deliberative quality of the assembly. This report, published in July 2021, will assist in decisions on future assemblies' use of virtual meetings. Officials from my Department are engaging with officials from relevant Departments on the approach to be taken with regard to these assemblies. It is envisaged that they will be established after the Dublin mayor citizens' assembly has completed its work, but the specific timing of each assembly has

yet to be confirmed. I am open to suggestions on prioritising the sequencing of these four assemblies. However, I believe the citizens' assembly on biodiversity is very important, as is the one on drugs. Deputies have asked me specifically about those two at different times in the Dáil.

By their nature, citizens' assemblies require large gatherings to be truly effective. There has, therefore, been an unavoidable delay in the establishment of the next citizens' assembly due to the public health situation.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: If the Taoiseach is looking for suggestions on which citizens' assembly to prioritise, I will obviously plump for the one on education. The sector faces a number of issues, as the Taoiseach knows. Leaving certificate reform springs to mind and the joint committee on education is in the middle of discussions on that. The reform of July or summer provision also needs to be seriously addressed given that only 20% of eligible students had access to the programme in the past year. I welcome progress made on the school meals programme. Not every child has access to two or three meals per day and a school setting provides an opportunity in that regard.

I have to mention school transport. We speak about this issue in the House every summer and it is one that we dread as September approaches. It is another aspect of education we need to address. Autism spectrum disorder, ASD, designation for schools is a nettle that we need to firmly grasp by removing from principals and boards of management the discretion to determine whether a school has an ASD class. The Department needs to step in and allocate ASD provision in schools on the basis of demand. It should not be at a board's discretion.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The programme for Government commits to convening a citizens' assembly to consider matters relating to drug use. The report published yesterday by the Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force demonstrates the urgency of this commitment and starkly highlights the devastation addiction causes for family and communities. Demand for task force services in Tallaght has doubled over the past decade and this reality is replicated throughout this State. Despite this, task force funding remains at pre-2008 levels. The autonomy of task forces has also been radically reduced since the HSE took over funding them in 2015. This policy decision has stymied the ability of local task forces to respond effectively to localised challenges. The HSE does not understand the mission of the task force network. Accessing funding, which is limited, continues to be too difficult and slow and does not recognise local need. I am especially concerned for the North Inner City Drugs and Alcohol Task Force, as the Department of Health, with the assistance of the HSE, is actively pushing out community and voluntary members. I would like an engagement with the Taoiseach on this matter.

I am deeply disappointed and alarmed by the Taoiseach's continuing opposition to a citizens' assembly on Irish unity. A live and growing conversation is under way about reunification and there is an absolute need to start planning for constitutional change. It is my strong view that the onus is on government to prepare for a referendum and the prospect of reunification. I hope the Taoiseach will, eventually, in the time left to him as Taoiseach, choose to step up to this challenge and responsibility on this front.

Deputy Mick Barry: A woman in her 50s was attacked on Sunday evening in Fermoy while out walking her dog. A man in his 20s or 30s approached her and struck her to the ground without warning and sexually assaulted her. He fled when two witnesses answered her cries. The Garda says it would have been far more serious had gardaí not arrived. The woman was

taken to hospital. This is just one of the latest examples of Ireland's epidemic of gender-based violence. The latest evidence from Trinity College and Maynooth University shows 49% of women and 19% of men have experienced sexual assault or harassment. The Citizens' Assembly on gender equality is demanding action on these issues. It wants gender-based violence to be covered in schools, guidelines to be produced on specialist training for judges and lawyers and the appointment of a victims and survivors commissioner as an independent voice and advocate. I support these measures and others which go beyond them. I ask the Taoiseach whether he will support these recommendations and whether, on foot of them, he will now stop the blocking of the sex education Bill put forward by Solidarity in the previous Dáil.

Deputy Alan Kelly: When will the citizens' assembly on drug use be established? There has been call for action on the tsunami of crack cocaine addiction in south-west Dublin. The issue has been all over the airwaves and it will become bigger and bigger in the years ahead. It is not isolated to Dublin. Ailbhe Conneely has covered the issue in depth for RTÉ, as the Taoiseach is probably aware, over the last two days. The Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force found that one third of those seeking help for addiction are women. The task force is only meeting 25% of demand. There is a tsunami of cases and issues here. When will a citizens' assembly on drug use be established?

I think this is the sixth time I have raised this issue in this House. The Citizens' Assembly on gender equality has published its recommendations, one of which focuses on the definition of the family. I have raised a case in the House involving a gentleman who lost his partner. The couple made a number attempts to get married but she was very sick and subsequently passed away from Covid-19. We need a referendum to amend Article 41 of the Constitution. The way in which families come together has changed and family units are different in modern Ireland. When will the citizens' assembly that deals with this specific area conclude? When will we be able to put forward a referendum to change this article? This is necessary. There are over 150,000 cohabiting couples - the figure is 158,000, to be precise - affected by this. These couples pay tax on everything together, but when it comes to the State looking after them in their hour of need, they are discriminated against. The Citizens' Assembly has taken a view on this, which is good. However, we need to see action on a referendum on Article 41 and changing the position in the laws we bring in here. We should start with the social welfare Bill in the next couple of weeks.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The programme for Government includes a commitment to convene a citizens' assembly on drug use. I am sure the Taoiseach saw some of the harrowing coverage yesterday of what has been described as an epidemic of crack cocaine use in Tallaght. People's lives and communities are being destroyed, yet the total figure allocated to address crack cocaine use in budget 2022 across the entire State was €500,000. Funding for the Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force remains €100,000 a year lower than it was ten years ago. That funding still has not recovered from the cuts of more than 20% in mainstream and interim funding between 2009 and 2013. The people involved in the drugs projects are doing incredible work in extremely difficult circumstances but they are being let down by the State. They do not need words of sympathy or claps on the back. They need actual supports and resourcing. At a minimum, what is needed for the Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force is an additional €1 million in funding. Will the Taoiseach agree to commit to that funding and to properly funding the task forces around the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for the points they have raised in the context of this question. Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, who tabled one of the questions, called for a citizens'

assembly on education. That would be useful. Other mechanisms have been used in the past, such as the National Education Convention where all the various partners in education convened for a general discussion in seeking out information on educational policy more generally.

Measures were taken in the budget to expand the schools meals programme. I accept that scheme can go further. There is a review under way on school transport. My view, in the context of the Government decision to halve the cost of public transport for younger people, is that in addition to all the other metrics that are used, we should look at school transport now through the prism of climate change. I have made this point to the Minister for Education, Deputy Norma Foley, as well as the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath. School transport is a complex scheme that has evolved over the years. It seems to me that having more kids on buses and fewer parents driving cars to schools, where that is feasible and possible, is part of the climate change agenda. I have asked that this be fed into the review of school transport that is under way in the Department of Education.

All schools should provide for children with special needs, as should all organisations, including those in the voluntary sector. Many schools are not State owned. As regards special schools and so on, the idea that schools will not accept a class or additional pupils has grown and that has to stop. The State will provide additional places and funding for them. Given that we have had mainstream special education over the last 25 years, it is important, particularly at post-primary level, that everybody is on board with inclusivity, as well as with facilitating access to schools for children with special needs. That needs to happen. The Government is working towards achieving that.

There are other issues with the examination review. There have been number of reviews of the leaving certificate. The leaving certificate of today is much different from what it was 25 years ago. There has been incremental change. The big challenge has always been to balance the anonymity of the process, whereby it is not who you are or who you are connected to but, rather, results that matter. That is a good thing. On the other hand, the leaving certificate facilitates rote learning to an excess. There needs to be reforms around the leaving certificate assessment model. The national qualifications framework, NFQ, provides opportunities for all students, irrespective of points and so on, to access their course or programme via different routes. That should ultimately be the optimal way forward.

Deputy Barry raised a sad and unacceptable incident that took place in Fermoy where a woman was attacked and sexually assaulted. I hope the person is brought to justice for that assault. The Deputy also raised the issue of gender-based violence. The recent Citizens' Assembly on gender equality produced recommendations on which the Government will follow through. We are not blocking any sex education Bill. However, there is an important exercise under way involving the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and interested parties. It is a review of the sexuality in education programme in primary schools and second level schools. It is important that it be informed by experts and that we get a proper, up-to-date, modern programme for sexuality education in our schools.

On Deputy Kelly's point, we need a citizens' assembly on drugs. As I said earlier, I believe we need a broader response. I have asked officials to draw up a broader programme on areas of disadvantage, not only around drugs but deprivation more generally and creating pathways for people and progression within areas of disadvantage. Funding of about €6 million has been allocated to the national drug and alcohol strategy this year. A further €1 million will be allocated and we will look at whether we can do more. I understand that €1.2 million has been allocated

to CHO area 4.

The report on crack cocaine use is very worrying-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach is out of time.

The Taoiseach: ----but the whole drug epidemic across the country is worrying. We intend to pursue that. Deputy McDonald raised a similar issue.

On the constitutional issue, I happen to believe that citizens' assemblies are useful. However, there is a broader issue. First, we need an Oireachtas approach to Article 41.

On the future of the island and on unity, I was in government before the Good Friday Agreement and right through the process. I know what it takes to build up relationships and work with people. I do not need lectures on that. I do not need to be put into a corner via slogans. It suits one particular party to do that. That is not the way to go on this issue. I regret the tone that has entered into this debate of trying to pin people into a corner and saying "this person is opposed to this" and "this person is against that". I have been for reconciliation of all the people and traditions in this island for all my political life. I intend to pursue that. I have my view on the best mechanisms to develop shared understandings and relationships. We should continue with that. It was one of the great achievements of a Government that I was in along with other parties. The lessons about how we got there are still applicable today and should not be dismissed too easily.

United Nations

11. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to the United States of America and his attendance at the United Nations in New York. [48197/21]

12. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to the United Nations in New York. [48308/21]

13. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to the United Nations in New York. [48309/21]

14. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the United Nations General Assembly. [48291/21]

15. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent attendance at the United Nations General Assembly. [53056/21]

16. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent meeting of the United Nations Security Council. [53430/21]

17. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the United Nations General Assembly. [54775/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 to 17, inclusive, together.

I travelled to the United States on 19 September for a five-day programme in New York centred around the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, and Ireland's presidency of the

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UN Security Council. On 21 September, I attended the opening of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly where I met with a number of world leaders. I delivered Ireland's national statement to the General Assembly on Friday, 24 September urging the assembly to heed the alarms sounding for conflict, Covid and climate, and to commit to immediate action.

I confirmed Ireland's contribution to global vaccine sharing, with the donation this year of 1.3 million doses to low-income countries, mainly through COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, COVAX, with a further significant donation to be made in 2022. Ireland has contributed over €200 million in support to global health since the outbreak of the pandemic.

I chaired a debate in the United Nations Security Council on climate and security on Thursday, 23 September. Ireland is calling for the effects of climate change on peace and security to be taken into account in any analysis of the causes of conflict or approaches to peace-building.

I spoke at an event convened by the European Union and United Nations on women in conflicts and reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to the protection of women and girls in conflict and the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in peace and security processes.

I also attended a European Union-Africa leaders' dinner, where I participated in a discussion on strengthening co-operation between the European Union and the African Union. I met bilaterally with many leaders while at the UN, including formal meetings with the President of Vietnam and the President of Colombia, discussing matters of shared interest, including Covid-19, economic recovery and conflict resolution. I also attended a Pacific Island Forum event, meeting the President of Palau and Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea.

During my wider visit to New York, I met the new Governor of New York, Kathy Hochul. We discussed responses to Covid-19, the importance of connectivity between the United States and Ireland and the current state of Kerry football, among other issues.

I addressed the Council on Foreign Relations on Wednesday, 22 September on Ireland-United States relations; Ireland's tenure on the United Nations Security Council; our commitment to multilateralism through the European Union and the United Nations; and Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. I also took part virtually in President Biden's global vaccine summit.

My programme also included economic, cultural and community events. I met representatives of Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland client companies and visited NBC Universal to discuss current and future filming and production opportunities in Ireland. I attended a building dedication ceremony at the new Irish Arts Center in New York. I met representatives of the Ireland Funds and leaders of Irish community organisations who briefed me on their critical support of the Irish community in New York during the pandemic.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The Taoiseach had a full-on visit to the United States. In delivering Ireland's national statement to the UN General Assembly in September, the Taoiseach rightly referred to the three Cs, namely, conflict, Covid and climate. These three issues disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations in least developed countries.

I ask the Taoiseach about climate and security and his chairing of the debate on this topic at the UN Security Council. I also believe that the effects of climate change on peace and security must be factored into any analysis of the causes of conflict or approaches to peace-building. We are talking here about the least developed countries and small island states as if these countries did not have enough to cope with already. I welcome the announcement by the Minister for the

Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, at COP26 of €10 million in funding for climate change mitigation and adaptation for these countries. What progress has been made on the need to accept the link between climate and security? Are Russia, China and India opposing this concept? Will the Taoiseach outline the current position in this regard?

Climate change puts our collective security at risk. It exacerbates conflict and insecurity. It goes without saying that the recommendations of the COP26 summit need to be implemented and that we must redouble our efforts with regard to the sustainable development goals. Where are we with regard to linking the concepts of climate and security?

I have a question on vaccine inequity. As we know, nobody is safe until everybody is safe. We have heard that said often in this House. It is a moral issue too. There is a crucial need for universal, equitable access to safe, effective and affordable vaccines, diagnostics and treatments. There have been calls for a Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, waiver for Covid-19 vaccine technology and a waiver on intellectual property protections for Covid-19 vaccines. The EU is not convinced that this is the right approach to take. We support the COVAX mechanism and have contributed substantial funding to it. Are we doing enough to address vaccine inequity for the countries affected in Ireland and at European Union and United Nations level?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The United Nations conference at Rio de Janeiro, among other things, developed a set of principles known as the forest principles, which relate to how important forestry is in combating climate change and biodiversity destruction. The Taoiseach and others attended the UN-convened COP26 and the Taoiseach was at an environmental session in New York where he discussed the issue of climate. Forestry is key in this, as has been said on a number of occasions. Last week, I raised with the Taoiseach the issue of the public forestry company, Coillte, selling 39 acres of forestry in a public amenity area in Enniskerry, which features Bronze Age stone pits, a right of way for the Dublin Mountains Way, important geological landscapes and so on. The Taoiseach, quite insultingly, tried to cast aspersions on the veracity of what I said but then said he would look into the matter. What I showed the Taoiseach was an advertisement from an estate agent's website, advertising the sale of this land for €250,000, an extraordinary price.

The public forestry body was selling off a public amenity forest in the context of COP26, protecting biodiversity, the forest principles of the United Nations and so on. It subsequently confirmed to me in a letter that the sale was going ahead. I went up to the forest where I saw "For Sale" signs all over the place. I am glad to say that I got a call from Coillte this morning stating that it had decided, although the sale was at an advanced stage, to abandon it. That is a victory. It also subsequently suggested that it was not really going to sell this forestry, even though there were "For Sale" signs everywhere and, as of this morning, it was advertised on the website of an estate agent. Why did members of the public or the Opposition have to point the Government to the fact that the State forestry company was selling off a public amenity forest? Why was there no proper oversight?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Has the Taoiseach looked into the matter? Does he believe there needs to be a role for greater oversight of the sale of public forest land by the State forestry company?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I see the Minister, Deputy Ryan, had an article in *The Irish Times* last weekend in which he approvingly quoted Greta Thunberg saying, “No more blah, blah, blah.” It is supremely ironic. How else can the words and actions of this Government on climate be described but as “more blah, blah, blah”? To take the example of transport, last week the Government announced a target of up to a 50% reduction in emissions in transport in the climate action plan. This week, we heard that a key investment in public transport infrastructure is to be postponed by another decade, and presumably beyond that. Second, there is a commitment to reduce by between 22% and 30% emissions in agriculture, the highest emitting sector in this country. This is completely inadequate. The Government refuses to tell the truth about the necessity to shift to a different model of farming and away from intensive beef and dairy farming, as well as how small farmers can be supported and do better with the model of regenerative farming.

4 o'clock

Furthermore, the Government today announced a €70 million fund going to processors involved in that intensified, unsustainable production. The Taoiseach asked me two weeks ago who I meant when I referred to big agribusiness. Look at the list of the companies getting the €70 million. It includes Glanbia, Dawn Meats and Liffey Meats. The Taoiseach can read the list for himself.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last month, the Israeli Government designated six prominent Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organisations. In an attempt to justify the unjustifiable, Israel circulated a secret dossier, which does not contain a shred of evidence to back up its outrageous claims. Did the Israeli Government or the ambassador to Ireland provide the Taoiseach or the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, with a copy of this dossier? The Oireachtas Friends of Palestine group hosted a briefing yesterday with three of the human rights organisations affected, two of whom are funded by Irish Aid. All of the groups are now effectively deemed illegal organisations by Israel, which means their offices can be closed, their assets seized and their staff arrested and imprisoned. This is outrageous.

Earlier this year, Human Rights Watch published a damning report that further exposed the human rights abuses of the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli authorities and called out their crimes of apartheid and persecution. Let us be clear that designating these human rights organisations as terrorist brings Israel in line with the worst days of South Africa's apartheid regime. What engagement has the Taoiseach had with European and international leaders on the matter? What concrete action will the Government take to demonstrate in full its condemnation of Israel's latest attack on the Palestinian people's human rights and those who advocate for them?

Deputy Mick Barry: COP26 is a United Nations climate change summit but there are more than just nations represented there. More than 500 accredited people at the COP have links to the fossil fuel industry. More than 100 fossil fuel companies have representatives in attendance at the conference. There are more fossil fuel company representatives at COP than in the largest national delegation there, namely, the Brazilian delegation. The number of accredited persons with links to the fossil fuel industry is greater than the combined number in the delegations from the eight countries most affected by climate change over the past 20 years. Fossil fuel lobbyists outnumber the official indigenous constituency there by 2:1. Fossil fuel representatives are members of the official delegations from 27 nations, including Canada and Russia. Does the COP represent the nations of the world or the fossil fuel corporations of the world? Will the

Taoiseach join me in saying fossil fuel corporations should be shut out of the conference and future conferences on the grounds that they are part of the problem and not part of the solution?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Haughey raised the issue of conflict, Covid and climate. I pay tribute to our ambassador at the UN, Geraldine Byrne Nason, and her team. They have performed excellently on behalf of the country in advancing our agenda, particularly during the presidency of the Security Council.

In terms of the motion and the theme we are moving, there were reservations from Russia, India and China to different degrees. That work is ongoing and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, and the Minister, Deputy Coveney are also working on that linking of climate with security as a core responsibility of the UN. It was well received on the day and much proactive work went into it in advance of the meeting and will continue. In the nature of UN politics it will progress and, in my view, ultimately be successful.

On vaccine inequity, I accept that no one is safe until everybody is safe. That is a basic mantra. The European Union is the largest exporter of Covid-19 vaccines to the world. It will continue efforts to increase global vaccine production capacity to meet global needs. Since last December, over 800 million doses have been exported to over 130 countries by the European Union. It is the only continent that had no export bans.

For Africa, what Europe is saying is that we will provide €1 billion in support of production within Africa of mRNA vaccines, which will give that continent long-term sustainable production capacity for vaccines and medicines that will be based on the mRNA platform. That is the most effective way to do this. We are working with other states in the WTO on flexibilities in the TRIPS Agreement but there was much sloganeering around that which would not have achieved one extra vaccine. I am interested in getting vaccines into the arms of people in low-cost countries. Europe is again leading the way in concrete measures.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is leading the way for the pharmaceutical companies. It is killing people. It is disgraceful.

The Taoiseach: Senegal and South Africa will be early beneficiaries of the idea to develop production capacity in those countries and the continent.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, because I was in COP and so on I was not in a position to have an in-depth conversation with Coillte. I am not in favour of the sale of forests. There can be local circumstances from time to time, such as sports clubs or national bodies looking for facilitation, but overall I want to grow more trees and we need to do so, particularly native species. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has overall authority in respect of that. We will seek a meeting with the Minister and Coillte to get their up-to-date position in terms of broader policies. I see the role of Coillte and Bord na Móna as being to fulfil the climate change agenda of the Government.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised "blah blah blah", a phrase that was actually coined by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, at the beginning of COP26. On the investment, I do not know whether the Deputy represents workers, but the workers of Charleville will welcome the investment in the plant there. The workers in Mallow will also welcome it. It is about going to higher end value, less commodity and diversifying to other markets, rather than relying on the British market.

On non-governmental organisations and Pegasus spyware, we support Palestinian human rights defenders as a Government and have consistently done so financially. We are a founding member of the Freedom Online Coalition. We believe the human rights people have offline must also be protected online and we must ensure that emerging technologies privilege freedom, transparency and an open and tolerant society. In terms of the NGOs listed, we support Al-Haq financially and Addameer. We maintain a high level of oversight of our NGO partners and have robust controls. We do not accept the actions that have occurred in this respect.

Deputy Barry raised fossil fuel companies. I did not meet any fossil fuel company in Glasgow. I met with other Heads of State, with the young students from UCC I mentioned and with a group from the Dingle Peninsula who were developing a coalition of interests in terms of alternative energy provision.

Deputy Mick Barry: Should they be excluded from the COP?

The Taoiseach: I said to the Deputy earlier that gas will be a transitional fuel but he did not come back to me on it. Ultimately, fossil fuels have no role in the future of energy supply and we have taken legislative steps to deal with that, as the Deputy knows.

Departmental Schemes

18. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the preparation of the language scheme of his Department. [47860/21]

19. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** den Taoiseach cuntas a thabhairt ar an slí ina bhfuil an Acht na dTeanga 2003 ag feidhmnú ina rannóg. [54413/21]

The Taoiseach: Áirítear leis seo cohórt foirne leordhóthanach a fhostú a bhfuil inniúlacht leordhóthanach acu an leibhéal seirbhíse a chomhlíonadh agus deiseanna a chur ar fáil chun cuidiú le baill fhoirne a n-eolas agus leibhéal úsáide a fheabhsú. Cé nach dtugann mo Roinn leibhéal suntasach éilimh faoi deara ón bpobal ar sheirbhísí i nGaeilge, aithníonn sí an tábhacht atá le baill fhoirne a bheith ann atá líofa i nGaeilge agus atá in ann seirbhísí a chur ar fáil i nGaeilge agus leanfaidh sí ina bhun sin.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Irish language will have full working rights in the EU from 1 January next year. Mar thoradh air sin, beidh gach reachtaíocht nua curtha ar fáil i nGaeilge, lena n-áirítear rialacháin, treoracha agus cinntí. At EU level, therefore, statutes will only be made available in Irish, including regulations, directives and decisions. It is astonishing that while we have made this progress in the European Union, the same language rights are not enjoyed here at home. In fact, the Government is appealing a High Court judgment that reaffirms the constitutional duty of the State to provide Irish language versions of Acts of the Oireachtas. Surely the Taoiseach agrees that all Acts, statutory instruments and regulations should be made available in Irish at the same time as the English version. It is unacceptable that the State is actively seeking to withhold language rights from its own citizens, rights that the European Union now provides. Níl sé sásúil beag ná mór go bhfuil an Stát seo ag déanamh a lán-dhícheall chun cearta teanga a shaoránaigh féin a choimeád siar - cearta ar a bhfuil an tAontas Eorpach ag freastal anois. Will the Taoiseach take a stand for Irish language rights and call on the Minister to withdraw his appeal? What action is envisaged to increase the number of High Court judges able to hear cases through Irish, as currently there is only one?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Tá ról ceannaireachta ag oifig an Taoisigh agus tá deis an-mhaith aige cúrsaí Gaolainne a chur chun cinn, ní amháin sa tír seo ach go forleathan ar fud na cruinne. Tá ardán mór agus láidir ag an Taoiseach agus a oifig i measc pobal na Gaolainne ar fud na cruinne. Tá an cheathrú scéim teanga i bhfeidhm ina oifig faoin tráth seo. Bheadh athnuachan le déanamh air sin an bhliain seo chugainn agus bheadh athbhreithniú ar siúl faoin tráth seo. Tá an Rialtas ag tabhairt chun cinn Bille nua a athróidh an tslí go ndéantar láimhseáil ar na scéimeanna teanga agus mar sin de. Mar sin, ní bheinn ag súil go mbeadh aon athnuachan á dhéanamh ach beidh athbhreithniú le déanamh. Cad iad na buaicphointí atá le feiscint mar chuid den athbhreithniú atá an Rialtas ag déanamh? Cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir leis na scéimeanna éagsúla a bhí i bhfeidhm in oifig an Taoisigh? Can iad na spriocanna atá amach romhaibh? Tá sé in aigne leis an mBille nua go mbeadh 20% d'earcaigh nua sa Státseirbhís ábalta a ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaolainn. An bhfuil na huimhreacha sin nó an líon sin daoine ann cheana féin in oifig an Taoisigh nó cathain an bhfuil an Taoiseach ag súil a leithéid sin a bhaint amach?

The Taoiseach: Ó thaobh na ceiste a chur an Teachta McDonald, tá an méid atá ráite aici dochreidte. Níl an Stát i gcoinne saoránaigh na tíre seo ó thaobh na teanga de. Táimid ag tabhairt gach aon tacaíocht don teanga agus do mhuintir na tíre ó thaobh na teanga a chur chun cinn. I find it very difficult to accept the language Deputy McDonald uses to exhort me to take a stand for the Irish language. There is a sense that we are somehow against it. I have learned Irish. I do everything I possibly can to promote Irish. I speak Irish. I want people to enjoy Irish. I have never weaponised Irish for political purposes and I regret that the Deputy tends to do that too much.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I certainly do not.

The Taoiseach: We are not endeavouring to stop anybody-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach might answer that-----

The Taoiseach: An rud is tábhachtaí ná rudaí a dhéanamh i ngach slí gur féidir linn. Tá TG4 ag ceiliúradh 25 bliain ar an bhfód agus rinneamar an-chuid chun é sin a chur i bhfeidhm, le daoine eile.

Ó thaobh na ceiste a chur an Teachta Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin, agus muid ag déanamh an athbhreithnithe ar an scéim agus ar an Acht, an rud is tábhachtaí ná déileáil leis an bpobal. Tugtar freagra i nGaeilge ar chomhfhreagras atá faighte i nGaeilge, mar shampla.

Maidir leis na buaicphointí, déanaim tagairt do na foilseacháin, preasráitis, óráidí, cáipéise agus beartais. Tá sé geallta inár scéim teanga go bhfoilsítear ar a laghad 30% de phreasráitis i nGaeilge. Tá ábhar statach agus grafaicí mo Roinne ar na láithreáin ghréasáin *gov.ie* agus *merionstreet.ie* ar fáil sa dá theanga. Áirítear leis seo earcaíocht, oiliúint agus forbairt ó thaobh cumas teanga a fheabhsú. Ó thaobh poist shainithe Gaeilge, sainíodh dhá phost, ceann amháin i m'oifig phríobháideach agus ceann eile i Seirbhís Fhaisnéise an Rialtais. Ó thaobh seirbhísí i nGaeilge a phoibliú, cuirimid custaiméirí ar an eolas ar bhonn réamhghníomhach faoi na roghanna atá ar fáil chun tabhairt faoi ghnó linn i nGaeilge. Aontaím go gcaithfidimid níos mó a dhéanamh chun freastal ar dhaoine atá ag iarraidh a ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaolainn agus sin atá ar bun againn. Tá mo Roinn sásta é sin a dhéanamh, agus gach aon Roinn eile, ach tá dualgas ar gach Roinn an tAcht a chur i bhfeidhm agus déileáil leis an bpobal.

I gcoitinne, tá an-chuid tacaíochta fós á thabhairt, gan amhras, do na Gaelscoileanna agus

na Gaelcholáistí. Tá ceann nua an-mhór oscailte i gCarraig Uí Leighin le déanaí. Tá TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta ag fáil an-chuid tacaíochta ón Rialtas. Tá eagraíochtaí éagsúla ar fud na tíre atá ag déanamh a ndícheall an Ghaeilge a chothú agus tá mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta do na heagraíochtaí sin chomh maith.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: 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 Niamh Smyth - to discuss the development of Cavan Institute as a hub for further education and training; (2) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss prospecting licences in north Leitrim; (3) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss plans to upgrade the Carrignavar wastewater treatment facilities; (4) Deputy Emer Higgins - to discuss encouraging the uptake and use of vitamin D this winter; (5) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae - to discuss policing in Ireland today and the morale in the force in light of events in Limerick; (6) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the ongoing crisis at University Hospital Kerry; (7) Deputies John Lahart, Paul Murphy, Seán Crowe, Francis Noel Duffy and Mark Ward - to discuss the report by the Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force; (8) Deputy Pearse Doherty - to address the publication of the Brandon report; (9) Deputies Gino Kenny, Richard Boyd Barrett, John Brady and Joan Collins - to address the decision by Israel to designate a number of NGOs as terrorist organisations; (10) Deputies Claire Kerrane and Mairéad Farrell - to address the rejection of municipal district budgets by all municipal districts in Galway County Council; (11) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to address an alleged child abduction case in Kilkenny; (12) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss the ongoing issues with water quality in Dublin Bay; (13) Deputy David Cullinane - to address the roll-out of disability services of children in the south east; (14) Deputies Martin Kenny and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss the industrial dispute by Garda superintendents causing delays to investigations by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC; (15) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss plans for the review of housing density guidelines for sustainable urban living outside of Dublin and city centres; (16) Deputies Thomas Gould and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the shortage of resources and waiting times for Children's Disability Network teams in Cork; (17) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the omission from the national development plan of the northern distributor road in Limerick; (18) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the retention of part-time firefighter staff and their terms and conditions; (19) Deputy Verona Murphy - to address the regulation of planning authorities following recent judgements; (20) Deputy Martin Browne - to address additional funding for track renewal on the Ballybrophy railway line; (21) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the proposed closure of Owenacurra mental health facility in Midleton, County Cork; and (22) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the winter plan and staffing in Naas General Hospital.

The matters raised by Deputies Niamh Smyth, Brendan Griffin, John Lahart, Paul Murphy, Seán Crowe, Francis Noel Duffy and Mark Ward have been selected for discussion.

National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I move:

That Dáil Éireann authorises the Minister for Finance, pursuant to section 6(1) of the

National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019 (the ‘Act’), not to pay the prescribed amount (€500,000,000) under section 5(2) of the Act into the National Surplus (Exceptional Contingencies) Reserve Fund for the year 2021 having regard to the fact that in accordance with section 6(3) of the Act the Minister is satisfied that, by reason of the exceptional circumstances posed by the public expenditure undertaken to remedy or mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 virus, the payment of the prescribed amount would place an undue burden on the public finances.

The motion relates to section 6 of the National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019, which established the National Surplus (Exceptional Contingencies) Reserve Fund, more commonly referred to as the rainy day fund. The Act was commenced on 31 October 2019 and the fund was subsequently seeded with €1.5 billion transferred from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, on 15 November 2019.

Today, I am seeking the Dáil’s endorsement for a motion not to transfer the €500 million contribution for 2021 into the National Surplus (Exceptional Contingencies) Reserve Fund. Deputies will be aware that, under section 5(2) of the National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019, the Minister for Finance is required to make a payment from the Exchequer of €500 million to the rainy day fund every year from 2019 to 2023. The Act also provides, under section 6, that in any given year the Minister for Finance may make a proposal to the Dáil not to transfer the €500 million contribution into the fund. I am proposing the motion that the Minister for Finance not transfer €500 million into the rainy day fund in 2021, following Cabinet approval on Wednesday, 27 October last.

The motion is before the House because the Minister for Finance is satisfied that, by reason of the continuation of the exceptional circumstances posed by the pandemic and the consequential public expenditure undertaken to remedy or mitigate the impact of Covid-19, the making of the payment of the prescribed amount would place an undue burden on the public finances. As everyone in the Chamber is aware, 2021 has seen the continuation of unprecedented challenges to the State in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic. As anyone would expect, the Irish people and, for its part, the Government acting in their name, have continued to respond to these challenges with steadfast resolve while deploying massive resources. The last one and a half years have been extraordinarily difficult for all, with disruption to family life, the pain of losing loved ones and the impact of successive, but necessary, public health restrictions all hindering, in an unprecedented way, normal economic and social life.

Despite this, throughout the pandemic, we have all witnessed the incredible resilience of the Irish people. Ordinary people, business owners and especially our front-line workers have risen to the challenge in an extraordinary way. In particular, I am sure that everyone in the Chamber will join me in acknowledging all those who supported and partook in our vaccination programme. It gives me an enormous sense of pride to say that this vaccine programme has been one of the most successful in the world. It is the key reason we are returning to greater degrees of normality. Given these facts, we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the staff and volunteers involved across the relevant agencies.

The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted the role of Government in supporting both our economy and society. While the response from the Government was unparalleled, with over €48 billion provided over three years, it was also completely necessary. Approximately €41 billion of this, or nearly one fifth of national income as measured by GNI*, was made available in 2020 and 2021. This included direct public expenditure, tax expenditures and

“below the line” supports such as loans and guarantees, including funds allocated for 2022. Through the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, approximately €17.5 billion has been directed to individuals, families and businesses. These supports worked and showed that we responded in the right way and at the right time. Ireland’s ability to respond was strengthened by the solidarity of our European Union partners. We must also acknowledge that our ability to respond was made possible because we managed our affairs well in better times in order to be able to give support at a time of great national difficulty.

Thankfully, we have now entered a new phase where we intend to recover from the pandemic, restore our public services and living standards and repair our public finances. Earlier this year, and very positively, we passed a crucial milestone with the return of many people to workplaces. In many cases, they were doing so for the first time in 18 months. As the recovery increasingly takes hold and citizens get back to some level of normality, the Government must remain focused on our elevated debt levels. At the end of 2020, the stock of Government national debt stood at €217.9 billion, an increase of almost €14 billion. General Government debt as a share of GDP increased to 58.4% of GDP in 2020, an increase of 1.2%. For 2021, it is projected to be 55.2%. General Government debt to GNI*, which is viewed as a more appropriate indicator of the repayment capacity of the economy, increased to 104.7% in 2020. This is an increase of 10% and it is expected to increase again in 2021, reaching 106.2% in 2021.

Public finances can absorb this shock, letting debt rise in order to provide support to the economy, but the debt-to-income ratio must be put on a downward trajectory once circumstances allow. Market participants have given Ireland the benefit of the doubt as a result of the prudent fiscal policies implemented in recent years. Nonetheless, Ireland’s public debt-to-income ratio is among the highest in the developed world. By 2024, our stock of public debt will reach just under €240 billion, or a quarter of a trillion euro.

The summer economic statement set out a pathway to meet the core objectives set out in the programme for Government. The strategy was reaffirmed by budget 2022 in October and involves investing in the economy and society and reducing the deficit in order to underpin the sustainability of the public finances. In general terms, the pandemic has entered a new phase, so fiscal strategy must evolve along with it.

The strategy involves three strands: pandemic-related supports will be unwound as appropriate over the course of the remainder of 2021 and during 2022; expenditure will be targeted in priority areas such as capital expenditure in support of climate action; and budgetary policy will be anchored within a medium-term framework via an expenditure rule. The expenditure rule involves limiting core spending growth to around the same level of trend growth in the economy via fixed expenditure ceilings. The headline deficit will be allowed to fluctuate while keeping the ceilings fixed. The strategy will allow the Government to return the public finances to a stable path, while maintaining key investment in public services, particularly public capital investment. Vitality, by next year, the country will only be borrowing for capital expenditure purposes.

The most recent Exchequer returns show a deficit of €7.4 billion was recorded in October, representing an improvement of some €4.2 billion on the same period last year, driven by increases in tax revenue. On a 12-month rolling basis, which is a better indicator of the trend, the Exchequer recorded a deficit of just under €8.1 billion. Tax revenues of €50.9 billion were collected to the end of October, ahead of target by €3.8 billion, or 8.1%, and up by €8.3 billion, or

19.6%, on the same period last year. Income tax and corporation tax continue to perform well, driven respectively by the reduction in unemployment and rising wages, as well as high corporate profitability. Moreover, VAT receipts and, to a lesser extent, excise duties have recovered strongly as the economy opened up.

Total gross voted expenditure stood at €67.5 billion to end-October, which was €2.5 billion, or 3.5%, below profile. The majority of this relates to an underspend in capital expenditure, driven by the extended shutdown of the construction industry in the first few months of this year. Nevertheless, total gross voted expenditure to the end of October was €2 billion ahead of the same period last year, driven by increased spending in the Department of Social Protection, primarily due to the ongoing cost of the PUP and EWSS pandemic support schemes.

The summer economic statement projected that the general Government deficit would be around €20 billion this year. Given the significant over-performance in taxes and the underspend in voted expenditure versus profile, this projection was revised downwards in budget 2022 to around €13 billion, or just under 6% of GNI*, or 3% of GDP, this year.

In conclusion, given the likely continuing impact of Covid-19 on the public finances, it was clear from earlier this year that the making of the planned €500 million annual contribution to the rainy day fund was unlikely and this was signalled in the April 2021 stability programme update and the summer economic statement. As Deputies will know, the rationale behind establishing the rainy day fund in 2019, which was the subject of broad support across the political system, was to accumulate funding that could be deployed in the event of an adverse shock to the economy.

The establishment of this fund and its availability for drawdown in support of budget 2021 in October 2020 have proven to be correct decisions. The drawdown receipt by the Exchequer was used to offset funding requirements arising from budget 2021 and the need to support the increase in Covid-19 related expenditure. It was important that the fund was there to support the Government's Covid response. Crucially, using the rainy day fund meant that the State was able to provide for additional Covid-19 measures without having to borrow more, saving the burden of repayment or refinancing costs on future generations. This motion not to pay the annual €500 million contribution into the rainy day fund, while not preferable, is necessary in order to ensure that the Exchequer has access to funds when they are most needed. The Minister for Finance wants to be in a position to add funds to the rainy day fund at some point in the future in order to be in a position to deal with potential future economic crises but to do so as the public financial impact of the pandemic continues does not make sense. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This motion authorises the Minister for Finance, in accordance with section 6(1) of the National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019, not to pay the prescribed amount of €500 million into the national surplus reserve fund for 2021. This relates to the so-called rainy day fund which was established by Fine Gael to burnish its image as a prudent manager of the public finances and which was championed by Fianna Fáil in an attempt to restore trust in its ability to manage the public finances after it torpedoed the Irish economy a decade ago. I support the motion. It would be foolish to divert resources into the fund when we still face the challenges posed by the pandemic, while our hospitals and patients suffer unacceptable waiting lists, while the housing crisis deepens and while climate breakdown confronts us. Sinn Féin will support the motion.

It should be noted that despite being established in June 2019 this fund never really got off the ground and it lies empty. Some €1.5 billion was transferred from the Irish Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, in 2019 and spent in response to the pandemic. We should not fool ourselves or anyone else for that matter; that money could have been spent directly from the ISIF without being pit-stopped into the so-called rainy day fund. Under the legislation, €500 million was to be transferred into the fund each year from the Exchequer, including in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. No money was transferred from the Exchequer in 2019, 2020 or 2021. There has always been something more pressing for which the €500 million of resources has been needed and so the fund is empty.

When the legislation was first debated I said that it was already raining. We have a housing crisis that is damaging the fabric of our society and the competitiveness of our economy. It is also burning, with a climate crisis that requires significant supply side investment to provide alternatives for low and middle income households. It was always my suspicion that the rainy day fund was more of an electoral gimmick than a serious innovation in fiscal policy. It was established shortly before a general election and was often touted as a great example of prudence together with a budget surplus in 2019. Every time we have debated these motions since then the two have been mentioned together by the Minister for Finance or by Government Deputies. The surplus that year was achieved due to an unexpected bumper receipt of corporate taxes, not as a result of budget policy. Boasting of a surplus at a time when the housing crisis was deepening is not an example of sound fiscal policy but of poor economic management. The housing crisis is after all a result of the fiscal and economic policy of this and previous Governments.

Sinn Féin will support this motion. We suspect that the Minister for Finance will ask us to do the exact same thing as in this motion next year and that the fund will still lie empty and idle. Given the debate this allows, I mention fiscal policy more broadly. The object of same should not just be to reach a certain number to one or two decimal places and then to wave that number around to the electorate in the hope of admiration. The object of fiscal policy must be to achieve economic and social outcomes. In too many areas the economy is failing. The housing crisis is damaging lives as well as our competitiveness. Childcare costs are hurting families as well as female participation in the workforce. A neglect of research, innovation and higher education has not only restricted employment opportunities but it has hampered the productivity of indigenous enterprises. In those areas we must do better and we can do so provided we have the right Government.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Given the exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves arising from the Covid pandemic, as my colleague, Deputy Doherty, outlined, Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion. A large volume of public expenditure was required to ameliorate the impact of Covid-19 and this was necessary to prevent the worst. This means that the €500 million annual contribution for transfer from the Exchequer to the national surplus reserve fund, or the so-called rainy day fund, to be made this year will place an unnecessary burden on the public finances and as per section 6(1) of the Act the Minister for Finance is allowed to make this proposal to avoid making the annual €500 million contribution into the national reserve fund. The Minister for Finance is right to do that. It is obvious that it would be inappropriate and irresponsible to divert badly needed resources away from fighting the pandemic and it would be a needless risk to do such a thing, especially when case numbers are rising in our hospitals and when our public services are under huge pressure.

It is worth mentioning that when this so called rainy day fund came into existence Sinn Féin voiced concerns on it. When it was proposed and introduced in 2019 my party submitted

amendments so that the fund could be used for the purposes of investing in housing, infrastructure and climate actions. At that time our amendments were either ruled out of order or opposed. It is said that hindsight is 20/20 but it should be obvious that the then Government was wrong to do that at the time. The housing crisis has become worse, our public infrastructure has fallen further into disrepair and our climate targets seem further out of reach.

We were so vulnerable going into this pandemic because of our infrastructural deficit which is due to years of underinvestment. The Government's national development plan clearly acknowledges that we need to make a massive infrastructural investment, particularly in the area of green investment. From our current vantage point it seems that these funds should be allowed to be used for these purposes. When this legislation was introduced the then Government also allowed the fund to be used for the purpose of a capital injection into the banking sector, something we found objectionable. Given the amount of losses the banks could carry forward, meaning they would be paying tax for decades, this seemed like a poor use of funds. Moreover we are seeing an exodus of banks and the Government continues to sit on its hands in this regard.

We know the rainy day fund is empty. The money that had been transferred to it from the ISIF had been spent fighting the pandemic but it was not applicable for the other crises we face. Our housing is in a worse state than it was when the fund was set up, we have longer waiting lists and in recent weeks we have seen over 700 people on trolleys in our hospitals in the western region after the Government told us time and again last year that it was putting huge investment into our hospitals. What has changed for those people who see family members lying on trolleys night after night and day after day? We need to make a serious investment if we want to reach our climate targets. That means we need investment in our public infrastructure and that we cannot continue in a situation whereby the Government is cutting the number of buses. We need more buses and more public infrastructure. People are struggling to buy a house or to cover the cost of rent and thousands are languishing on waiting lists. It seems that for those people when it rains it pours but it has been pouring for a hell of a long time and it continues to do so. We need to ensure that the necessary investment is made in all aspects of our infrastructure.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The so-called rainy day fund was established in 2018 and for reasons that are fairly obvious at this point in time, only one instalment of €500 million was paid into the fund. That was in 2019. The right thing to do was to use that €500 million to help fight the pandemic and to support jobs and business through the most difficult of years. We are, again, as the House knows only too well, in very dangerous territory and it is right that no money is paid into the fund this year either. We are all agreed, at least for this year, that there are better ways to allocate this money in 2022 and, indeed, more urgent matters that we need to address as a society as we battle through this difficult time.

When the legislation to establish the fund was taken by this House, the Labour Party opposed it. We opposed also the motion to direct the first tranche of €500 million into the fund in the first year of its operation in 2019, not because we do not believe that we should budget responsibly and organise our economic affairs sensibly. We opposed the rationale of the fund in the first place because we believe there should be no need for it if the economy is managed well, sustainably and productively.

It would be wrong-headed and unconscionable to set aside in one year the kind of money

that could build several thousand homes when so many of our citizens need the security of a decent long-term roof over their heads. I appreciate the view of the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, that the idea of a rainy day fund is in the interests of the prudent management of the economy. That is their perspective and they are entitled to hold that perspective, but let us put the experience of 2018 and 2019, when the fund first came into being, in some kind of context. That was a time when €500 million was being funnelled into the fund yet the 2016-2020 Government, supported by the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming's party, was paying for cost overruns in the HSE with corporation tax windfalls. Similarly, massive sums of money not budgeted for had to be found to fund cost overruns in the national children's hospital project. Protecting the economy and our citizens from black swan moments is in the long run better achieved by making investment in public goods such as housing, education, childcare, training and primary healthcare now, not by putting half a billion euro of taxpayers' money a year into an account no matter what the weather. It is public investment, first and foremost, that will prime our economy for the kind of sustainable growth that can make our society more resilient to the kind of shocks we experienced in 2020 and 2021. The idea that we pumped half a billion euro into a fund for the future while at the same time seeing cost overruns get out of control before our very eyes on many high profile public projects did not sit well with me or with the general public. Quite rightly, it drives people mad to see how the State is constantly on the hook, low-balled and taken for a ride by big contractors for overruns on big projects such as the children's hospital.

If this Government really wants to see the State better insulated and better prepared for all eventualities, a good place to start is by ensuring better value for money and oversight in real time of public spending - something that we do not seem able to achieve in this country. The Minister of State could also agree to raise additional sustained revenue to build up our public services through targeted wealth and asset taxes on those who can most afford it. Tax seems to be a dirty word for this Government but we need to talk about tax. Mark my words, this is something we will have to return to very soon. This would bring real sustainability to the public finances and make Ireland fairer and better prepared to withstand any future shocks than any rainy day fund might.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important motion. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for his introductory remarks. I appreciate the contributions of all Deputies opposite, as we repeat a discussion that was held 12 months ago. At the time, I stated my concern that while this is an understandable move, it is a disappointing one because I fundamentally believe the creation of the rainy day fund was sensible even though we did not get the full chance to see the worth of it before, unfortunately, that rainy day fund was drawn down. We have seen how important it was to have.

When initially this was thought up, the main threat envisaged was a no-deal Brexit and the impact that would have on our economy. No one would have dreamed back in 2018 of the impact of a once-in-a-century global pandemic the likes of which we are still living with. If we look at the response to that global pandemic, what has been achieved and what has been put in place over the past 18 months, it is testament to the sound financial footing that the State was in. We see the co-ordinated efforts between European Union member states to realise new capital through the formation of eurobonds to pool together in order to procure vaccines at the best possible price was downright good decent sense about economic planning. We look at the State's commitment to tackling the Covid response and the fact it was able to draw on various financial tools and the sound economic footing the State's coffers had been brought back into.

It is something for which the Government, and particularly the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, who cannot be here with us, deserves credit.

With regard to the preparation for Brexit and the response that we have seen on a domestic level in preparing for Brexit in terms of investing and diversifying, and the collective European Union approach in the Brexit adjustment reserve fund of which Ireland has achieved the lion's share, there are practical implications for this. We see one of those practical implications today, of all days, with €70 million announced by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, directly for the agrifood sector to allow our producers to diversify in markets. I remember, way back when, talking about Brexit debates. We realised that 86% of our cheddar cheese exports were going to Great Britain and how that simply would not be sustainable if we were trading less and less with the British economy. That is why we are seeing this diversification announced today and are seeing it being realised. Government talked about it but Government actually backed-up and is providing the supports for industry to make sure industry can continue to produce high-quality diversified goods for new markets. We are looking at new markets within, but also through, the European Union.

I suppose we have to remember that Brexit, despite the assertions of the current British Prime Minister, is not done. Brexit is not done based on one treaty. Brexit is not done based on one Act. Brexit and its ramifications will be with us for at least a generation. We see, even this week, how that continues to play out.

Much like Brexit is far from done, and it will be with us for many years to come, we understand that the Covid pandemic is far from over. That is not only based on rising infection rates or the pressures on our public health system. If we look at the impact on the economy, so many areas of the economy and, indeed, society simply have not got back to where they want to be. They will not necessarily get back to where they were before and perhaps they can go to a better model. The supports that have been provided for by this Government working with stakeholders and with European Union partners have been so important in keeping those aspects of the economy and society going and ensuring that businesses were able to reopen and get back into the workplace in due course. When discussing this fund and the motion it is important to state that we look to the future. I am heartened by the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming's comments in relation to the overall budgetary and financial outlook for the Irish economy in the coming months and, indeed, years. It apes many of the statements that were made by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, when we debated the budget last week.

When we are talking about the potential and likely economic growth of the State, it is important we state that although no funds are being put into the so-called rainy day fund by way of this motion, we maintain the option to do that going forward and maintain the commitment that we will work back up the rainy day fund because, despite assertions of others opposite, this is not some sort of image. This is real money that had a real impact on so many lives. This is real money that is needed. It is simply good management. Any household always has a reserve. It is no different with an economy or a society. It is the responsibility of every legislator in this House to make sure that we have a rainy day fund and that when circumstances allow it the appropriate funds are put into this account because it is raining at present and it will be raining again.

Having this sort of sensible economic outlook will underline everything that can be done in every sector of life. It does not take away from capital or current expenditure on the mainte-

nance of our economy and the betterment of society. This is something that provides that guarantee or level of insurance that all of us deem so important. That is why it is not good enough to say that we are deferring payment and bringing this motion to the House, following it being passed by the Cabinet. We need to hear the commitment in the Minister of State's summing up remarks that the Government will build the rainy day fund back up and prepare for future eventualities.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. The National Surplus Act came into force in June 2019 to establish the contingency reserve for exceptional circumstances, or rainy day fund. We all agree we are living in exceptional circumstances. It is most definitely raining. The housing crisis this Government is presiding over is evidence of that. In fact, it is a torrential downpour as we can see from the state of the health service. Operations are being cancelled and Covid is not being used as an excuse this time. Waiting lists are getting longer and medical cards, GP and dental appointments cannot be got for love nor money. The health service is in disarray and it is not by accident. The public health service was deliberately run down by successive Governments to make the private health service more attractive. Sinn Féin in government will abolish the two-tier health system favoured by the parties that make up this Government and by the Labour Party. We will put patients first and give our healthcare workers an all-Ireland health service that everyone can be proud of. As Deputy Mairéad Farrell said earlier, when this legislation originally came through the House, Sinn Féin submitted amendments so that the fund would be used to invest in housing infrastructure and climate action. These amendments were ruled out of order or were opposed. Instead, the Government included a section that allowed the fund to be used for a capital injection into the banking sector. Sinn Féin in government will put ordinary workers and families ahead of profits or private companies.

The rainy day fund has turned out to be a bit of a damp squib. By now, we should have €3 billion in it, but it is empty. We need to spend this money wisely. We need to stop funding an over-heated private rental market with HAP and start building public homes on public land. We need to stop pouring money into private hospitals through the National Treatment Purchase fund and start reforming our health system to ensure that it is fit for the 21st century. I sincerely hope that is what happens.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am happy to contribute to this debate. I do not have any difficulty with the motion in front of us. It would not make sense in the present exceptional circumstances to allocate €500 million to a rainy day fund but it has not made a lot of sense up to now either. Deputy Richmond said that any sensible household puts money away in a rainy day fund but you do not do that when there is a hole in the roof and you need to replace the roof. Essentially for several years now there has been the equivalent of a hole in the roof, whether that is the health crisis, in terms of the capacity of our health service, the housing crisis or many other aspects of the dysfunction within our country. It is not the case that everyone was in favour of this from the beginning.

I notice the Minister of State did not speak at all about his thinking or the Government's thinking about the future of the rainy day fund and what the intention is. To have such a fund is very well where a country has sorted out its public services and its economy is in a very healthy state and its people are all doing well and prospering. In circumstances like that, where there is a surplus, it makes sense but we have not been in that position in this country and it is hard to see us being in that position for the foreseeable future. That is not only as a result of the exceptional circumstances that we are in now. Obviously, the big issue now is the hugely negative

impact of Covid on the country and that is the immediate reason for not proceeding with the allocation of €500 million, but we have to ask what questions have been learned from Covid.

I echo the Minister of State's comments on what has happened in this country over the last two years in terms of the huge level of personal family tragedies and the very significant number of people who have passed away. I echo the condolences to them. There have been more than 500,000 cases now. We think of all those whose lives have been damaged in so many ways. We recognise the huge efforts that have been made by everyone working within the health service, and by those in other front-line jobs in areas such as retail, deliveries and in so many other areas of our society. We think of all those who kept things going, who kept the show on the road, sometimes at huge cost to themselves. It is important to acknowledge that.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that the experience of Covid over almost two years has shown up huge weaknesses in the way we run our country and the Government's approach to the economy generally and the neglect of so many aspects of our public services right across the board. Some of us have been committed to proper levels of investment in public services throughout our political careers. You have to ask what lessons this Government has learned by the very substantial weaknesses in things such as capacity within our health service, our dysfunctional housing system, the dysfunctional childcare system and the way in which we fund, or under-fund, all levels of our education system. What lessons have been learned? It was very clear that if the country was to survive at all over the last two years that there had to be very significant intervention by the Government in taking over the use of private hospitals, for example, or taking on the payment of salaries for childcare workers. All these things were exposed as being dysfunctional in an emergency situation. There seems to be an attitude that when we get over all of this, we will go back to the old ways of doing things. Clearly that is not sustainable. I would be much more reassured if I heard the Minister of State and other Ministers speak of the lessons that have been learned.

The figure of €500 million is coincidentally the same figure as the Government decided to spend on tax cuts, which are in the main regressive cuts in the recent budget and which was not a very wise way of spending money. I support the motion but let us hear about the lessons that have been learned over the last couple of years.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State and his officials for bringing forward this motion. I welcome the opportunity to examine it. I will be supporting the motion which will authorise the Minister for Finance to not allocate €500 million to the rainy day fund for 2021. The action is prudent given the very exceptional circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic. A similar motion under section 6 of the National Surplus Act 2019 was proposed last year in the context of the pandemic and in 2019 because of Brexit. Given the international economic environment, returns on investments are minimal and the €500 million will be better spent being invested here in Ireland. That said, the medium-term benefits of building a counter-cyclical fund remain. The macroeconomic outlook for next year is very positive and in those circumstances I would like to see the payments resume in the future. It is important we prudently set aside funds during the good times for future challenges. We have mentioned challenge of Brexit. Who was to know that something would surpass Brexit? It was the issue of the time, and remains a significant challenge for this country, but then along came the pandemic and really put us to the test. However, the Government moved quickly, and rightly so, at the outset of the pandemic to provide funds. The Minister of State said it required €48 billion to deal with the pandemic and to fund front-line Departments, local authorities and agencies to ensure the continuity of public services, protect incomes and re-imagine the public realm.

The work of officials and staff at the Department of Social Protection in particular should be noted. They reacted overnight, ensuring more than half a million workers had access to pandemic unemployment payment. I also want to acknowledge the actions of Revenue in dealing with companies and all their queries about employees and themselves.

5 o'clock

The response of the Revenue Commissioners was exemplary, especially in the early and middle parts of last year, and should be acknowledged. Local authorities also moved quickly to improve the public realm, installing public toilets, bins, outdoor seating, etc., and providing all sorts of other services. I encourage local authorities to retain improvements that have worked and engage in meaningful public consultation, which is key in this regard.

However, now the acute phase of the pandemic has passed - I hope it is behind us - it is important we resume normal procurement practices to ensure taxpayers' money is spent prudently. This is particularly important given the increase in costs for construction projects and services. I join the Minister of State in expressing condolences to those who passed away during the pandemic. This is not all about money. This is about the impact it has had on society, families, workers and businesses across the country. We must remember that when we are discussing finance in this House. I thank the Minister of State and his officials for their attendance today and for their assistance over the past 20 months.

Deputy Réada Cronin: As has already been stated, Sinn Féin will support this motion. As Deputies will know, we rejected the Act after our proposals on housing, for example, were rejected and it was decided the capital injection could be used for banking, the most over-injected, overindulged, perennially pampered sector in the State and one that still pays no tax. Given that we are dealing with a full-blown and unprecedented public health emergency, we need to ensure our hospitals and other public services are as well funded as possible.

We can all see the crisis in our hospitals. At Naas General Hospital, healthcare workers are out on their feet but they keep going. The HSE, in a reply to a parliamentary question, indicated there are over 100 vacancies at Naas General Hospital. From speaking to nurses, it seems the only thing keeping doctors, nurses and healthcare workers going at the moment is the solidarity they show each other. When it comes to the rainy day fund we absolutely agree it is already bucketing down but when it comes to housing, childcare, carers, ventilating schools, supporting people through a just transition and the climate crisis, the monsoon arrived a long time ago. There is a huge amount of work to be done so that we do not create a divide between the climate haves and have-nots. The Minister for Finance took umbrage at the mention of words "undermining democracy" but I can tell the Government that if it allows inequality to take hold, it will present a real danger to social cohesion. People cannot be excluded from transitioning well and comfortably simply due to money.

To return to the issue of housing, instead of looking after the vulture funds and planning punitive roadshows to entice more of them to come here, we should be looking after their prey, the workers in this State who are despairing of ever being able to either rent or buy an affordable home. With all the talk of biodiversity, the vulture is in no fear of extinction in this country. While the vulture funds are allowed a clean sweep, the biodiversity of ordinary people trying to buy houses has collapsed. This biodiversity and habitats disaster is unlikely to be addressed by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, at COP26 but it is true all the same.

I am equally concerned about our carers, who have suffered hugely throughout the pandemic. Sinn Féin has set a clear path for recognising and assist them. I am all for pupils, teachers and the wider school staff. The State has signed up to the EU buildings directive which would vastly improve ventilation in our schools for health and safety reasons. It is beyond me that this fund is not being used to fast-track funding for investment in design, which is desperately needed. Covid might not be a problem for a rainy day but a rainy season. As a result of diversion, funds are not available for what is essential for the people as opposed to essential for the Government and its preferred projects and sectors. The issue with the rainy day fund is not just money but the priorities for spending that money. That is the difference between the Government and the Opposition. It is about priorities and choices and I hope the Government will make some of the right choices.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Sinn Féin supports the motion. Obviously, the rainy day fund needed to be used for the rainy day we found ourselves in with the Covid crisis. It goes without saying that we are far from through this period. We are still in a very difficult situation. We need to look at the entire way our financing operation works. We need to look at our health system from a point of view of doing all that can be done at this point in time. That entails the use of booster vaccines and ensuring a best-case scenario for contact tracing. I welcome that we finally have some sort of movement on the use of antigen testing. All these tools need to be put in place. We are in a period of living with Covid so we need to do all that is necessary.

Major issues still need to be dealt with, especially from a capital expenditure point of view. It goes without saying we are in the middle of a housing crisis and the only way to get to the crux of the problem is to address the supply of affordable housing. That means providing rental properties, mortgages and council houses. We need to facilitate that provision in any way possible. Unfortunately, there has been insufficient planning to provide what is necessary for people who are suffering.

Sinn Féin accepts that as well as the pandemic, we are also dealing with a climate crisis, an energy crisis and a cost of living crisis. As I have said previously, we need the Government to address those parts of these crises that it can address. The European Union and other bigger players have greater wriggle room than we have for dealing with some of these issues. Turning off the tap in Russia cannot be sorted out by this State. I also accept that we are not sure of what the implications will be if the British Government triggers Article 16 or if doing so would be just another means of negotiating. We do not know to what the end result will be but we need to take action in relation to what we can.

We are talking about huge expenditure on the national development plan and necessary works. I am worried and perturbed that of the €5.1 billion to be spent on roads over a decade, €1 billion will be spent in the first five years. This means the business end will be in the second five years of the decade. However, we have all accepted that we action at the business end on climate change and carbon budgets will also come in the second half of this decade. For this reason, we need to have a more realistic conversation on what needs to be done.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion, which I support. The Government should not transfer €500 million into the national surplus reserve fund in 2021. We are in a period of great crisis. Society, including the business community, has suffered great financial hardship because of Covid-19. Unfortunately, I fear we will feel the effects of this pandemic for a long time to come. In times like this, we need to invest in infrastructure and services. This is not a time for investing in rainy day funds. We invest in rainy day funds

so that we will have funds and resources in times of great need. Now is a time of great need. We need to invest in our infrastructure and services. I am calling on the Government not only to suspend payments into the national surplus reserve fund but to use the funds to invest in our infrastructure and services.

Last week in the House, I highlighted the fact that the most recent GeoView report, in 2020, showed there were 92,251 vacant addresses in Ireland. This represents a staggering 4.6% of all housing stock. Surely I am not the only person who sees this both as a problem and a major opportunity. Many, if not all, of those homes are situated in established residential areas where there are existing services, such as schools, shops, playgrounds and doctors. We are in the midst of a housing crisis.

The Government has continually stated that housing is one of its top priorities. It has also stated that it is willing to listen to all suggestions. This is an immediate answer to many of the housing issues and I just cannot understand why this Government is not looking at it more closely.

This situation requires one thing and one thing only: funding. What better way to use the national surplus fund than to invest it in bringing vacant homes back into the housing stock? Many of these homes just need cosmetic upgrading that will not cost as much as building from scratch and can be brought on stream much quicker. The longer we leave these houses vacant, the longer it will take to bring them back onto the market. From my experience in Dundalk, I know that many vacant homes exist. If you walk through any established residential area, I am sure you will find vacant homes, not only in Dundalk and Drogheda, but in many towns throughout Ireland.

The housing crisis is not going away. Once we emerge from this pandemic, the demand for housing will still be there. The effects of the housing crisis are clear to be seen and it affects us in many ways. First and foremost, we must not leave anybody homeless. As a society, we must be able to provide housing for everyone. Young families starting out on their journey are finding it nearly impossible to secure their first home. When we look at this more closely, I fear that unless we solve the housing crisis we will eventually lose out in investment from many of the large companies already situated in Ireland. They will look elsewhere when expanding, if it is the case that their workforce cannot secure suitable housing. I know from dealing with constituents in Dundalk that many of the big employers in the area have concerns about the lack of suitable accommodation for their employees.

On the motion, I once again voice my support for the suspension of the payment for 2021, but I also ask the Government to use the fund for housing. As I have said many times in this House, Louth County Council has been to the forefront in bringing vacant houses back into the housing stock. It has identified many vacant homes and upgraded them so they could be used as homes again. From speaking to officials in the council, the only thing holding them back is funding, which I am sure is the case for every other county council in the country. I am sure that with a little effort by the Government the vacant homes issue could be resolved, which in turn will go a long way to solving the overall housing crisis. As I said, the Government has continually asked for solutions; this is a ready-made solution. It is a no-brainer. The Government needs to listen. This is not about political point-scoring, but about real solutions to real problems.

The rainy day fund should be used to bring vacant homes back into the housing stock. Why

build new homes in an area if homes already exist in it that are vacant? This does not make any sense. We need to think outside the box. If we target even a third of vacant homes as ones to be brought back into the housing stock, it will mean in excess of 30,000 homes could be brought on stream over the next 12 months. Surely, the Government can see this is a solution to a major problem. I will repeat that there are 92,251 vacant addresses in Ireland. That is one in every 20 houses situated in established areas, with schools, shops, playgrounds and doctors. I ask the Minister of State please to listen. I call on the Government to have an open and honest debate on the housing crisis and to discuss my proposal that the rainy day fund should be used to bring vacant homes back into the housing stock.

Last week, I raised an issue with the Taoiseach during Leaders' Questions. He told me he would contact the Minister of State's office which, in fairness, has contacted me. It concerns a company in Dundalk, Air Bound Trampoline Park, which looks after people with disabilities and is doing a fantastic job. The problem is it cannot get insurance. The Minister of State's office gave me a contact name but when we contacted the company concerned it stated that all it would look after is outdoor activities. The trampoline park is an indoor facility. I again plead with the Minister of State, whose Department kept its word, as did the Taoiseach, to help us keep this trampoline park open. This is only one of many such facilities and if we can help this one, I am sure we can help the rest. I thank the Minister of State for his support.

Deputy Michael Collins: The rainy day fund, known as the national surplus exceptional contingencies reserve fund, is supposed to be an economic buffer. There is currently no money in the country's rainy day fund because it was raided last year due to pandemic expenses. Let us not forget, pensioners in this country did not receive one extra cent from this so-called rainy day fund.

There are far more needs now than there will be years down the line, for example, the fishing crisis. This Government gave away 25% of our pelagic quota on Christmas Eve last year. That was a real happy Christmas to every fisherman, fisherwoman and child in our country's coastal communities. They did not get a brown cent. Where was the rainy day fund for the fishermen at that time? They are since counting their severe losses.

Farmers are in desperate need and will have a very bleak-looking future if the Government continues in the way it is going at the moment. It kicked the can down the road on the issue of giving any funding to farmers in this year's budget. That is fine if people can afford to have the can kicked down the road but the farming sector, which got no funding, certainly cannot.

I cannot understand why we are talking about rainy day funds when urgent projects need funding in our country. I have continually pleaded with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach, when they have been before the House over the past number of months, for funds for roads in west Cork. They do not believe or understand that there is a need for that. There is nothing for bypasses in Innishannon and Bandon, the northern-southern relief road, Bantry, the N71 and the R586. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, was honest enough to state that it would possibly take eight to 13 years. There needs to be investment in transport in rural Ireland. There are now some talks about such investment, which is needed urgently.

The cost of energy is rising rapidly leaving every person, including the most vulnerable, yet again, in debt. Funding needs to be put aside and invested immediately in this as people are in fuel poverty.

There are no special needs assistants, SNAs, in our country. Last week, I asked the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, about that and he said that they would be available next year. That is no good for people who need SNAs in schools this year. There is no funding available for that. People in schools all over west Cork are telling me they are short of SNAs, whereas the capital seems to have no problem getting them. We also need funding for CoAction, which is closing its centre in west Cork this week because there is no pay parity. That is another project that needs funding immediately.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this issue. While I do not blame the Minister of State, I certainly understand why we cannot put any money into the so-called rainy day fund when the Taoiseach went to COP26 in Scotland and gave away €225 million this year, with a promise of more over the next ten years. How could we have any money to put into the rainy day fund?

While I acknowledge the Covid pandemic has been a savage strain on the coffers of the Department of Finance, this is not the thing to do. We are not a country rolling in money such that we can give away €225 million when it is raining for many already. People cannot get proper healthcare or a proper service. It is pouring down on top of working people, including those in the transport business. The farming community did not get a bob in the budget and, on top of that, the cost of diesel is savage now. It is raining down on top of farmers every day because they cannot move without diesel and it is an extra cost.

People are struggling on waiting lists, many of whom are homeless, suffering and wondering where they will finish up. Many people with families are being told to get out of the house they are renting. It is raining for people because of high rents, especially in towns like Killarney, Kenmare and Dingle. There are 676 applications on our local improvement schemes list, only 31 of which were completed over the past two years. At the rate we are going, it will be 80 years before that list is exhausted. I ask the Minister of State to look at that matter. Surely, we will not give away money next year when things like that have to be dealt with.

Can the Minister of State imagine that people on benefit payments will not get any fuel allowance? People on illness benefit and even all those who paid stamps would not get those benefit payments otherwise. Someone on a benefit payment such as illness benefit who is living with a pensioner with cancer will not get the fuel allowance. Can the Minister of State imagine that? The Taoiseach then went and gave away €225 million last week. It is absolutely ridiculous giving it away like that when it is raining on a lot of other people in our country.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I do not disagree with the terms of the motion regarding a rainy day fund. However, and maybe this is just my disposition, I am not quite as optimistic for the Irish economy as the Minister of State is. I welcome the image he has portrayed. He has no alternative but to portray that image, at least in public, although perhaps it is a belief he shares in private as well. It is not just that we are not replenishing a rainy day fund, which I do not have a problem with because if ever there was a rainy day, it would be during a pandemic, but the amount of debt we are incurring, and the amount of spending and how little we have to show for it, are what concern me. Obviously, we are not putting money away now because we need to spend money.

The general message I am hearing from economists, even to ordinary people, is that now is not the time to save money but the time to spend it because it might not be worth nearly what it is worth now in a year or two or in ten years' time if they saved it. That is because the only way

we can deal with the kind of moneys being borrowed by almost every country, but especially this country, is inflation. I asked the Minister for Finance, who, more importantly from the point of view of any influence on monetary policy, is also the chair of the eurozone group of finance ministers, if he had any issue with inflation. I asked that because of the effect it is having on ordinary people, which I will come to in a moment. He said he did not. That is understandable because if we enter a period of quantitative tightening, one of the first things that will be impacted will be the ability to sell Government bonds. The fact that they are very attractive to international financiers should not necessarily be taken as a compliment because what else are they going to spend their money on in the current climate?

The Minister for Finance made an interesting speech at the end of the debate on the Finance Bill and it is one I would like to take up with him in person. He talked about the use of language and said we needed to be able to have a reasonable, rational debate. That is something I would agree with but in the same week, the Minister for Health, who is the Minister of State's party colleague, albeit a relatively new-found one, sat exactly where he is now and sent out a tweet saying that everybody who opposed his view was reckless. We do not live in a system of *eine Stimme*. It is not our way. It is not democracy and it never should be. We cannot label people who question things. We had a Minister for Finance who sat where the Minister of State is now and spoke about "pinkos". I notice, by the way, that the Minister of State is wearing a nice pink shirt and red tie. He referred to the pinkos and liberals who were questioning the orthodoxy of the Ahern years and the economic approach of Bertie Ahern. I am not here to vilify the man. There were achievements during his reign, particularly the Good Friday Agreement.

To question and debate is a good thing in any democracy. I have questioned and will continue to question the value that we are getting for the money we are spending on Covid response. Our expenditure increased by 20% last year. The European average was about 10% and the expenditure of countries like France and Denmark only increased by about 6%, in comparison with their infection rates, if we want to use that as the metric. I do not think we can measure a society by infection rates or start to look at fellow human beings as mere carriers of pathogens. It is a very sad state of affairs if there is no "I" or "You" in society but mere carriers of pathogens. We are not getting value for money. Nor, by the way, are we getting value for the relatively paltry infrastructural investment we are making at the moment. Over €100 million has been spent on the national broadband scheme to date and only 2,700 premises have been connected. We have no idea what the overrun on the national children's hospital will be.

We need to look at how this State spends money. Interest rates, most assuredly, will not always be where they are now. Money will not always be as available as it is now. That is what the rainy day fund was about. I do not have a problem with the fact that the Government is not putting money into it now but I do have a problem with running a Department of Finance on the basis that cheap money will always be available in abundance because that is simply not the case.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I have listened with interest to the contributions of Deputies to the debate on this motion. I will respond to some of the points and issues raised. First, I acknowledge that every person who spoke was supportive of the motion not to make the contribution to the rainy day fund, in view of the costs involved with Covid-19 and because there are other priorities at this particular point in time. As I mentioned in my opening statement, fiscal support of over €41 billion, which is nearly one fifth of the national income as measured by GNI*, was made available in 2020 and 2021 in the form of direct public expenditure, tax expenditures and below-the-line supports such as loans and guarantees. Given the continuing presence of

the pandemic and the economic disruption it continues to cause, when we include the funds allocated for 2022 the total amount provided for stands at approximately €48 billion.

The total value of payments made to date under the Government's three main support schemes, namely, the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, or its predecessor, the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, and the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, is over €17.5 billion. Over €8 billion has been paid to households through the PUP and over €6.5 billion has been paid to employees through the EWSS and its precursor, the TWSS. Approximately €650 million has been paid to businesses through the CRSS.

The Government is steadfast in its commitment to there being no cliff edge to the EWSS. It has been an extremely successful policy instrument during these challenging times, one which has greatly assisted us in maintaining the link between employers and employees. As announced on budget day, the EWSS will remain in place in a graduated form until 30 April 2022. That is six months after the lifting of most public health restrictions and two months after the PUP ceases. The revised arrangements for the EWSS strike a balance between helping those businesses that continue to need support while recalibrating the scheme in light of the wider economic recovery.

Public spending next year will amount to €87.6 billion. The Government has been steadfast in its commitment to keeping this amount below the ceiling laid out in the summer economic statement. Our medium-term strategy sets out that over the next two budgets we will restore our public finances, phase out temporary Covid-related spending and repair our public finances. This strategy strikes the appropriate balance between tapering supports and investing in the domestic economy. In budget 2022, core expenditure will grow by 4.6% in line with the trend of growth in our economy and by 2022, we will only be borrowing for capital spending.

It is worth recalling how dramatically the budget landscape has transformed over the last two years and, in particular, how we entered the crisis with a budgetary surplus of €2 billion. While in the 2021 summer economic statement my Department forecast a combined deficit of just €34.5 billion for 2021 and 2022, by budget day this had been revised to €21.5 billion for both years, a reduction of approximately 40%. Critically, this means our deficit this year in terms of the national income is falling significantly. As such, it is clear that we are reducing our overall borrowing this year and next year. Budget 2022 will bring our overall national debt to just under €240 billion. That means a debt of €50,000 for every man, woman and child in the country. This is not where we want to be when interest rates start to rise again. That is why we need to repair our public finances and put them back on a sustainable footing.

A number of Deputies spoke about housing. As everybody in this Chamber is well aware, a core, if not the core, challenge facing the country in the coming years is housing. The Government is determined to build more homes and total housing expenditure has more than doubled since 2016. As of 2021, it will be more than 40% above the peak level in 2008. The Government's Housing for All strategy targets delivery of, on average, 33,000 new homes per annum up to 2030. Housing construction has already rebounded rapidly this year and there have been almost 30,000 housing commencements in the 12 months to August of this year.

As part of the Housing for All strategy, under the Finance Bill 2021, the Minister for Finance is introducing a zoned land tax to encourage the use of land for building homes. The primary objective of the measure is to increase the supply of residential accommodation, rather than to

raise revenue. Ensuring that people have access to home ownership in this country is a priority for the Government. Focusing directly on those trying to access the housing market, the help to buy scheme has been a significant support for first-time buyers of new homes. From 2022 onwards, the scheme is being continued at its current rates. Following the recent tax strategy group recommendation, the Minister has also announced a full review of the scheme will be carried out in the course of next year.

Also, on housing, as part of budget 2022, the Minister proposes to extend the relief for pre-letting expenses for landlords for a further three years. This will continue to encourage landlords into the residential rental sector to return empty properties to the market as quickly as possible. Deputies mentioned the importance of bringing vacant houses back into use. That is important not only in the private sector but especially in the public sector through our local authorities.

Given the likely continuing impact of Covid-19 on the public finances, it was clear from early 2021 that the making of the planned €500 million annual contribution to the rainy day fund was unlikely. Consequently, this was signalled in April 2021 in the stability programme update and the summer economic statement. The Act which established the rainy day fund requires the Minister for Finance to bring forward such a motion when he decides not to pay the €500 million to the rainy day fund from the Exchequer in any of the years from 2019 to 2023. As I said, we commend this motion to the House.

A number of issues were mentioned regarding the commitment to build back up the fund. I make clear in my opening contribution that the Minister for Finance wants to be in a position to add to the funds in the rainy day fund at some point into the future in order to be in a position to deal with any potential future economic crisis but to do so at this point in time does not make economic sense. I was also asked about the future of the rainy day fund. The Minister has made it clear that we are committed to adding to it as soon as resources permit.

I was asked about the lessons to be learned from the rainy day fund. The first lesson was not only learned but implemented. There was €1.5 billion in the fund at the end of 2019. That was used during the Covid crisis. Had we not that money in the fund at that time we would have had to borrow another €1.5 billion, which would have placed an extra burden on future taxpayers. I mentioned the national debt can be equated to a debt of €50,000 on the head of every man, woman and child in the country. Having that money in the fund has alleviated to some extent an increase in our debt.

Farming was mentioned by Deputies in the Cork region. I confirm an announcement made earlier today of €70 million to food producers and processors in the meat and dairy sector to help them deliver, diversify and win new markets and customers post Brexit. One of the Deputies from Cork said the Government is doing nothing for farmers. However, €28 million of that of €70 million was allocated to meat and beef and dairy processing facilities in County Cork. That is a commitment to Irish agriculture and to suppliers and farmers and suppliers, who will have modern processing facilities for their products, and will help win new customers abroad.

On behalf of the Minister for Finance, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Regional Transport Infrastructure: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— State-led strategic infrastructural investment is essential for the social and economic growth of our villages, towns, and cities and to ensure balanced regional development and increase connectivity;

— the network of 94,000 kilometres of regional and local roads across the State provide vital connectivity to rural Ireland;

— the State's regional airports carried 5.45 million passengers in 2019 and reports from 2016 and 2019 demonstrate that Cork, Shannon and Ireland West Airports generate a combined annual €2.13 billion to the economy and support directly or indirectly 29,050 jobs;

— our ports are vital assets to our coastal and island communities and have important economic functions including building resilience in respect of supply chains post-Brexit;

— public transport investment, including bus and rail, can play a major role in decreasing CO2 emissions from the transportation sector and provide workers, families, and communities an alternative and sustainable mode of transport;

— the recently published National Development Plan 2021-2030 sets out a broad vision for infrastructure investment; however, there are many projects without a commencement and completion date or an identifiable funding allocation, with projects seemingly prioritised on the basis of planning considerations rather than their importance for achieving balanced and strategic development; and

— the current strategic rail review is being completed on an all-island basis which is a positive development;

further notes that:

— the approach of successive Governments has failed rural Ireland and the downgrading of the North and Western regions from a 'developed region' to a 'region in transition' by the European Commission is an example of this;

— senior members of Government, up to and including the Taoiseach, have indicated publicly that a number of critical regional infrastructure projects outlined in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 may never be delivered, casting doubt on approximately 30 road projects, while other public transport projects will be delayed by years;

— Bus Éireann Expressway bus routes from Galway, Limerick, Cork and Belfast have been cut, impacting connectivity and frustrating efforts to reduce transport emissions;

— an economic appraisal by former Economic and Social Research Institute economist Dr. John Bradley in June 2021, entitled 'The Atlantic Railway Corridor - The Galway-Mayo Rail Link: An Appraisal', assesses potential demand for Phase 2 and 3 of the Western Rail Corridor at 575,000 passengers per annum by 2030, and finds in a cost-benefit analysis that

restoring the rail connection between Galway and Mayo via Tuam yields a positive net present value and a benefit to cost ratio of greater than one, concluding that a strong business case based on potential passenger and existing freight flows to southern ports justifies it being prioritised for delivery; and

— no firm commitment to deliver the extension of the Western Rail Corridor to Mayo has been provided in the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide clarity on all projects included in the National Development Plan 2021-2030, including funding and timescales for the progression and the estimated completion of projects, ensuring balanced regional development is prioritised in the delivery of projects;

— introduce a statutory requirement that all Government Departments and public bodies will undertake rural impact assessments in relation to their measures, especially where measures have a socio-economic impact on rural Ireland;

— fully commit to the delivery of the Western Rail Corridor extension to Mayo as a key infrastructure project for regional development and seek relevant sources of European Union funding to advance the project;

— prepare a new all-island national aviation policy that recognises the impact the pandemic has had on our regional airports to ensure they can continue to contribute to sustainable regional development;

— resource Bus Éireann via the National Transport Authority to ensure there is no curtailment of the intercity Expressway bus services; and

— urgently expediate the delivery of key public transport projects as outlined in the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS) 2040 and Galway Transport Strategy.

I am sharing time with colleagues and I will take five minutes.

This Private Members' motion is an attempt to put balanced regional development and investment in public transport at the centre of Government and to be central to tackling the climate change crisis. The national development plan was to be the litmus test of the Government's commitment to regional development. I believe that is a test that it has failed. Right now, workers and families are being hit hard by carbon taxes. This is not only unfair but also an environmental strategy that will not work. Taxes designed to change behaviour only work when the people have alternatives. This motion is crystal clear. We need State-led investment in strategic infrastructure for our regions. We have decades of evidence of how successive Governments have failed to deliver for rural Ireland, not least the west is categorised by the EU as a region in transition. This is not a case of just a political party saying that Governments have not delivered for the west. This is being said by the EU also and by many other commentators. We desperately need State-led investment in infrastructure but, sadly, we seem to have another Government that is unwilling to lead. We have 94,000 km of regional and local roads across the State that provide vital connectivity for, and to, rural Ireland. Yet despite years of empty promises, in Mayo we still do not have delivery on the likes of the N26 and R312.

Sinn Féin has brought forward this motion to give the Government a second chance, a chance for it to show voters it is serious about regional transport infrastructure, it is serious

about reducing carbon emissions and that it has a vision for our country beyond maintaining the *status quo* and blocking change. This motion is a direct response to the Government failure to deliver on very modest demands for investment in infrastructure in the regions. The motion calls on the Government to provide clarity on all projects included in the national development plan, ensuring balanced regional development is prioritised in the delivery of projects; to introduce a requirement for the Government to undertake rural impact assessment of all policies; and to prepare a new all-island national aviation policy that recognises the impact the pandemic has had on our regional airports such as Ireland West Airport Knock; to resource Bus Éireann via the National Transport Authority and to ensure there is no curtailment on the intercity Expressway services; as well as to urgently deliver key public transport projects such as those outlined in the Cork metropolitan area strategy and the Galway transport strategy.

Regarding an issue that is very close to my heart as is the case for many people in Mayo and across the west, the motion calls specifically on the Government to fully commit to the delivery of the western rail corridor extension to Mayo. The western rail corridor has become a byword for regional development and investment in the west. Why has the Irish Rail 2040 rail freight strategy not even been released yet? That strategy has remained unpublished for almost a year and it is referenced in a number of recent publications, including the terms of reference for the rail review and the draft consultation for the greater Dublin area transport strategy published today. The west will not forgive another Government for failing to deliver on this project.

If the Government does not support this motion and commit to the western rail corridor, what little faith people in Mayo and across the west have left in it will continue to erode and disappear. The publication of the economic report by the former Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, economist, Dr. John Bradley, earlier this year confirmed what Sinn Féin has been saying for years, namely, that there is a strong business case for restoring the rail connection between Galway and Mayo via Tuam and the western rail corridor should be reopened and prioritised as a capital project. Many Government Deputies from the west have been very critical of the national development plan, NDP, and the complete lack of any commitment to the western rail corridor. They are right. Not including the project in the NDP is a missed opportunity for the Government to show it is committed to regional development in the west. I call on Members from the parties in government to take this second chance to support regional infrastructure development and the reopening of the western rail corridor by voting in favour of the Sinn Féin motion.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is incredible that on the day the national development plan was launched, we were told by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, that there were projects included in it that will never be delivered. That made sense, however, to any of us who read it, given that it provided for €5.1 billion for new roads, €800 million of which was already committed to roads at construction, but there was a long list of 30-odd projects at a cost of approximately €1 billion each. We could see straight away that the numbers did not add up. Despite this, two days later, to appease disgruntled backbenchers, we were told by the Taoiseach that there were things not included in the plan that would be delivered. That said it all. It is exactly what one gets when there is a coalition pulling in different directions and for different reasons. It was clear the Government could not agree what needed to come out of the plan, so nothing came out of the plan. It was a charade and an embarrassment and it would be a joke if it were not so serious.

There is any number of reasons that the NDP is hugely important. It should be a statement of the commitment of the State to lead in delivering balanced regional development and stra-

tegic development. There is an important point that has not been picked up on in the debate, namely, that there seems to be a dangerous shift in decision-making processes. Instead of trying to create an overarching plan in a logical way, there is a shift to a kind of survival-of-the-fittest strategy. We are told projects will proceed on the basis of which of them get through planning and reach the starting line, or the famous decision-making gates, first. It will be very difficult in this scenario to provide a counterbalance to the already dominant regions.

I could say more about rail and roads provision but there is not time. The plan is not good enough. The Government has a second chance to get it right by supporting the Sinn Féin motion.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is léir do chách go bhfuil an Stát ag teip ar an iarthar agus ar na pobail tuaithe mar gheall ar easpa infheistíochta cuí agus níl sa phlean forbartha naisiúnta ach leanúint den treocht sin. Ní féidir gan na torthaí den treocht seo a fheiceáil nuair a bhreathnaítear ar staid na mbóithre i gConamara. Tá an R366 ó dheas agus an N59 ó thuaidh an-dainséarach ar fad. Ní féidir le daoine rothaíocht nó siúl orthu go sábhailte agus bíonn timpistí orthu go minic. Tá grúpa ar an gCeathrú Rua ag impí ar an Stát ar feadh blianta le haghaidh maoiniú do chosáin agus do chúram ar bhóthar Dhoire Fhatharta agus tá siad ag fanacht go fóill. D’ardaigh mé féin bóthar Chuan na Loinge i gceantar na noileán anuraidh. Bhí an bóthar ag cur bac ar dhaoine dul chuig an obair agus ar scoil mar go bhfuil sé faoi uisce chomh minic sin. Tá muintir Ros Muc an-bhuartha go mbeidh drochthimpiste ar an mbóthar mar gheall ar na poill mhóir atá ann, agus nach bhfuil cosain ná soilse air. Tá go leor samplaí eile fud fad Chonamara.

We also see this lack of investment in other aspects of daily life in rural Ireland. The 20-X20 bus route has not been reinstated, even though thousands of people in rural towns and villages relied on it. Earlier this year, the 51 bus route was cut back severely, leaving passengers with no evening service after 5 p.m. Fortunately, after intense criticism, that decision was rolled back, but only slightly. Rather than fully reinstating the service, with one bus leaving every hour until 8 p.m., there is now only a 7.05 p.m. service. Even before these cuts were made, rural Ireland needed more public transport links, not fewer. The NDP also failed to commit to a western rail corridor, something that is desperately needed to build connectivity between communities in the west. It seems we all share a vision of an Ireland with less reliance on personal motor vehicles but that vision will not be realised without policy and funding.

I want to raise another piece of infrastructure that is central to the success of coastal areas like my constituency, namely, piers. For communities that are built around the sea, including many parts of Connemara and, in particular, our offshore islands, a safe and functional pier is vital. I encourage the Minister to support the motion.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: In 2019, the EU downgraded the west and north-west region from a developed region to a region in transition. This is not something that just happened; it was the direct consequence of our region being at the bottom of the table when it comes to Government investment in health, roads and third level education. It is a direct result of the failure of successive Governments to invest in critical infrastructure and ensure the region west of the Shannon got its fair share. Unfortunately, by the looks of the national development plan, the Government has failed to grasp the serious situation in which our region finds itself.

We have an opportunity to address this by way of the European Regional Development Fund. For every €100 the Government spends in our region, the EU will provide €60 of that contribution under this funding. It is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. Taking public

transport as just one example, we have a situation, as referred to by my colleague, where the 20-X20 Dublin-Galway route, an important route covering a number of rural towns from Balinasloe to Ahascragh, has been lost. There is also an issue with the Local Link bus service, which covers a really important route from Ballaghaderreen to Roscommon, stopping in rural towns and villages that have no access whatsoever to public transport. When I contacted the National Transport Authority, NTA, seeking an increase in the service, I was told that the authority is there to work with Local Link to increase the network but the money is not there to do it. Ordinary people are being crippled with diesel and petrol prices the likes of which most have not seen before. At the same time, the very few alternatives that are there, such as Local Link and the 20-X20 route, are being pulled or the money is not there to fund them.

The Government needs to make a decision. Is it going to fund the alternatives and make it easier for people to access them, or is it going to keep cutting vital public transport networks and refusing to fund the existing ones to make them better? This is the decision that has to be made. It is not just about investment in public transport; it is about investment right across the board to ensure those of us who call the west of Ireland home can live there contentedly and raise families there.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Taking a map of our island and following the route to Donegal, a person is lucky if he or she is setting out on that journey from Dublin because there will be motorway for the first 30 minutes of it. After that, however, the drive will be on a mix of national and secondary roads, often winding, poorly lit roads in dire conditions. If one is going to where I am from, Gweedore, or somewhere on the Inishowen Peninsula, the journey will take four and a half or possibly up to five hours. Is it any wonder that our towns and villages in rural Ireland are suffering and failing to retain talent and attract investment? The infrastructure to support the north west and other parts of rural Ireland is simply not there. Donegal is one of only three counties in this State that do not have access to rail services. The last time a train travelled through Donegal, my mother was a teenager.

I welcome the indication by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, that a rail network to the north west, as he termed it, is doable. It is long overdue. However, any railway to the north west must directly connect the region to Donegal via stops along the way, whether in counties Tyrone, Monaghan or Meath. That is the vision and ambition the north west needs. Investment in rural transport and infrastructure must also include investment in bus services. Last week, I raised the issues with the Bus Éireann route that connects Donegal town to Dublin. It was cancelled 183 times in the past two years. One could not make that up - 183 times cancelled. That is happening without warning and often without proper notice via Bus Éireann. People are standing on the side on the road in the dead of night with no idea whether the bus will show. Constituents have contacted me and have told me how they have missed flights and appointments. This Government is launching another flashy brochure about major investment in new rural bus services and people are literally standing at the side of the road wondering if the bus will turn up. Some 183 times in the past two years, it has failed to do so. I ask the Taoiseach for an urgent review of route 30 with Bus Éireann to resolve these problems. Tacaím le rún Shinn Féin. Tá méid curtha chun tosaigh ag mo pháirtí leis an infheistíocht cheart agus an struchtúr ceart a chur i gcrích sa dóigh is go mbeadh infreastruchtúr den chéad scoth do mo chontae, Dún na nGall, agus do réigiúin tuaithe eile ar fud na tíre.

Deputy Martin Browne: Sinn Féin has brought this motion before the House because rural Ireland is sick and tired of being paid lip service. Rural communities have been dismissed by Government for far too long. The days of the development plans being used for Dáil re-election

must end now. During my time in the Dáil, I have constantly made representations about the shortcomings of our public transport links, but what actions have been taken? Has the timetable between Limerick Junction and Waterford been adjusted? No, it has not. Has the same been done for the Ballybrophy line? No. Has the X12 service been restored for Roscrea and Nenagh? No, it has not. Does the Minister for Transport have any intention of stopping rolling work closures on the Ballybrophy line, in favour of getting the job done in one go? No, he does not. Indeed, he did not even give me his views on the matter when I asked in a parliamentary question. When announcing the connecting Ireland rural transport plan recently, we were told the new standard for rural bus services is at least three return trips per day. Why does this standard not apply to the north and south Tipperary rural rail lines?

People in rural Ireland continue to face the same old struggles to do business and travel to work or education or even hospitals and yet as much attention was given in the national development plan to plans to extract water from the Shannon as was given to any projects for my county. That says much about this Government. Deputies such as I may stand here and outline what our constituents and rural businesses need, but this Government persistently ignores our citizens.

We see the Government clapping itself on the back for its plans to reduce emissions by freeing up town centres. Try convincing the people of Tipperary town of its concerns. There was no mention of the need for a bypass of Tipperary town in the national development plan, despite it constantly being raised in this House. We just saw the N24 project being relegated to subject to approval status. This is hardly a ringing endorsement of the project. We need clarity on this and on all the projects alluded to in the national development plan.

These are just some of the reasons we needed to bring forward this motion. Rural Ireland needs a balanced approach to development that helps our towns, villages and rural communities and listens to them. In this Bill, we propose a statutory requirement that all Departments and public bodies will undertake rural impact assessments on measures that have a socioeconomic impact on rural Ireland. We need this Government to come clean with people, instead of delaying matters under the guise of glossy brochures and we ask it to support this motion.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This motion is about ensuring we establish a proper infrastructure throughout rural Ireland in order that people can function and live to their full potential. Due to the failure of past and current Governments, that is simply not the case. The western rail corridor is one of the key infrastructure projects which needs to be delivered for the west of Ireland to ensure it can be competitive and bring industry, commerce and productivity back into that region and yet the Government continues to turn its face against it. The transport infrastructure policy of this Government needs to have a clear focus on delivering the western rail corridor. That needs to happen as an absolute priority. Buses and where our bus network throughout the country has huge problems continues to have issues.

Fortunately, County Leitrim has been part of a recent pilot project with the Local Link where we have improvement in the number of buses on the roads, connecting all our small towns and villages into Carrick-on-Shannon, Sligo and other areas and more people are using them. It proves the point that if infrastructure is put in place, people will use that and ensure it is delivered. Government continues, and this has been a policy for many years, to put pilot projects in place, prove they work and then pull them and put them nowhere else. We have seen that happen time and again. We want to make sure that does not happen in this context and the work that has been done on the Local Link project is spread throughout the entire country and

expanded upon, because, that is what needs to happen.

I also want to raise the issue of school bus transport, which has been an almost continuous yearly issue in that children are left standing along the side of the road who cannot get a bus to school. Absolutely key for people living in rural areas is making sure they have transport to send their children to school in every part of the country, not just in some select areas, which seems to be the policy of this Government up until now.

The other issue I will raise is aviation and specifically Ireland West Airport. The local authorities throughout the west have come together to put money aside to try to help develop Knock airport because it is key strategic infrastructure that needs to be developed to develop the west and ensure the potential of the people in the west is there for future generations. Unfortunately, the Government continues to put all its emphasis on a few small areas, mainly in the capital city. We see today the Government is pulling what money it was going to deliver, even for the capital city. A huge problem we have continuously highlighted is of people in rural Ireland needing to get fair play and it must be ensured that they are delivered some sense of that. Key to all of this is having adequate infrastructure in place. The national development plan is full of promises but little hope for the people who want to get delivery of all of these projects.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about regional transport infrastructure. I have no doubt there will be much agreement among all of us on the importance of regional and rural transport infrastructure. Too often, when we talk about transport, we end up discussing the cities. However, I am keenly aware rural and regional Ireland need improvements to its transport infrastructure and I am happy to have the opportunity to update the House on what this Government will deliver in that regard.

This Government is allocating unprecedented levels of funding toward improving active travel and greenway infrastructure throughout the country. For the first time, local authorities outside of the five cities can now apply for funding to the National Transport Authority, NTA, to support active travel improvements in towns and villages throughout the country, which is hugely positive. In our greenway programme, we are eager to see greenways better link in with local areas to ensure they become more than just tourism amenities and can connect local communities with each other and with local services.

I note the motion seemingly calls on NTA funding to be provided to expressway services.

6 o'clock

Deputies will be aware that there are two types of public transport: publicly subvented public transport and commercially operated public transport. Taxpayer funding is provided to publicly subvented services through the public service obligation, PSO, programme. It is not provided to commercial services because they are commercial. It is a basic premise and also a feature of EU law.

During the pandemic, Expressway, like other commercial operators, was able to avail of temporary Government financial support. However, the impact of the pandemic has been profound on certain Expressway routes from Galway, Limerick, Cork and Belfast. Following the decision to cease operating these Expressway services, the NTA completed a detailed assessment of various corridors to determine whether it was necessary for a replacement PSO service to be introduced to ensure no loss of connectivity to the travelling public. The NTA concluded

that other than the X8 from Dublin to Cork route, sufficient connectivity is provided by the remaining operators and that the public service obligation is adequately met by other rail and bus services, thereby negating the need for further intervention.

In relation to rail, the national development plan, NDP, commits to increased investment in the inter-urban and inter-regional rail network. This increased investment will permit track relaying on the Dublin to Cork line to increase line speeds. It has been facilitating track renewal works on the Ballybrophy line. It will also allow for improvements on the Limerick Junction to Waterford line. Importantly, a strategic rail review has commenced. It will examine all aspects of inter-urban and inter-regional rail on the island of Ireland. It will examine how to improve regional rail connectivity. The review will provide an investment framework for the development of the railway sector over the coming decades. As well as enhancing regional accessibility and supporting balanced regional development, it will consider the potential for high-speed rail links between the major cities. It will also consider the potential scope for improved rail services and infrastructure along the various existing or future potential corridors of the network, including the western rail corridor. It will provide the objective, evidence-informed basis we need to make investment decisions about the rail network. I expect a public consultation phase on the review will commence in the next few weeks.

I note the motion also refers to two of our regional cities, Cork and Galway. I am glad to report that there are significant projects under way in both cities. I am even more pleased to report that this Government will deliver significant projects in all four regional cities. In Cork and Galway, public consultation is well under way on the BusConnects projects in each city, with the NDP committing to substantial completion of those projects by 2030. In rail, phase one of the Cork commuter rail programme was included in Ireland's national recovery and resilience plan. It is scheduled for completion by 2026, with both Ceannt Station and Oranmore station having committed funding in the next few years for upgrades required at both stations.

Early next year should see the completion of a feasibility study on possible future upgrades for the Athenry to Galway corridor. This Government and I recognise that we need to invest in our national, regional and rural road network. The NDP commits to maintaining the quality of the existing national road network, with approximately €2.5 billion earmarked for the protection and renewal of our existing assets across the State. Some €5.1 billion is also being allocated to new national roads out to 2030, which will enable better regional accessibility across the country, as well as compact growth. At a regional and local level, funding will allow the Department to continue to provide significant grant support for a range of protection and renewal programmes. Regional and local roads are a vital lifeline for rural communities and also act as public transport links for local link services as they exist today and will be expanded in the future.

Taking to the skies for a moment, I would like to highlight the new Regional Airports Programme 2021 to 2025, which was published this year. The new programme proposes a continuation of the subsidised air services between Dublin and the regional airport at Donegal. As part of the new programme, €10 million in capital and €3.9 million in operational support has been made available to the regional airports during 2021. A further €6 million was made available under state aid-approved schemes to help airports mitigate the effects of Covid-19. Overall in 2021, three regional airports, Donegal, Ireland West Airport Knock, and Kerry, will have been allocated almost €20 million in Exchequer supports. The two regional State airports in Cork and Shannon will have received €51 million in 2021. This level of funding of our State airports is simply unprecedented.

Finally, on aviation, I note that the motion calls on the Government to prepare a new all-island national aviation policy. However, I would note that since its departure from the EU, the UK is no longer required to implement the EU *acquis* in respect of civil aviation. Given that civil aviation is under the remit of Westminster, as it is a reserved matter, it operates under a different regulatory framework to civil aviation in Ireland. Air transport operations between the two jurisdictions are governed by the provision of EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Therefore, it is neither appropriate nor feasible for the next iteration of the national aviation policy to be approached from an all-island perspective. Obviously, the issue of improved cross-Border connectivity will continue to be considered under the North-South Ministerial Council, NSMC. I am happy to inform the House in that regard that the Irish Government has agreed to take forward a review of potential options for supporting viable air services on two routes, Belfast to Cork and Derry to Dublin, as part of discussions on air connectivity. As I said at the outset, the spirit of this motion is broadly in line with the principles of this Government. However, it does not reflect the great work currently undertaken, nor our vision for the future of regional and rural transport services. It is about making sure that people have options.

Transport connectivity is hugely important for people who live and work in rural and regional Ireland. It is key to bringing life back into our towns and villages. To have strong local economies, and to give people real options for getting around, one needs good transport links, including good public transport options. Expanding the public transport network and increasing service levels in the ways set out in our policies and currently being delivered by our projects will lead to a balanced regional development and greater connectivity.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. We will go back to Sinn Féin. Deputy Thomas Gould is sharing time with Deputies Stanley, Guirke, and Brady.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last week in Cork we saw the announcement of BusConnects. Unfortunately, huge areas of Cork that will miss out on any public transport or proper public transport. Rural areas that have come into the city boundary are particularly affected. The Government talks about the importance of reducing the effects of climate change, of saving the environment, and about preventing global warming. Yet, the things that make the most sense, that will not destroy people's lives, are just not being done. Areas such as Carrignavar, Whitechurch, and many other areas on the periphery of the city, will only have buses every two hours. How does this provide public transport for people?

Over the summer, we were canvassing, knocking on doors, and meeting people again. We were going to houses where there were four cars. The husband and the wife both had a car, as did the son who might be going to college and the daughter who might be going to work. There were four cars at each house. If we are talking about proper transport systems and about proper public transport, how we are going to get people out of their cars? For many people living in these towns and villages, what has come out of COP26 means nothing to them. BusConnects, which they need, means nothing to them because it is not being provided. That is down to the Government's failure, to the failure of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and of the Green Party, to deliver proper public transport.

Alongside this, there is the scandalous price of public transport, in particular the train from Dublin to Cork. I checked the price this afternoon. The cost of bringing a family of two adults and two children up from Cork to Dublin by train is almost €200. The Government is trying to get people out of their cars. People have to go to Dublin for events, holidays or what have you. How can you justify that kind of expenditure, compared with using a car? If you use a car, you

can stop off and get food and fuel and it would be at least half the price of the train. The Government needs to care about providing public transport that is affordable to people. You cannot travel by bus from many parts of Cork to the city and many people cannot afford to use the train.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The motion is about recognising the importance of regional transport and for it to be financially backed. For years, I have been calling for the construction of the Mountmellick N80 bypass. This is important regional infrastructure. It has been promised for decades with little progress. The feasibility study was completed last year. The Government needs to be ambitious about regional transport and it needs to be backed up with money. Mountmellick bypass is based on a busy route, the N80, connecting the midlands and the west to the port of Rosslare, which is even more significant now due to Brexit, since hauliers are using this route to get goods to Rosslare and directly to the Continent, understandably bypassing the British landbridge. The current situation is unacceptable and ignores the serious traffic issues on the ground in Mountmellick. Trucks are driven through the centre of the town. There is a T-junction in the middle of Mountmellick. Lorries have to cross over to the wrong side of the road, at the very far side, to get around this. This presents dangers. Despite all of this, the project is not included in the national development plan. I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister for Transport some time ago and was informed that the project is not even listed on the national roads programme 2018-2027. There is no mention of it in the national development plan. I ask the Minister to look at the N80 again. It is carrying a substantial amount of traffic, including from the Minister's county, to the west. Traffic coming from Mayo, Roscommon and other counties and going to Rosslare is travelling through the centre of Mountmellick. I ask the Minister to revisit that.

I also raise the need for bus shelters. I have been raising this with the National Transport Authority for years. If we are going to get people to use buses, we have to provide bus shelters. Borris-in-Ossory, Mountrath and Castletown on the R445 need bus shelters. Ballylynan, Newtown and Crettyard on the N77 need bus shelters. If we expect people to use the bus, that is what we have to do. People catching the bus in those localities are getting soaked on a wet day, or on a wet morning going to work, to a hospital appointment or to anything else. Bus shelters are fundamental infrastructure. I ask the Minister to take this up with the NTA. Why is it so difficult to put these in place? In the neighbouring jurisdiction, just up the road, there are bus shelters all over the place, even for school transport. We need to give that role to local authorities and let the local authorities provide them. They will fix it and provide shelters. The NTA is not the right body. If you have to write to somebody in Dublin about a bus shelter at Crettyard, the game is lost. That needs to be done at local council level. I appeal to the Minister to devolve that power in his time in office.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: With the draft transport strategy for the greater Dublin area, which was announced today, the people of Meath and the surrounding counties will be disappointed by the Government again but they will not be surprised. It has been revealed that building works on the Navan rail line that we have been demanding for decades will not commence until 2031 at the earliest. Given the shambolic record of this Government in delivering projects, it will most likely be a decade or more after that. We are in the middle of a climate emergency where building the Navan rail line could do more for the environment than any other project, taking thousands of cars off the road. Meath is the fifth largest county in the State, with 210,000 people, and it is growing. Navan is the largest town in Ireland not serviced by rail. Some 81% of people leaving Meath to work do so by car. I spoke to a lady the other day who asked me about the Navan rail line and when it might be built. She told me that every day she goes to

work, leaving Meath for Dublin. She pays €6 every day on tolls, €15 a day on parking in Dublin, and €100 on fuel for the week. That is more than €200 a week just to get to work and then home. It is getting to the stage where people are not able to afford to get to work.

We are spending €2 billion a year on congestion. For many years, the people of Meath have been left behind by successive governments, spending up to ten extra hours a week out of their lives away from family, due to overly packed buses and traffic congestion. This is entirely unacceptable. The people of Meath and beyond will not accept a start date of 2031 for the Navan rail line. We have waited for long enough already. This is another example, in a climate emergency, of a Government that is out of touch, out of ideas and without foresight. It will fail to deliver the Navan rail line at its peril.

Deputy John Brady: Last week, the Government announced the climate action plan. Unfortunately, what we have seen today in the NTA's draft transport strategy from 2022 until 2042 is a failure to bring forward ambition. There is certainly no ambition when it comes to Wicklow. Unfortunately, we have a Government that makes little mention of Wicklow, especially west Wicklow, which has little or no public transport. The Government is blocking the upgrade of the N81, which is critical infrastructure. If the Government is serious about reducing the daily number of car journeys by 500, one would think that it would put public transport in place. There is no mention of west Wicklow in the NTA strategy, such as extending the Luas from Tallaght to Blessington. There is no provision for increased bus services. On the other side of the county, there is little by way of plans for the Dublin to Rosslare rail line that could be rolled out immediately.

There is a reference to the possibility of extending the DART to Wicklow town. It has been talked about over the last number of years and it is badly needed but according to this plan, it may happen within the next 20 years. It is a failure of ambition. There has been talk over the last decade about extending the Luas as far as Bray. That was contained in previous plans, with the possibility of getting that brought forward before 2030. In this plan, it could be 2042 before that takes place. Unfortunately, the two main roads in the county, the M11-N11 and the N81, are both congested daily. People sit in their cars, trying to commute to work, because of the failure to provide jobs within the county. We need to go back to the drawing board in respect of the climate action plan and the draft NTA plan because they fail the people of Wicklow. They fail dismally to put in place the infrastructure and public transport that are needed now. We have 19th century infrastructure for the railway in the county. That needs to be invested in now, not 20 years into the future.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad to speak on this motion for the Labour Party. It provides a timely opportunity for a debate about the need for better public transport and general transport infrastructure. We will support the motion. I am glad the Government is not opposing it. It is timely, especially with the announcement today relating to the greater Dublin area. The motion refers to transport infrastructure outside Dublin. We might take a moment to ponder just how disappointing today's announcement by the NTA is and what knock-on impact it will have for transport infrastructure outside Dublin 2, the counties in the immediate vicinity of Dublin, and for all of us living and working in Dublin city. In my constituency, Dublin Bay South, we clearly need to see what it will mean for us all. It will clearly have a seriously detrimental impact on the Government's ambitious targets for climate emission reductions. That is a real concern. I have been calling on Government to provide greater clarity about the implementation of measures to reduce emissions.

I welcome the ambitious climate targets that we have set ourselves. We must all recognise the need to meet those targets. We must also be conscious of the need to have clarity about how those targets are to be delivered. Marie Donnelly, the chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council, was clear last week about the need to put in place, over this year and the next few years, the necessary infrastructure to enable us to deliver the more ambitious reductions in climate over the latter half of this decade, between 2025 and 2030. Yet, today, the NTA made an announcement kicking forward any delivery of major projects, such as MetroLink, light rail and overground infrastructure. This announcement is deeply disappointing. It is an appalling delay. It illustrates why we need a clear timeline and plan to meet targets when we see such delays.

One of the positives that we have seen over the last 20 months was an increase in people using active transport such as walking and cycling. I welcome the NTA's commitment to improving infrastructure there. We need to be clear that cycling infrastructure in Dublin is still severely lacking. It still feels unsafe to cycle on many streets in the city centre. I speak as someone who cycles every day. The segregated cycle lanes across many parts of the city are welcome but, all too often, they are not joined up. A cycle lane finishing with oncoming traffic on O'Connell Bridge is one example of that. We need to ensure much better cycle infrastructure and give people the choice of using public transport. Today's announcement for the greater Dublin area is disappointing.

There are issues with our transport infrastructure across the country, particularly in the north west. Our policy is to ensure better investment in public transport, not just in Dublin, but in towns and villages across Ireland. We have put forward the idea of a rural transport guarantee to ensure every rural town has guaranteed access to reliable, affordable and sustainable public transport and every child has a guaranteed place on a school bus. Our transport spokesperson, Deputy Duncan Smith, has put forward the need for that joined-up thinking across the country with regard to rural and urban public transport.

Some of our public representatives in counties affected by the lack of investment have asked me to put three questions to the Minister of State, which she might address in the round-up at the end. First, Councillor Conor Sheehan in Limerick asked whether the Minister of State will supply a timeline for commuter rail stations around Limerick that were announced in the national development plan. I would be grateful for a response, even in writing at a later date. Second, will the Minister of State provide a timeline for the rail spur to Shannon Airport? That question is also from Councillor Conor Sheehan. Third, Nessa Cosgrove in Sligo asked me to find out when we can expect to see real movement on the western rail corridor. That was clearly an issue of great concern to all those in Sligo and other counties in the west.

As the Labour Party spokesperson on disability, I raise the question of accessible transport. Not only must our transport infrastructure be sustainable and climate-friendly, we must also ensure it is accessible. I have been sent videos of people struggling with wheelchairs on buses and in train stations as part of the Make Way Day campaign and more generally from colleagues in Labour Disability and others. Footpaths and shopping amenities can often be an impediment to access. People with disabilities need guarantees of being able to access public spaces. Local authorities should conduct an audit of accessibility in towns and villages across the country, looking at simple remedies such as dishing of paths to ensure no kerbs, matching up of paths with opposite sides of the road and pedestrian crossings. They may sound like basic and mundane measures but they can be the bedrock for those with disabilities or those pushing buggies, on which safe and secure transport networks are based. These are the sorts of measures that will encourage more people to walk to work or to shops rather than take private cars. We have

legislation providing for access officers in all public bodies but we need dedicated disability officers in local authorities to work with planners and ensure we can rectify past mistakes in building infrastructure that is not accessible enough. I have put in parliamentary questions on how public bodies can comply with their obligations under the Disability Act, particularly in ensuring towns and villages are safe for those with disabilities.

There is a need to stop further cuts. The motion contains a reference to cuts that have been made to Bus Éireann Expressway routes from Galway, Limerick, Cork and Belfast and states that these cuts have impacted connectivity and frustrated efforts to reduce transport emissions. I endorse the points made in the motion because if we want to reduce our emissions and meet our targets, we must ensure cuts made to routes are reversed.

We saw in the Climate Change Performance Index today that our low performance has slipped further. We are now 46th in the rankings on how we have addressed the climate crisis. We remain among the low performers in greenhouse gas emission categories and we know we are performing poorly on international ratings generally on meeting climate targets, despite having set welcome ambitious targets. These cutbacks to crucial routes in cities outside Dublin must be addressed to ensure we meet the targets and provide connectivity for people in different settings.

Part of the motion deals with regional airports. Since March 2020, we have consistently called on the Minister for Transport and the Tánaiste to ensure the sectors most affected by the coronavirus pandemic, namely, aviation, tourism and entertainment, continue to receive adequate supports throughout the public health emergency. We are conscious, as all colleagues are, of the unique challenges that have been presented to the aviation sector, in particular. I call on the Minister of State to ensure supports, where necessary, are maintained, particularly for smaller regional airports.

The Labour Party supports the motion and urges the Minister of State to look at the announcement made today in relation to the greater Dublin area and ensure that where we have, on the one hand, ambitious targets on emission reductions in transport, we do not with the other hand make cuts to public transport routes, delaying the development of vital public transport infrastructure and not delivering the sort of transport facilities we badly need.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Murphy, who is sharing with Deputy Holly Cairns.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: This is a timely debate, particularly given the announcement of the transport strategy for the greater Dublin area that was published today. It is important that other parts of the country pay attention to what is occurring with this strategy because one would expect the same approach to follow in other areas. Between 1996 and 2016, the population growth in this region was as follows: Dublin city and Dún Laoghaire both grew by 13%; south Dublin by 28%; Fingal by a whopping 41%, making it the fastest growing area in the country; Meath by 40%; and Kildare by 39%. Fingal, Meath and Kildare absorbed most of the population growth and housing development.

Looking at patterns of growth elsewhere, the suburbs of Cork have grown. The part of the county that has come into the city has grown most. In Galway, development is occurring in the suburbs and putting significant pressure on the city centre, without transport alternatives, rail being the most efficient of those. We see housing developments arriving in what is called

a development-led approach. There is pressure on facilities and services, such as schools and community facilities, but transport is the most prevalent one. As I pointed out last week on a similar issue, when you listen to AA Roadwatch in the morning, the N4 and the N7 are mentioned repeatedly every day. We know what that is like because it is the area we are trying to navigate through.

The expectation is that when high levels of population growth are seen, other services will follow, but that is not usually what occurs. Many transport projects were announced but not built. The railway interconnector was first suggested in the 1970s. It was part of the Dublin transportation initiative in the 1990s. Six governments later, we hear today it has been postponed to 2042. That is five governments away, assuming a government lasts five years. It is depressing. MetroLink is again delayed and no commitments to dates of delivery can be provided. Transport is the second-biggest emitter of CO₂ and we have binding targets that will get much more difficult as we proceed through this decade and into the next. There appears to be a reliance on electric vehicles to reach the targets in urban and rural areas where there is not a great chance to provide large-scale public transport, albeit it should be provided in a different way.

In my constituency, DART+ is going to Kilcock, but you cannot get on it. I pointed that out last week. There is no station but there are eight railway sheds. That does not make sense. The same will be the case with the Kildare line. It is only going as far as Celbridge, but there is a big catchment of about 50,000, including Naas and the towns around it. People feel they have no option but to get in the car and that is what the Government wants to discourage.

Cities like Galway are choked with traffic. Cork cannot be the counterpoint to Dublin unless it is properly planned and there is provision of services. The same is the case in relation to suburban transport in Limerick. It is not that there is an unwillingness by urban communities to use public transport, but they must be given the opportunity to do that through ambitious projects that can be delivered within a reasonable timeline.

In recent weeks, two carbon budgets were announced and commitments were made at COP26. If we miss our targets on transport and retrofitting, it will put increasing pressure on the agriculture sector because these areas are all interconnected. Today, the Tánaiste said the Dublin transport strategy was not approved by the Government, but most of the projects were included in the national development plan and we are seeing some of them postponed. Unless we have timelines, it is very difficult to see how we are going to meet our targets on transport. This is a very serious issue, given how transport relates to the other aspects of our climate targets.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Transport infrastructure is an essential prerequisite for regional development. I will focus on a few key points in the time available. First, public transport in rural areas is essential for accessibility and social inclusion and can make a substantial difference in achieving climate goals. The lack of a robust and reliable public transport system continues to be a challenge and an obstacle for people living in rural areas in accessing employment, education and health services.

Public transport is an equality issue. It is a vital service that helps those who cannot drive or cannot afford a private vehicle to get jobs, reach medical appointments and take part in cultural events. People with disabilities in west Cork highlight the inadequacy of the Local Link services, despite recent improvements, and how some services are not wheelchair accessible.

People must rely on family or taxis to get around or even to attend day services or training in some cases. The lack of transport remains a significant barrier. It is also an age and gender issue, as young and older people are the demographic groups which disproportionately use public transport. Many of the older cohort do not have driving licences, especially women aged over 70 who, for historical reasons, never learned or were not permitted to learn how to drive. They deserve a public transport system that allows them to live full and healthy lives.

Furthermore, the absence of proper bus stops and shelters is a major issue. Towns and villages across west Cork and rural Ireland are screaming out for sheltered bus stops that would at least allow people to sit and wait out of the rain. That is a bare minimum. Given that we are in Ireland, we know it is going to rain. It is unbelievable that in most towns and cities there is not even somewhere to sit and stay dry. That is a major disincentive to the use of public transport.

Despite a decrease in transport emissions last year due to Covid restrictions, this sector is a massive contributor to our overall emissions. Public transport can play a clear role in alleviating this. As we face a period of significant change to meet our emissions targets, public transport can and must be central to these plans. We need more public transport. We also need more frequent services, guaranteed accessibility and late-night routes. Such services must be subsidised. Funding is the key to this. Despite the Minister of State's assurances on the amounts spent, unless funding translates into regular, dependable and accessible transportation for as many people as possible, it is not working.

Second, there will still be a requirement for safe and well-maintained roads. They are a crucial social and economic link. Economic strategies can only be successful if the necessary infrastructure is in place, from broadband to roads. Roads are essential for emergency services and connecting rural communities with hospitals and even GP surgeries which are increasingly contracting. Public transport obviously has limitations in rural areas compared with built-up areas, and roads are fundamental to filling in the gaps. Crucially, better and safer roads also encourage cycling and other active travel. We need rural transport to be joined up to allow all people, young and old, to switch from different forms of mobility quickly and cheaply.

I raised the issue of road safety recently. There are numerous accident black spots in west Cork, such as the New Court corner west of Skibbereen and the Baxter's Bridge junction near Bandon, which I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, knows. They are unbelievably dangerous. How many accidents does it take for something to change? I seek an assurance that once a place is known to be dangerous, automatic interventions are implemented to save lives.

Third, in terms of maritime transport, there is a need to support the ferry services that sustain island communities. They are vital links that must not be overlooked in discussions of rural and regional transport.

The motion calls for clarity on all projects in the National Development Plan 2021-2030, including funding and timescales for the progression and estimated completion of projects. Deputy Catherine Murphy highlighted a concern of mine around the Government's rural development policy. A plan without clear targets, timescales and costs is not a plan but a wish list. The success of rural Ireland lies in a properly funded transport system. We need better public transport, integrated approaches and safer roads. Ultimately, we need the public investment to make this possible.

The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, referred to rural Ireland but it is difficult for many to understand how far-reaching the impact of the lack of public transport is in rural areas. I will give one example. In the past, people could always go to the community welfare officer if they needed to present as homeless and look for emergency accommodation. Due to the upsurge in homelessness on account of the housing crisis, they now have to go to the local authority housing office. There is no public transport from many towns in west Cork to the housing authority. The issue was brought to my attention in the case of people fleeing domestic violence who do not necessarily have transport. They might have children and lots of stuff and they cannot get to the housing office. That is an absolute disgrace and it highlights the specific need for transport in rural areas.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank Sinn Féin for introducing the motion, which gives us an opportunity to discuss infrastructure. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is aware of my passion for the western rail corridor and I will take a few minutes to speak about that initially. There is a lot of confusion about what we are trying to do but, in a nutshell, we have rail connectivity from north Mayo as far as Claremorris, and then it takes off eastwards towards Dublin. We have rail connectivity from Galway to Athenry and the service goes down along the south coast and complements the western rail corridor, phase 1, which was opened in 2011. This is the fastest growing rail line for commuter passengers in Ireland currently, with more than 500,000 passengers last year. Phases 2 and 3, which would link Athenry to Tuam and on to Claremorris, are left as a void. This connectivity would bring together Galway and Mayo. It would also bring together Galway, Mayo, Clare, Limerick, Cork and Waterford in terms of rail freight. It is a very simple project, which is shovel-ready, in other words, it does not need planning permission or consent from anybody. It is a replacement of the railway track from Athenry to Claremorris. What would that do for the economy, balanced regional development and every one of us who lives in this area, including both the Ministers of State who are present?

By providing such connectivity, we are opening up the potential for rail freight as part of our carbon emissions targets. At the moment, we run rail freight from Ballina, right through the congested lines at night, to bring it down to Waterford and Dublin Airport. We are trying to develop a port in Foynes, to make it a flagship for offshore wind development, but we must also develop Galway Port and establish connectivity with it. We also need connectivity with Cork and Waterford and to open up the western rail corridor. The corridor has been supported by the Atlantic economic corridor task force, Chambers Ireland and the local authorities in Galway and Mayo. I dare say it is probably supported by every political party in this House. The only thing that is holding it up is the absence of the willingness to do it.

The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is passionate about doing the western rail corridor. He is doing an all-island review at the moment to try to bring together a full strategy for rail. I accept what he is doing, but I believe there is an opportunity for the Government to put its stamp on regional Ireland and take out of the equation the mantra that we are not doing anything for the west, the north west or the mid-west. We have a situation where we can positively discriminate in our investment in the region. According to the European Union, we are a region in transition and we can tap into a 60% share from Structural Funds to make projects like this happen. We should use this as an opportunity to develop the area.

One of the most unique things is that there is some resistance to it but I think that resistance comes from within a Department which has control of transport. I do not know why, but it just does not seem to get that what we are trying to do is develop Ireland. I live, work and have my constituency office in Tuam and that is where I went to school. Tuam is the largest town

in County Galway. If we build out this network, we will be reconnecting Tuam to the national rail network. The western rail corridor is unique in the sense that it is probably the only piece of infrastructure that does not link into Dublin, so it has great potential. We need to make sure that we can link Westport, Ballina and Claremorris to Galway and Tuam, then down to Ennis and along to Limerick and Cork. We have to look at the potential for tourism development in all of this. We have to look at the idea that we can bring tourists into Shannon and Knock airports and get them around the region, using the brand of the Wild Atlantic Way and using the western rail corridor as a mode of transport for them.

It is very important that we take this on board in a positive way and that we are brave about it. Some people will say that rail is a thing of the past. In what we are doing in terms of climate action and changing our whole approach to living in order to save the world, one of the key potentials we have is rail transport. What I mean is that we take the trucks off the road and put the containers onto rail freight. Companies are demanding that so they are running their businesses in a way that meets their green carbon targets. That is the potential that is there but, for one reason or another, successive Governments have never supported the idea of rail freight in Ireland. It has only happened through the efforts of a certain few people who have produced much of the rail freight from Ballina down to Waterford, against the grain and against a lot of resistance from within Departments. We do not subsidise it. About €2.5 million is contributed from the Exchequer to Irish Rail annually but a levy is then put on top which ensures it does not make any money. It is hilarious what is going on there.

It is also important that we think about this. When we talk about tourism, there are companies in Ireland doing rail tourism and they rely on lines like the western rail corridor to make sure we further realise the potential on the west coast, from Cork up to Donegal. It is important that we take that on board. In phases 2 and 3 of the western rail corridor, we have a gem of a tourism attraction, which is Ballyglunin station, the location of the film “The Quiet Man” that was made many years ago. Even today, businesses like Ashford Castle are bussing tourists over to that station as an attraction. It has a powerful attraction. Would it not be great if we could run trains from Galway out there with tourists on a day trip? It is a place where the local community are refurbishing the station, turning it into a museum and also into a broadband connection point and digital hub, which is bringing innovation and history together in a museum.

We have the potential right on our doorsteps to do this. From the point of view of the west of Ireland, it is important that we create this linkage and get rid of the stigma that we are not supporting the west. We can put funding into the area but when we talk in the national development plan about a cancer treatment facility in Galway for the west of Ireland which services Donegal down as far as Limerick, we need to have the public transport for people to access that. What better way to do it than by train? People can travel and work on the train, and there are many benefits to doing this, for example, it is the safest mode of transport. The only thing that is missing is the fact we just do not seem able to get it to a stage where we can start the work.

This is something the Government and political representatives in the west have to consider seriously. We have to work together to make sure we do this. This will create the linkage and create the spine for the activity that is needed if we are to survive and grow out of being just a region in transition. As I said, it has the support of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly and the Southern Regional Assembly. It also has the support of local authorities and all of the business communities. The only thing that is missing is the Department of Transport, which needs to come out of the dark ages and to see how, under phase 1, this is the fastest-growing line in Ireland in terms of rail transport.

Phases 2 and 3 will only add to that, and we will only see the full benefit when we link it all together.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins, who is sharing time with Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: Rural communities are the most at risk of energy and transport poverty. That is according to a new study from a variety of universities which claims that rural residents in Ireland are most at risk due to a lack of access to national heating infrastructure, a high risk of power cuts and the fact they live in older homes with poor insulation. Transport poverty issues are linked to the lack of nearby goods, services and jobs, as well as poorer services when it comes to public transport. Rural villages across Ireland have no access to viable public transport, even under the Connecting Ireland plan the Government published for public consultation a few weeks ago. The National Transport Authority, NTA, plan only proposes an overall increase of 25% in rural bus services, and a 25% increase on nothing amounts to little, let us face it. A frequent, reliable and direct public transport system is key to reducing rural isolation and reducing dependency on cars. However, the Government simply does not get the importance of public transport outside the M50.

I am blue in the face from saying the same thing over and over in the Dáil. The Government wants us to reduce our carbon footprint but without proper and adequate transport. There is not a hope in hell this can be done. We were further ahead in the 1960s, when we had a train network that extended all over west Cork, right down to my own parish of Schull and down into Bantry and places like that, than we are in 2021.

At the same time, in saying that, I welcome the plan that was published last week. There is obviously room for change and, when having a meeting with the NTA, it was generally accepted that we would have a bit of feedback into the plan. I see that services will run five times a day on the Baltimore to Union Hall route and three times a day on the Dunmanway to Kinsale route, which will take in Clonakilty, Courtmacsherry, Kilbrittan and Ballinspittle. Services will also run three times a day from Dursey to Kilcrohane, Castletownbere, Glengarriff, Bantry and that area and there is also Mizen Head to Castletownshend, which includes Goleen, Schull and Ballydehob. I have concerns and I will be working with the NTA going forward in regard to areas like Drinagh and Ballinacarriga. The route from Goleen and Durrus to Bantry is not being serviced, and there is also Lisheen, Ardfield, Inchydoney, Timoleague, Ballyroe and Newcestown, and out to Ardgroom, Eyerics and Allihies. These are areas that need to be looked at. They cannot be exempted and let go. The very focused, frequent service that people get in Dublin is what we should be getting in rural Ireland.

Cork Local Link has been excellent in rolling out services in the last number of years. It should be connected with West Cork Connect, which is another service that is coming out of Skibbereen and Bantry several times a day to Cork. We also need to look at late-night services. We cannot just say we are going to provide a service in the morning. Young people want to use public transport and the Government is advising us to use public transport. It is another area that needs to be looked at.

We need to look at school transport. We put proposals to the Government in our budget submission that we would cut down on the original 3 km limit for children going to school, which is very important. I am assuming that all these new NTA plans will include the PSO routes so that young people will get the 50% deduction on all this travel going forward. It is an interest-

ing time and I hope the Government can deliver immediately.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very important subject because we do not have public transport in many places in rural Kerry. A few years ago the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said that one car in a village would service six or eight different families. Is that the ideal that he is still going by or that the Government is still going by? I welcome the eight new routes that should be allocated to Kerry, including from places like Fenit to Farranfore Airport three times per day.

However, much of the carbon tax that is being collected, after the €225 million that was given away the other day, is for new bus after new bus for Dublin city. Double decker buses and other long buses in Dublin have big signs on their left-hand corners warning people to look out for the tail swing. Buses are so big and plentiful that there is hardly room for anything else on the roads. If you watch outside the Dáil gate the buses are going by one after another and there are only two or three people at most inside any of them. Places like Gneeveguilla, Scartaglin and Cordal are far away. The Government is saying that 500,000 people will be walking by 2030 but can you imagine walking from places like that to work or cycling from Gneeveguilla or Scartaglin, Lauragh, The Black Valley or Bonane? That is not on. I know it might not be by choice and that the Government is tied on to the Green Party but that is the decision that was made and that is the worry I have.

On school transport, no child should be left behind if he or she is more than 1 km from a school. I mention our road network and the local improvement scheme, LIS. We still have 676 schemes on the list. The people in Kerry are entitled to a good road to their doors the same as the people in Dublin 4. These are public roads; not private ones. They are public roads that were never taken in charge. We need a bypass for Killarney because it has over 18,000 vehicle movements every day. That is too much, the people of Killarney are being choked up and it could affect our tourism product.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this very important Private Members' motion. We are starting on the back foot when we have a Minister for Transport who says he does not like building roads. There is a massive increase in the cost of motoring and fuel is going close to €2 per litre, which is a frightening prospect because everything is reliant on roads in our country. I recently had a meeting with a number of car dealers in Kerry. A wise man attended that meeting and he is not young but I will not say he is old either; he is an experienced car salesman. He asked me if I would stand up inside in the Dáil and tell the Government that people cannot afford the electric cars they are being told to buy.

There is nothing in the world as efficient as a properly serviced and maintained diesel engine. That is a fact and I will argue that with any environmentalist. Any environmentalist who thinks he or she has a monopoly on protecting the environment does not. We are as concerned as anybody else about protecting the environment but we have the common sense to know that if you own a well-performing diesel engine it is rubbish and nonsense to think about getting rid of it to buy an electric car. We are after closing down a number of our ESB generating stations so our electricity is becoming scarcer and at the same time we are telling people to use more of it. If you own a diesel car the message should be to hold onto it, maintain it, change the oil in it and keep it running for as long as you can. You are doing better for the environment by doing that than by buying something for which the production of its battery is an enormous blow to the environment. That is a debate for another day.

I welcome the Macroom and Baile Bhuirne bypass and the future Listowel bypass. We definitely need a bypass for the Killarney bypass. Even though we have a Minister for Transport who does not like building roads, we will have to try to build those roads in spite of him and without him. We will do so because we are entitled to them. The same as the people in Dublin are entitled to a lot of things; we are entitled to these things in County Kerry as well. I thank the private taxi and bus operators who provide a service in County Kerry and in rural Kerry, whether it is Tralee, Killarney, Killorglin, Cahersiveen, Listowel, Kenmare or Sneem, we have excellent people there providing those services. They are not public services; I am talking about private operators and I thank them for the business they conduct.

We are in a worrying time. Last week a lot of people would have turned in their graves. It is not for me to comment on what other political parties do but the leader of the country and of what we would call a one-time major political party came out and made a statement. He was accused of making a speech that could have been attributed to the Green Party and he said he took that as a good compliment. When the Taoiseach of the day comes out with a statement like that we are in worrying and disturbing times.

Deputy Mick Barry: I want to make a few points about public transport in Cork. The transport news that has dominated today has been the news of the delays in key public transport initiatives in Dublin. It is in sharp contrast with what the Government said last week at COP26 and at the launch of the climate action plan that there are delays in key public transport initiatives. A key public transport initiative in Cork is the plan for light rail. We need to know when we will have light rail and we will not be tolerating delays to it. Delays in Dublin are also unacceptable.

BusConnects is in the news in Cork and a new round of public consultation on it has opened. The proposal is to increase services in the city by 36%. That is not sufficient and it needs to go further. There are big population increases on the cards in Cork over the next number of years and a 36% increase does not match up to that. We need to be more ambitious. BusConnects needs to ensure that the travelling time for people in key suburbs is not increased by connecting with other areas. For example, the trip from Ballyvolane to the city centre by bus takes about 15 minutes. If that service from Ballyvolane was to run to the city centre via Blackpool that would increase to something closer to 30 minutes. I understand that is the type of measure that is being looked at. We need to improve the service for the people in the likes of Blackpool but we should not do so at the cost of disimproving the service for the people in Ballyvolane. If BusConnects is to be a success, it would be important to take that point on board.

7 o'clock

Under BusConnects, 200 extra buses in Cork city is being spoken of. An investment of €200 million is being spoken of. The central bus garage at Capwell is not a suitable location for an expansion of that size. Capwell is already too small for the needs in the city. It is bounded by houses on both sides. It is bounded by schools as well. It has been accepted for some time now that Capwell will not be sufficient. There was an attempt to secure a depot at Monaghan Road last year. The attempt to do that was not successful. There has been an attempt to secure a depot at North Esk. My understanding of the position is that at best Bus Éireann would be able to secure the North Esk site for a maximum of five years for a variety of reasons. I am not 100% certain of them and will not speculate here on the floor of the Dáil but I understand that five years is the maximum that could be got there. Therefore, North Esk is not a long-term solution. It may not even be a medium-term solution.

I understand that there is another reason an alternative location for a bus depot is needed in Cork city. Above and beyond the expansion of the fleet, there is the question of the electrification of the fleet. My understanding is that if you electrify your bus fleet, you need more storage space, not less. You need to have room for chargers, you need to have more space between your buses and you may need to dig up what is underneath the ground surface in your depot. My understanding is that what is underneath the ground surface in the depot in Capwell would make doing that a difficult and expensive job, which may even raise a question mark as to whether you can have Capwell as a depot for your buses alongside another location or whether you will need to move from Capwell, lock, stock and barrel, and have another location entirely. The question of securing a new bus garage, depot and storage space in Cork city is a priority issue of some urgency now that will need to be watched carefully.

On BusConnects and the expansion of public transport, in the budget it was announced that there was to be half-price travel for a cohort of young people, I think, aged 18 to 23, to be introduced. That is a step forward but it is a half-measure. The climate emergency does not call out for half-measures. It calls out for emergency measures. The emergency measure that is necessary here, I believe, is free public transport for all. That is an idea the time of which has come. It is something about which we need a government to say, "Yes, we are going to do that." There needs to be pressure put from below on Government by the emerging climate movement to have free public transport in this country.

On the question of a Cork-Limerick motorway, the idea of treating the climate crisis as an emergency in the State is not compatible with building a motorway between Cork and Limerick and a motorway should not be built between Cork and Limerick. That is not to say that there is not investment needed on the road there. There are a number of towns that need to be bypassed and increased safety provisions need to be made on that road. However, if we are looking at improved connectivity between Limerick and Cork, and we should do that, what we need to look at is improving rail services between the two cities and improving bus services between the two cities, including stop-offs that will facilitate people in getting from A to B in work situations, and improving public transport as you come into both Limerick and Cork so that when you arrive, you are able to travel efficiently and cheaply around the city that you are arriving in.

Those are the key points that I want to make. I reiterate the point about the bus garage and the bus depot in Cork. That is an issue, given the expansion of services with BusConnects and issues of electrification, that needs to be addressed now as a matter of some priority.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy Harkin is sharing time with Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: First, I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion on regional transport infrastructure, which, if delivered, would be an important component in helping to deliver balanced regional development.

It is worth examining where we are right now and the latest figures in regard to roads and road spend. The most recent figures that I have are from the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. Between 2008 and 2018, the average national road spend per kilometre in the north and west region was €87,000, in the southern region was €103,000, and in the eastern and mid-land region was €199,000. Some people might say there are more national roads in the eastern part of the country than, for example, in the rural north west, and that is true, but the figures quoted here are per kilometre. In effect, the amount spent per kilometre in the north and west

area is less than half of what is spent per kilometre in the eastern half. That is a shocking difference and clearly shows the huge imbalance in national roads spend per kilometre between the regions. If we look at regional and local roads, there is a gap. It is much less, but there is still a gap. There is a lesser spend per kilometre on regional and local roads in the northern and western region than in the eastern and midlands region. In fact, according to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, the spend per kilometre is 9% less. There are a lot of figures there but they clearly illustrate the imbalance in spending and it is very significant.

We have all been assured that the national development plan will reverse this trend and, finally, deliver balanced regional development. However, as this motion states, “senior members of Government, up to and including the Taoiseach, have indicated publicly that a number of critical regional infrastructure projects outlined in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 may never be delivered, casting doubt on approximately 30 road projects, while other public transport projects will be delayed”. It will, therefore, be extremely difficult to see if the national development plan, NDP, is, in fact, delivering the regional balance. That is why I strongly support the call that there must be clarity, or at least more clarity, around funding and timescales for all projects in the NDP. Without some level of clarity, we will be living on the never-never, as it were, and my huge concern is that this approach may further widen the gap between the regions.

A really important part of this motion is that there will be a rural impact assessment undertaken by all Departments and public bodies in relation to their programmes. We are told that we will have value for money impact assessments and climate impact assessments, and that is perfectly correct, but we also need regional impact assessments if we are genuine about delivering balanced regional development.

Earlier the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, was present. I wanted to raise with her the issue of Sligo Airport. I think this is my sixth time to raise it in the House. Sligo Airport has no passenger services but operates the busiest search and rescue operation in the State. It has not received a single cent of public money in more than ten years. It needed about €370,000 to fund essential works. That was whittled down to €280,000 and finally to €200,000 but there is still no money on the table. The latest we are told is that it is on the Minister’s desk awaiting ministerial approval.

I ask the Minister of State to pass this query on to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, for a written reply as the delay, at this point, is simply inexcusable.

I thank Sinn Féin for giving us a chance to debate the crucial issue of regional transport infrastructure.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I also wish to start by thanking Sinn Féin for the motion. I will zone in on two aspects that have already been mentioned, namely, the rural-proofing of all policies and budgets, which we have sought for years and the delivery of the western rail corridor extension to Mayo as a key infrastructure project for regional development.

There are two reports in this regard, namely, one by EY entitled, *The Western Rail Corridor: Financial and Economic Appraisal*, followed by a very detailed report by Dr. John Bradley, *The Atlantic Railway Corridor – The Galway-Mayo Rail Link: An Appraisal*. Both are worth reading. The first was commissioned by Iarnród Éireann followed by a peer review and that was followed by Dr. Bradley’s detailed report that sets out the differences and the issues be-

tween the two reports. What is not at issue the need for the western rail corridor, as set out in a number of policies that have already been clearly set out by Deputy Canney. I will mention one point quoting the regional spatial and economic strategy, which observed that “The Western Rail Corridor is of strategic importance as it represents a piece of key enabling and sustainable transport infrastructure for the region”. I am looking at a report where it finds that the business case does not justify it and it fails to tie it in with policies. I do not see it quoted anywhere in the report that it is of a strategic nature and it is essential. There are a number of interesting things about Dr. Bradley’s report. He dedicates it to “Dr. Micheál Mac Gréil, SJ, ar ócáid a nóchadú breithlá” - we all know who Dr. Mac Gréil is - on his 90th birthday, and who, Dr. Bradley says, fought so long and so hard for the development of the west. The Minister of State came in here tonight and her speech took issue with our statement of the fact that we have ignored rural Ireland. She said that is not true. I am afraid it is true. We see it in that dedication to that priest and sociologist, and onward with the groups on the ground who have all fought to have sustainable development in the west of Ireland. We have utterly failed to do that. We have many good policies which I could not argue with. It is the implementation of them that has a lot to be desired. Another interesting thing about Dr. Bradley’s report is his mention of Alexander Nimmo and his works in Ireland. We all know who Alexander Nimmo is and we are certainly very familiar with him in Galway in both the city and the county. Nimmo’s Pier is a stone’s throw from where I live. When there was no money in Ireland, and he was given instructions to have minor works, he ignored the instructions and went for a massive public infrastructure programme, which has stood the test of time. Nimmo’s Pier is still there in Galway among many other piers, houses and so on. That was at a time when we had nothing.

If we have struggled to put the west on the map it is all the more important now with climate change and the biodiversity emergency. The Government will hear this over and over again because we have to make words mean something and we have to allow sustainable development in the west of Ireland to take the pressures off the cities. I am all for one who wants to develop Galway city, but in a sustainable way. When she was here, the Minister of State utterly failed to say that we have no park-and-ride in Galway even though it is in the development plan since 2005, we have no feasibility study on light rail. I heard Deputy Barry talk about Cork. We have 24,000 signatures from many years ago begging the Government to carry out a feasibility study. In the context of tonight’s motion, I would point the Minister of State towards Dr. Bradley’s research. He sets out the differences between the two reports and the cost analysis. He said there was a very strong business case for re-opening the railway from Galway to Mayo. He set out the differences between the two reports. I am running out of time to go into them but capital costs was one of the main arguments. His report takes that apart. There is also time saving. Dr. Bradley also said the EY report is full of errors, and not only typographical errors. He was not even negative about it, he just highlighted it. He said he was giving a fresh appraisal of this project because it is absolutely essential in the context of climate change and of Brexit, that we would have balanced regional development. It makes absolute sense to have a railway running from Galway up to Mayo and beyond if we are seriously interested in our commitments under law, in relation to climate, and in relation to balanced regional development.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan): I am deputising for the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is unavailable tonight. It is clear that Deputies on all sides of the House are committed to improving transport infrastructure in regional and rural Ireland. I think it is clear we are all committed to improving transport infrastructure in rural and regional Ireland. Nobody has a monopoly on this issue. It is clear this Government is committed to improving transport infrastructure across the country.

That commitment is evidenced in the national planning framework and the Our Rural Future policy but is also backed up by the funding allocated under the national development plan for the next ten years and the funding allocated under budget 2022 to allow Connecting Ireland launch next year. To pick up on a point made by an earlier speaker, sometimes projects do get delayed. That is part of the planning process. Were the Department of Transport, a Minister or local authority to interfere in that, I am sure that some of the Deputies who spoke would take issue with the same Government for a different reason. All Deputies will remember the tribunals that took place for different reasons. Planning processes are independent and for a good reason. We all agree that an improved transport system has an important role to play in promoting balanced regional development and enhancing rural connectivity but also crucially addressing climate change. There is no dispute from any side of the House, let alone the Government side, that these improvements need to be delivered. However, there are aspects of the motion that seem to wish away best practice in terms of project delivery. It is clearly the case that costings and schedules for projects are subject to uncertainty in the earlier stages of development. The earlier the stage of planning, the more uncertain the cost of the project and the timelines around delivering it. The purpose of the public spending code's decision gate approach toward Government approvals is to gradually develop that certainty, in order that when the Government is asked for decision gate 3 approval, the cost and schedule estimations are then as certain as they can be and are the baselines against which to measure success. It is simply the case that within the national development plan you have a variety of different projects at different stages of their project life cycle, so for some the cost and schedule estimation process is well developed and for others it is much less well-developed.

I also share the motion's wish for improved investment in our national rail network. That is why the Department and the Minister welcome the increased funding provided by the NDP to do just that. I know there are passionate views expressed by Members from all parties, and none, about various proposals to further improve our rail network. The Minister and I recognise the long-standing advocacy of groups such as West-On-Track in terms of their campaigning for the reopening of the western rail corridor, which Deputy Canney and others mentioned. As noted in the motion, earlier this year West-On-Track published a report it had commissioned on the proposed reopening. I do not think it would surprise anyone to know that a report commissioned by an advocacy group advocated reopening the line. What the Government has approved is not to consider issues like the western rail corridor in isolation but instead to look at our inter-regional rail network in its entirety, not just to consider it on the basis of the State's network but to look instead in the context of the entire island of Ireland. That is why we have launched a strategic rail review and I encourage everyone to take part in its public consultation, which should launch very shortly. The Minister and I welcome the motion's acknowledgement that the impact of all Government measures on rural communities needs to be assessed closely. I have no doubt but that the proposers will welcome the fact this is already a requirement. All memorandums for Government decisions must provide an assessment of the impact on rural communities. Furthermore, the national planning framework places the concept of balanced regional development at the very heart of everything the Government must do across all its policies and strategies.

I endorse the comments of my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Naughton, on Connecting Ireland. The initiative could potentially be transformative for public transport in rural Ireland. It will expand bus services across the country, linking local communities with the destinations they need to access, be it for work, education or leisure. This is something previous speakers referenced, especially in the context of Covid. Obviously,

in rural Ireland the car will always play an integral part in people's transport needs. As we strive to meet our climate action targets, those cars will increasingly become zero-emission vehicles. While I welcome the continued funding committed in the NDP towards the protection and renewal of our regional road network, if I could be parochial for a moment and consider my own County Limerick, the Government has committed to funding the improved active travel, bus and rail infrastructure that will benefit both the urban and rural areas of the county for generations. The Limerick greenway, Limerick BusConnects, Connecting Ireland and improved rail infrastructure services will be funded under the NDP and I look forward to seeing that being delivered.

In conclusion, I reiterate my view that the House broadly agrees on the need for investments in rural and regional transport services and state as fact that the Government has demonstrated a commitment for ongoing investment across these services. I thank the Acting Chairman and Deputies for giving me the time to respond to the House on that. I am sharing the remainder of my time with Deputy Calleary.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputies Conway-Walsh and O'Rourke for giving us the chance to discuss this matter this evening. Deputy Connolly quoted an tAthair Micheál Mac Gréil, to whom the Bradley report is dedicated. I will come back to the report in the context of the Minister of State's remarks. I want to speak about another priest, Monsignor James Horan, who, 40 years ago, showed how it is done. In the face of the same kind of opposition and the same kind of sticking its head in the sand from the Department of Transport as we have today, especially the permanent side of it, he developed Knock Airport. He had a phrase which is often quoted by our colleague, Deputy Ó Cuív. He referred to the policy of the Department as "MAD", meaning maximum administrative delay. Keep putting it on the long finger and hopefully it will go away. Tonight there is an all-party motion saying we are not going away. We are not going away on the western rail corridor. We are not going away on road projects such as the N26 or on proper regional development. We do not want sticking plasters but ambitious stuff that makes a difference. That is what is laid out in the Bradley report. I tell the Minister of State it does not matter who commissioned it. Its findings will stand up to any independent analysis. In that it is unlike the EY report commissioned by the Department at a cost to the taxpayer of €500,000, which has many flaws within it.

The context of waiting for an all-Ireland rail review for a project that has been reviewed so often is typical of the maximum administrative delay strategy. This works. It works not just in the context of the western rail corridor and the extension of the existing corridor to County Mayo and beyond, hopefully, but in the context of the all-island Atlantic economic corridor. If we are serious about regional development we will build a ballast to the east right from County Derry to County Kerry. It would be all-island and all-coastal, with a spine going down through it that has rail at its centre. This would be rail that is sustainable. It would be rail not just for freight but for passengers too. This will allow people to move off-road into a proper commuter rail service linking the west. It will link the cities of Galway and Sligo to communities for hospital services, education and day-to-day living.

That is the kind of sustainability we should seek in the climate action plan yet it seems the west coast is to be the location for offshore wind and onshore wind. Whatever kind of wind farm you are going for will be located in the west. We will be expected to provide the energy but we are at the end of the queue when it comes to the benefits. These are kind of the benefits I am referring to. The western rail corridor will allow, through the Atlantic economic corridor, the infrastructure of wind farms to be moved by rail not road. As I have said, it will encourage

people to go off-road and use public transport for their day-to-day work. It fits all the headings this Government is about and last week's climate action plan is about, yet we keep delaying it. We keep saying we will have another review. We cannot have any more reviews. I am calling for the preliminary work to begin. It is not a choice between the rail corridor and a greenway. Both can exist perfectly well alongside each other. It seems again we are being offered greenways all over the west but tell that to the second biggest producer of Coca-Cola concentrate in the world. Tell that to one of the biggest healthcare manufacturing sectors in the world, which we have in County Mayo. Ask them do they want to export their stuff on a greenway or do they want to do it on a proper road or on a proper railway. Real regional development is about putting that infrastructure in place with ambition and respect and without any further delays.

I join Deputy Connolly in paying tribute to an tAthair Micheál Mac Gréil; a priest, a sociologist and somebody with no commercial interest in rail but who has led this campaign. I pay tribute to West-On-Track, including Colmán Ó Raghallaigh and people like him who are leading it in spite of so many hits. They are in the spirit of Monsignor Horan. Ireland West Airport Knock has developed into a facility that employed 170 or so people before Covid with over 800,000 passengers. The economic benefit of it still has not been fully reached. Why do we have to keep fighting? Why do we have to keep constantly harassing? These are things we are entitled to. The only change I would make to this motion is that I think we need an all-party committee on the implementation of the NDP. It covers so many different projects and Departments. It suits those who do not want to see progress to have it siloed in committee after committee. One overall Oireachtas committee on the implementation of this plan would see it delivered once and for all.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): We return to Sinn Féin and Deputy Funchion to close the debate.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, for bringing this important motion forward. The constituency I represent, Carlow-Kilkenny, is a good mix of urban and rural. While it is a fantastic place to live and work we are certainly lacking public transport. It is an integral part of a functioning rural community and has an important role in reducing emissions, which we are all apparently in favour of, though when it comes to actual practice it is hard to know whether we are.

As part of the recent budget, the young adult travel card was announced. It was welcome and I thought it a positive move. However, for rural communities where we do not have very much public transport it excludes private bus operators. I am obviously an advocate for public transport but in some of our communities where we do not have that, to not roll it out to those operators is a missed opportunity. We would really would benefit from that. Students from counties Carlow and Kilkenny would especially benefit from that as we have had a recent announcement about the institutes of technology in Carlow and Waterford amalgamating to form a technological university for the south east. It would be hugely beneficial for students if they could avail of this but for the most part there are only private providers in the constituency at the moment.

It is ironic that our Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications is currently at the COP flying the flag for Ireland and all we are going to do to encourage people out of their cars and onto public transport yet it is certainly lacking in this constituency. I add that as somebody who travels to Kilkenny on the three days we are up here, if I were to rely on public transport I would have to leave here at 6 p.m. to get the 6.30 p.m. train, as it is the last train to

Kilkenny. It is incredible to think that is the situation in 2021.

I briefly mention the situation in Carlow with the bus service. There has finally been an announcement it is going to go out to tender but it is not going to launch until next autumn. Imagine a town like Carlow still has no bus service and we only recently got a proper bus service in Kilkenny city. I am going to run out of time very shortly so I again commend my colleague and urge everybody to support the motion. On rural communities, the Minister of State is in one himself and it really is important we have good public transport and that there are options for people.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I want to show the Minister of State a map which he may have seen before. It is a map the Northern and Western Regional Assembly published a number of years ago. If one looks at it the deficit in infrastructure in the north-west of Ireland, working its way down to the west, is very clear. Let us look at it. There is no motorway network to the fourth largest city on the island, Derry, and County Donegal. There are about 500,000 people in the cross-Border region of west County Tyrone, County Donegal and County Derry. There is no rail connection and no motorway connection. For the past ten years, the Government has starved the City of Derry Airport although 40% of the passengers who go through it come from Donegal. It has got no funding from the Government for the past ten years. Funding was removed when the Derry to Dublin airport link was taken down. There is no road or motorway infrastructure, no rail and no air connecting approximately half the county of Donegal and all of Derry. It is stunning. It is the same for electricity infrastructure. We have said this for many years. This motion is so important because we in the west and north west of Ireland do not have a motorway or rail connection joining up the west of Ireland. Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Derry and that huge mass of population in the west has no motorway connectivity for nearly all of it and no rail connectivity for a big part of it. That has to be the priority, but from reading the national development plan it is not at all clear to me that this Government gets the scale of the neglect of the west and north west of my county of Donegal, right down to Cork. It needs to be addressed and prioritised. I agree with Deputy Calleary that we now need a committee to come to grips with this because successive Governments and senior civil servants have failed to do so. We need a sense of urgency and an investment plan. We need to work with the likes of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, which has no political axe to grind. Its members are just speaking the truth. I will hold up the map again to show the damning indictment of the failure of our people in the west and north west.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank all my colleagues, including Deputy O'Rourke and others from rural constituencies, who have worked on bringing this motion forward. As others, across parties, have said, it was a shock to read the national development plan and realise that the map Deputy Mac Lochlainn talked about was not going to change. I thank all the other speakers. I have listened intently to everybody's contribution and rarely has there been such consensus across the House on what we need to do.

We have to examine who is in the Government and who has the ability to deliver the things we have agreed on tonight. I appeal to Deputies within the Government to go back to the heads of their parties and make them understand they are the ones elected to this House. Senior civil servants with pens and paper are not elected to this House. We are the people who are accountable to those who vote for us across the constituencies. The key pieces of infrastructure we talked about form the vision for rural Ireland. They are the catalyst for development and are the things we need. There are wonderful, bright people across the board in rural Ireland. We talked about some of them tonight, such as Monsignor Horan, who Deputy Calleary referred to,

in addition to Micheál Mac Gréil, Colmán Ó Raghallaigh and many others in businesses and communities throughout rural Ireland who share the vision and commitment to making rural Ireland, and the entire country, work for us all, but they are being blocked. We need to unblock what is happening and we need to challenge the analysis that is sometimes presented to us, whether it is from an auditor or a senior civil servant. We need to show people who is in charge here. All of the Deputies know that we can make a cost-benefit analysis say whatever we want it to. Depending on the criteria we use, we can predict the outcome. The population-led cost-benefit analysis being used across the board will just not work for rural Ireland in terms of the investment decisions that need to be made.

People in rural Ireland want to do their bit for climate change. In fact, they want to do more than their bit. They want to be leaders in climate change, whether it is through wind or wave energy, or many other things, but we cannot do it unless we are given the basic infrastructure, such as public transport. The Atlantic economic corridor task force sets out a vision for us all on where we need to be and the potential that is there but, again, it cannot do it without the key infrastructure we need. That is why many of these communities and businesses know that this Government is out of touch with how they think, and with what they want and need to make their areas work. They want more than launches, brochures and photos and, post Covid, they expect to have more than that delivered for them.

The western rail corridor is a shovel-ready project, having had ten years of very hard work put into it. The report by Dr. John Bradley concluded all that work. It makes sense economically, socially and from a climate change perspective in terms of freight, passengers and what we want to deliver for the west. The vast majority of politicians across this House agree it needs to be delivered. We need to address the implementation deficit and we need to get it delivered. That would really show the Government intends to listen to people in rural Ireland and the west. I again ask this Government to go back, look at the western rail corridor and deliver it along with the other key infrastructure projects that have been talked about tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Fuel Prices

68. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider providing relief to low- and middle-income households struggling with the cost of energy through an exemption from VAT in respect of domestic energy supplies or a rebate of VAT on domestic energy supplies in the winter months; and if he has or will discuss these matters with the European Commission. [54656/21]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The winter months will pose significant financial challenges for many households, particularly those on low and middle incomes. We see rising prices and a spike in energy costs. More than 35 price increases have been announced by energy providers

since the start of the year and annual bills now are rising by between €400 and €500. I ask that the Minister take further action in this regard. Will he reduce VAT on domestic energy bills for the winter months, either through a VAT rebate or through negotiations with the European Commission for a temporary removal of VAT?

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My apologies to the House for keeping Members waiting. I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. The VAT directive obliges each member state to have a standard rate of VAT and allows that a member state may choose to have no more than two reduced rates of VAT which may be applied to certain goods and services. In addition, within this rates structure the directive allows for historic VAT treatment to be maintained under certain conditions on certain goods and services. Under this framework, Ireland has a standard VAT rate of 23% and two reduced rates of 13.5% and 9%. Ireland has also retained its historic application of one of the reduced rates of VAT, 13.5%, to a range of services, including the supply of fuel, gas, oil and electricity services, and, under the directive, the rate applicable to such services cannot be reduced below 12%. There is no provision in the directive that would allow a VAT exemption or a VAT rebate in respect of domestic energy supplies.

The Government recognises the impact the increase in energy costs is having on households. In budget 2022, a targeted package of social protection interventions was provided for through both the redistribution of carbon tax receipts and direct Exchequer funding.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In the 12 months to September, the price of electricity rose by 21%, gas by 14% and home heating oil by a staggering 46%. We need to stretch every sinew to protect households from energy poverty this winter. Budget 2022 clearly failed to do that. The Minister has read out a response that is outdated as regards the EU directive. He will be mindful of the toolbox the Commission agreed, which does allow for rebates, although he has just put on the record that rebates are not allowed. I am sure he is aware of what his colleague in the Czech Republic is doing, where legislation has been passed to zero-rate energy bills for the winter months. It appears the Commission is going to allow that to happen. We are asking the Minister to stand up and have the backs of the households in question. The two ways of doing that are to look at the toolbox in order to grant rebates over the winter months, or engage with the Commission, as the Czech Republic is doing, to try to take the pressure off those households.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I was responding to the question the Deputy provided to me in writing. He asked about a rebate or an exemption from VAT for domestic energy supplies. I answered the question that was put to me. He made reference to the Czech Republic but it is notable that out of all the members of the European Union, at the moment only two are engaged with the Commission and the Union regarding a change in the VAT regime for energy pricing and the cost of energy. The Deputy is asking me to stand up. I am already standing by those who are affected the most by the change in energy pricing. That is why the Government has made the changes it made in the qualified child payment scheme. It is why we have increased the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance and it is also why we have increased the income threshold for the working family payment scheme. We are absolutely aware of the added pressure many are facing at the moment and we have recognised that through decisions that have already been made in the budget.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Some of those decisions will increase energy prices further by hiking carbon tax later next year. As the Minister mentioned, a number of countries are en-

gaging with the Commission on this issue, the Czech Republic being one. Spain has already slashed the cost of energy bills by 11%. The Spanish Government has done that up until the end of the year. The Labour Party across the water has been calling on the Tories to zero-rate energy bills during the winter period. Britain is, of course, outside the European Union. The European Union itself came forward with a communiqué on 13 October that allows member states to rebate the VAT collected on energy, as it is conscious that these energy price increases - a 46% increase over the year on home heating oil, 21% on electricity and 14% on gas - are having a real impact on families. The Union is therefore allowing finance ministers, of whom the Minister is one, to take action. There are two things the Minister can do. He can join others and engage with the Commission to zero-rate these bills for the winter months or he can consider giving a rebate. The €785 million in VAT receipts above what was profiled would well cover the cost of this proposal for the three-month period to which I referred.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy must note the starting positions of those other countries. The starting position of Spain and the Czech Republic is a standard rate of 21%. We already apply a lower rate than 21%. Our starting position compared to that of those other countries is very different. The starting position of Spain is 21% while our starting position is 13.5%. That is the difference. They have an interest in seeking to make a change in their VAT payment because their VAT rate is so much higher than ours. Those are the figures. While the Deputy is drawing attention to two other countries, the majority of other countries are handling this very severe issue for many families in exactly the same way as we are by the changes being made in the social welfare payments, which were announced on budget day, and also by other changes we have made in taxation, which have also been implemented in the budget.

Tax Code

69. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider providing relief to low- and middle-income households struggling with the cost of energy through an exemption of VAT from domestic energy supplies or a rebate of VAT on domestic energy supplies in the winter months; and if he has discussed or will discuss these matters with the European Commission. [54745/21]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: During the past decade, corporate profits here have gone through the roof. I estimate there has been an increase of approximately 127% in corporate profits. Last year, net household wealth increased by €89 billion to a record €883 billion and more than 50% of that is in the hands of the richest 10% of the population. In the interests of justice, fairness and equity and to provide funds for public services and infrastructure, is it not time to introduce wealth taxes?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I should remind the Deputy of the many different ways in which wealth is currently taxed, for example through capital gains tax, deposit interest retention tax, or DIRT, and the local property tax. Any revenue raised from a wealth tax may not therefore be additional to the existing forms of wealth taxation, as revenues from those taxes could be affected by the introduction of a wealth tax.

On the issue of household wealth, late last year the Central Bank published a report, Household Wealth: What is it, who has it, and why it matters. It presents the results from the household finance and consumption survey, which collects data on households' financial positions. That survey was undertaken before the pandemic, but it provides a starting point against which

to benchmark its impact on household finance positions and consumption patterns. I am informed that the report indicates household net wealth grew by more than €76,000 for the median household, or by 74%, to €179,200 from 2013 to 2018, driven primarily by house price growth and declining mortgage debt. The report also highlights a significant portion of wealth for most households is tied up in the family home.

While the net wealth of the top 20% of households increased by approximately 52% from €560,000 to €853,000, the relative share of net wealth held by the top 10% of households decreased by 2.6% from 2013, and is 1.3% below the equivalent figure for the eurozone as a whole.

As was confirmed in the recent budget 2022 policy changes, a range of metrics demonstrate that compared to other countries the Irish tax and welfare systems contribute substantially to the redistribution of income and a reduction in income inequality.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister has just confirmed correctly, although he said it has reduced slightly, that the richest 10% of our population owns more than 50% of all the wealth in a study to which he referred. People need to understand how much that is. Net household wealth, according to the Central Bank report, is €883 billion. That means the richest 10% have €440 billion in personal wealth. The Minister said that is tied up in the family home. Our wealth tax proposal explicitly excludes the family home. There are 160,000 people in that top 10%. Let us allow them €1 million each to cover the family home and that is being very generous. That would be €160 billion of the €440 billion. Why not tax the rest even by 2% in order to redistribute some of the wealth to the bottom 50% who have less than 2% of the wealth?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I noted in my reply the array and level of taxes we have on capital. Our capital gains tax and capital acquisitions tax are very high in comparison to many other countries in the European Union and OECD countries. We already tax capital at a very high level. The Deputy was right in saying I acknowledged in my reply that a share of the wealth is wrapped up in property that is owned in terms of the family home and in property investments some people may make. The reason we have a local property tax is to tax that form of wealth, which is a tax the Deputy wants to abolish and get rid of. If he believes the way in which we should tax a very high level of wealth is by the way in which we tax capital, that is what we currently do. We have an array of capital taxes at high rates. It is one of the rationales for having a local property tax.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are not in favour of taxing the family home in our wealth tax proposal. We are very explicit. We are in favour of taxing the wealth in excess of €1 million in the hands of a small group of people. I will put it another way to the Minister. We have approximately 2 million workers, and the Minister can confirm the numbers. Last year, between them they earned €130 billion but they paid €27 billion in tax. The corporations earned €203 billion in pre-tax profits and paid €11 billion in tax. In other words, the corporations made twice as much as 2 million workers in profit or income, whatever way the Minister would want to put it, but paid half as much tax. Where is the justice in that? The wealthiest group saw their wealth very significantly increase by approximately €50 billion last year. Should they not pay a bit more tax?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: How many of the workers the Deputy referred to are employed by the corporations to which he also referred? Many of those corporations are very large employers employing a large share of the workers he correctly identified. We receive income tax

on the salaries those corporations pay those workers. We receive tax from the investments those corporations make here. It comes back to the challenge we face in that many other countries are competing for the level of foreign direct investment we have here. The benchmark for what the corporate tax rate should be, which as the Deputy is aware we are planning to increase for the largest companies, is not just how much revenue can be accrued through changes in rates, but also the need for that rate to be competitive with that of other countries. I acknowledge we have a low rate of corporate tax of 12.5%, albeit it will increase. The reason for that, in turn, is to create a country in which we have more people at work than otherwise we would have.

Insurance Industry

70. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the action he will take to ensure that all claim cost reductions derived from the new personal injuries guidelines are passed on to consumers in the form of reduced insurance premiums; and when legislative action will be taken to reform the duty of care. [54657/21]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On 6 March, the personal injury guidelines were adopted by the Judicial Council. They came into force on 24 April, which was more than six months ago. I raised this issue with the Minister on 31 March and I am doing so again because it is important for motorists, businesses and our community sector. The reductions in rewards under those guidelines are not being passed on to consumers in full. There is enough evidence to prove that. Some of them are being pocketed by the industry. Will the Minister end the delay and support my Bill, the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill, which would hold this industry to account?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance(Deputy Sean Fleming): The adoption of the new personal injury guidelines by the Judicial Council and their subsequent commencement in April this year is a significant achievement. It was achieved eight months ahead of the schedule as originally intended.

8 o'clock

The new guidelines should provide much greater transparency around award levels, in addition to reducing payouts for many common injuries and leading to lower legal fees by encouraging greater use of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, to settle claims. Accordingly, this should lead to a reduction in claims costs for insurers, shorter settlement times for claimants and, importantly, help to attract new entrants into the Irish market and encourage providers that previously exited the market to return. Work being undertaken by my Department's office to promote competition in the insurance market, in conjunction with IDA Ireland, will seek to leverage support in this area.

As the Deputy knows, consistent implementation of the guidelines by insurers, PIAB and the Judiciary will be vital in achieving an improved claims environment. These are early days in terms of assessing the impact of the guidelines. As the insurance reform agenda progresses, we will continue to seek that the industry meet its commitment to reflect savings from the guidelines and other elements of the ambitious reform agenda in the prices offered to customers. In my ongoing engagement with the sector, I have emphasised the need for insurance providers to reduce premiums and increase their risk appetite to provide cover in new areas. I am engaging with the main insurers again this month, with meetings commencing next Monday on a one-by-one basis, to assess their response to the guidelines. They have had sufficient time now to come

up with a concrete response and I will be emphasising the importance, when settling claims, of their not undermining the guidelines by settling for amounts that are inconsistent with them.

Another valuable tool the Government has in holding insurers accountable to their commitments is the national claims information database, NCID, which allows us to monitor both claims costs and pricing trends. To date, the database has published two comprehensive reports on the private motor insurance sector and one on employer and public liability insurance. The reports include data on legal costs, settlement channels and all the other elements that impact on the overall cost of insurance premiums.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State said it is early days in this process. In fact, it is more than six months since the guidelines were enforced. As we see from the information provided by PIAB, it has reduced average awards by 40%, thereby reducing the cost of claims for the insurance industry. The relevant legislation was not passed by all the parties in this House to boost the profit of insurance companies, but that is exactly what is happening. The legislation was passed to reduce insurance premiums and costs for consumers but the savings are not being passed on in full.

There has been ample time to see what is happening. We have had a study by the Alliance for Insurance Reform, which looked at hundreds of different cases and found that both businesses and community groups had seen an increase of 15% in insurance costs, on average, since the guidelines came into effect. Similarly, we are not seeing the type of reduction that should be happening in the car insurance sector. We need to call a spade a spade. Insurance companies are pocketing some of the reductions in costs that are arising as a result of the guidelines. The Minister of State can meet with their representatives over and over again and have tea and coffee with them. That is fine, but he will never know what they should be charging unless he implements the legislation I have brought forward. I ask him, hand on heart, why in God's name he is stalling that legislation. Surely we all want to do the right thing. Is it just because my name is on the Bill? Progressing it is the right thing to do for consumers and businesses.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Minister of State to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is a company in Dundalk about to go bust because it cannot get insurance-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----and there are many others like it.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It has been a number of months since the guidelines were introduced. I want to put it on the public record that there has been a decline in the cost of motor insurance premiums, as per the figures produced on an ongoing basis by the Central Statistics Office, CSO. The cost of insurance has reduced by at least 20% in recent years and that has continued right up to the present quarter. The early indications from PIAB show reductions of up to 40%, which will see a proportionate reduction in the overall costs making up premiums and a consequent reduction in their cost to consumers.

The other point I want to mention is there have been some increases in business and other types of insurance. In a number of particular sectors, there are local problems. This could be to do with high-risk factors or a lack of competition due to Brexit. It is only happening in a certain number of sectors. I am meeting with Insurance Ireland and the Alliance for Insurance

Reform in the coming days to discuss the particular sections of industry that are experiencing this problem, which is generally not affecting the vast majority of businesses.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is what I cannot understand. The Minister of State says he is going to take action against the industry. The Tánaiste talked about it more than a year and a half ago, before the election, saying he was giving the insurance industry six months and that was it, after which the stick would come out. We in this House did our job. Representatives of the insurance industry came before the Oireachtas committee and said they would reduce premiums across the board by 15% to 20% and, if not, they would need to be asked tough questions. We did our job and the judicial council did its job. We all accept that awards have gone down, but premiums have not. Now is the time to bring out the big stick.

There is legislation before this House that has passed Second Stage and the Minister of State is stalling it. It is ridiculous. Similar legislation is in force in Britain and my Bill is about holding the exact same companies to account. There is no way that I, the Minister of State or anybody in this House will ever know what premiums should cost unless we collect the type of information provided for in that legislation. I ask him to stop stalling the Bill. It should be before the House next week.

I also want to ask the Minister of State what he is doing on the duty of care aspect. I mentioned a company in Dundalk that is going bust. Awards are coming down but we need to deal with the duty of care. There have been promises after promises in that regard. When will we see the legislation?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I want to take this opportunity to inform the Deputy that the Department of Finance sought agreement last week from the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach that it engage in pre-legislative scrutiny of the insurance (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2021. Tomorrow, I will ask the committee, of which the Deputy is a member, to set an early timescale for that. We want it to be done before Christmas because it will eliminate issues like the loyalty penalty for home insurers and motor insurers.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are misleading the Dáil. That legislation does nothing of the sort. It asks the Central Bank for a report on what it is doing.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Through the Chair, I have not misled the Dáil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State is completing and utterly misleading the Dáil.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I have not misled the Dáil.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Your legislation does nothing.

Deputy Sean Fleming: There is a request to the committee for pre-legislative scrutiny, to which it has agreed. I am asking the Deputy and his colleagues on the committee to give the matter their urgent attention in order that we can deal with it promptly. The duty of care legislation will be going through the justice committee, not the finance committee. The particular legislation to which I referred is being dealt with by the latter. I welcome the opportunity to be in the committee with the Deputy doing that pre-legislative scrutiny in the immediate days or weeks ahead.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The legislation does nothing. The only power it gives you is to ask for a report from the Central Bank. You could telephone the Governor and ask for the same thing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are moving on. I call Deputy Naughten.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is an embarrassment.

National Treasury Management Agency

71. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the steps taken to date to divest from fossil fuel investments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54601/21]

Deputy Denis Naughten: I worked with the Minister to enact the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018. We now need to go much further and ensure the whole financial system divests from fossil fuels. A carbon tax is being charged on our citizens who, in the vast majority of instances, cannot avoid paying it. Yet we are not taxing investments in fossil fuel industries, which make it much harder for people to switch to clean solutions.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Ireland was one of the first countries to divest public money from fossil fuel investments. The Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018 was signed into law by the President of Ireland in December of that year. The Act imposes certain prohibitions and restrictions with respect to the investment by the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, of assets of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, in certain fossil fuel undertakings. It prohibits ISIF from directly investing in any undertaking that generates 20% or more of its turnover from the exploration for, or extraction or refinement of, a fossil fuel such as oil, natural gas, peat, coal or any derivative thereof intended for use in the production of energy by combustion.

Where the agency becomes aware that an undertaking in which such assets have been so invested by it is, or has become, a fossil fuel undertaking, the Act requires the agency to divest the assets of ISIF from such investment. The legislation also provides for a restriction on such investment when the investment is of an indirect nature, that is, investment of the assets of the fund in an investment product or in a collective investment undertaking. ISIF has developed a list of 246 fossil fuel companies in which it will not invest, as determined by criteria within the Act. The list is updated on a semi-annual basis in line with methodology that is aligned to the legislation, as set out on ISIF's website.

Deputy Denis Naughten: That is a very welcome and positive initiative. However, there is little point in the public making monumental efforts to meet the targets set out in the climate action plan if its investments and deposits are being used to fund further oil exploration or increased use of fossil fuels. This year, investors in coal production will have a bumper return and profits. We need to see full transparency from our banks and financial institutions in this regard and we must raise awareness among the public. Fossil fuel investment must be treated just like tobacco investment. However, this has to be done at EU level and not just domestically. The Minister is president of the Eurogroup. He sits on the Economic and Financial Affairs Council. We need to see measures taken at EU level to force banks, asset managers and listed companies to publish transition plans on how they will divest from fossil fuels and decarbonise.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: ISIF is already doing this on a national level. It has published

a list of the nearly 250 fossil fuel companies it does not invest in, much of it for the reason the Deputy has just outlined in that we believe, as a country, it is appropriate we not invest in fuels and technology that can do more harm to the future of our world and national environment. It was one of the first agencies of its kind to make a move of this nature. The Commission has brought forward what it refers to as taxonomy proposals, brought forward by Commissioner McGuinness. It is looking to break down and segment different kinds of investments based on the impact they can have on our environment and, in turn, use this as a way of influencing and guiding the investment decisions made by financial markets. That work is under way and Commissioner McGuinness published proposals on that a few weeks ago.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Part of the problem is no one knows what green finance means. If Ireland, as a key financial centre, and the Central Bank leads by example and for this to happen throughout the EU, we could provide clarity on what sustainable investment is and the powers to hold financiers to account. We could help to revolutionise this sector and lead to an exponential drive to net-zero emissions. The International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation has announced it will develop a single set of standards on sustainability disclosure requirements. The adoption of this by the International Organization of Securities Commissions would transform the global financial markets. This needs to be spearheaded at EU level by the Eurogroup and EU finance ministers.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy's point about the need to tell people what we are doing is relevant to this debate. Much of what he is calling on me and the European Union to do is happening. I have just mentioned what ISIF has done. Only a few weeks ago, the Governor of the Central Bank wrote to all of the CEOs involved in the insurance sector about investment decisions they make, reminding them of the need to be aware of their commitments under Environmental, Social and Governance, ESG, under more sustainable investment decisions. It may not be a clear name for what it is doing, but through its taxonomy proposals, the Commission is looking to have a common way of understanding the impact of investment decisions on the future of our environment and use that to influence and guide more sustainable investment decisions by investment companies. That work is happening. The point I should consider, off the back of Deputy Naughten's question, is to find ways in which we can better communicate this to a country that wants to see this work done.

Forestry Sector

72. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Finance if landowners with trees that need immediate solutions will be entitled to tax deductions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54776/21]

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I ask the Minister to note that forestry is the easiest solution to sequester carbon. What financial solution will be offered to foresters who are affected by ash dieback? Landowners were advised by Teagasc to leave conventional farming and to use an ideal solution for farming in ash, oak and elder. These were the hardwoods recommended by Teagasc.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I know the Deputy's question relates to farmers or foresters who sell their trees for profit and whose trees have become damaged or diseased. As he said, there is a particular issue with ash dieback disease, sometimes referred to as chalara, which is of particular relevance to his question. Profits or gains from the occupation of woodland in

the State, which is managed on a commercial basis and with a view to realising a profit, are exempt from income tax and corporation tax under section 232 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. It follows that the issue of a tax deduction is not relevant in such circumstances because the income is already exempt from income and corporation tax. With regard to section 232, forestry plays a key role as a carbon sink, helping to mitigate the increase in greenhouse gas emissions from other sectors of the economy. It is capital-intensive investment with costs front loaded. Compared with other industrial sectors, it has a relatively long period before returns are realised.

The Department of Finance reviewed all of these schemes in 2006 and these issues were again looked at in 2014. An exemption from capital gains tax, under section 564 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, is also available to an individual in respect of gains realised on the disposal of woodlands, to the extent those gains relate to standing timber. Any gain attributable to the underlying land is subject to capital gains tax. In certain cases of tree farming, which do not amount to occupation of woodlands, the exemption in section 232 does not apply. In these cases, a tax deduction may apply where immediate solution costs are incurred wholly and exclusively in respect of the trade.

Non-tax measures on forestry generally and ash dieback disease are, of course, matters for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and I understand he has put in place a support scheme for plantations affected by ash dieback, known as the reconstitution and underplanting scheme, to assist farmers and foresters with site clearance and replacement of affected crops.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Ash dieback is a disease that affects ash trees. Ash plants imported into Ireland from Holland were diseased. This ash dieback has destroyed the ash plantations in Ireland. Initially, an income was guaranteed for 20 to 25 years. At ten years, the trees sequester carbon. Ten trees equals 1 cu. m, which would be a yield of €60 per cubic metre. Ash butt is used for making hurleys and is worth €450 per cubic metre. This equates to a loss of €6,000 per cubic metre. In 2009, concerns were raised that ash dieback was imported into Ireland and highlighted to the then Minister, but it took two years for Teagasc to confirm ash dieback. It was brought to the attention of the Department of Agriculture in 2011 which said it could not do anything, as it was unable to stop the plants coming in from Holland, it being an EU member. This was brought to the Department in 2011. The Government held its hand up, under a Fine Gael-led Minister, and said it could do nothing.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: However, we have acted. Ash dieback was not a regulated disease in the European Union when it was detected here and as I understand, it is still not a regulated disease in the EU. Ireland and the United Kingdom were the first countries to introduce emergency national legislation to restrict the impact and import of ash plants from other member states. The then Government acted to restrict the arrival of these trees into our country and prevent the kind of harm to which the Deputy is referring. A scheme is in place to assist foresters who are coping with the cost of this. The scheme depends on how much land somebody has and the degree to which he or she is affected by this matter. However, it is there and I understand approximately €2 million to €3 million was set aside per year to deal with the costs to which the Deputy is referring.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In 2011, the then Minister for Agriculture said he could not stop the import of plants from Holland as it was a member of the EU. However, it was stopped in 2012 by a statutory instrument in the Oireachtas, but it was too late. The disease was already here. The Forestry Act says that the Minister has a duty of care to protect from diseases and

pests from abroad. The people of Ireland were let down by the Government. Land needs to get back into production. The scheme to which the Minister refers provides €1,000 per acre. Yet, it costs them between €3,000 and €12,000, depending on the plantation.

Currently, it is costing the taxpayer millions of euro to try to eradicate Chinese knotweed. We are now importing peat from anywhere and everywhere. Bark beetle in pine trees is rampant in Scotland. This was under the Minister's watch. The then Government was told in 2009. In 2011, it decided to act. In 2012, Oireachtas introduced an instrument. The then Government decided that under an instrument it was going to stop. The Government has let the foresters down. Has the Government told Europe that we do not have the forestry that they are talking about?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Everything from the Deputy is always about blame. It is always about blaming somebody.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Man up and take the blame.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: It is always about blame. It is the same old song from the Deputy, regardless of the topic. What I am doing is pointing to the action that we have taken. I am pointing to the legislation that was brought in by the then Government. It was one of the first Governments to bring in legislation to restrict the import of these trees into Ireland.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Three years later.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am pointing to the cost in relation to this. I am informing the Deputy for the third time of the scheme that is in place there to help those whose trees and forests have been afflicted by this disease. Of course, it is also the case, and he may or may not be aware of this, a planting grant is available, which can cover up to 60% of the afforestation grant to help foresters with the cost that is involved in reseeding and replanting-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They get no income for 20 years. This scheme will not pay them for another 20 years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister is to be allowed to speak.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, that is the proper record of what we have done. The then Government recognised this as an issue. As I have outlined, though the Deputy has little interest in hearing it, the supports and schemes that are available to help foresters deal with this issue.

Question No. 73 replied to with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Credit Unions

74. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance how he is supporting the credit union sector to continue to provide essential financial services to local communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54363/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I ask the Minister for Finance to outline the ways in which the Government is supporting the credit union sector to continue to provide essential financial services to local communities.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance Deputy Sean Fleming: The programme for Government includes a number of commitments to the credit union sector. I intend to shortly issue proposals emanating from the review of the policy framework for consultation. This will involve meeting with representative bodies and other stakeholders, a commitment I made in my recent engagements. In total, I have had 23 meetings with credit union stakeholders this year, including with representative bodies, collaborative ventures, service providers, the credit union advisory committee and the Registry of Credit Unions, to gather further information to help inform the next steps of the review.

In supporting the sector to provide essential financial services to local communities, I will outline some of the recent developments which highlight the potential of the sector to fulfil a role in community banking. The Central Bank of Ireland in recent years reviewed both the lending and investment frameworks. Since January 2020, credit unions now have a combined capacity to provide up to €1.1 billion in additional SME and mortgage loans with further capacity available to credit unions that can comply with certain conditions, or on the approval of the Central Bank of Ireland. As of June of this year, credit unions had a combined mortgage and SME loan book of €372 million, an increase of 18% on last year. There is, therefore, adequate headroom for credit unions to issue more mortgages and more loans to the SME sector, without requiring any further Central Bank of Ireland approval at the moment. Credit unions are permitted to place their surplus funds that have not been lent to members in range of investments, including tier 3 approved housing bodies, AHBs. I am pleased to share with the Deputy that two credit union-backed funds have received approval from the Central Bank of Ireland. Credit unions will be able to invest up to €900 million in these regulated funds, which will be subsequently lent to the AHBs.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State for that reply and for his engagement, particularly on the review. I note that €1.1 billion being lent for SMEs and mortgages. Will he please update the House on the three commitments contained within the programme for Government, one of which is the status of the review with the policy framework with the credit unions and how they are operating? What action is being taken to enable and support the credit union movement to grow? I also note the 18% increase in the loan book. How are he and his Department supporting credit unions in expanding their services to encourage community development? Finally, I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on these commitments, either to the House this evening or in written form.

Deputy Sean Fleming: First, the policy review referred to in the programme for Government is at an advanced stage. In the coming weeks, we will have a clear timeline for that process, but it is imminent.

Second, growing the credit union movement, as referenced in the programme for Government, is essentially about growing the credit unions' loan book. They have adequate deposits and savings. They do not need to grow those to any great extent. In fact, the extent of their savings can cause them financial difficulties in the negative interest rate environment we are in at the moment. I met specifically with all the main credit union organisations in light of a number of banks closing branches in many towns, cities and rural areas throughout the country to progress the opportunities available in many of these locations where the credit union is the

only financial institution left standing. Credit unions have tremendous ability and scope to increase their lending. That does not require further legislative proposals to assist them. I look forward to working with them in that area.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The Minister of State mentioned the credit unions' willingness to step in, particularly given the closure of bank branches throughout the country. There have been a number of high-profile branch closures, including in my constituency and in Dublin city. Only last week, Shankill in my constituency lost its ATM. Some Deputies might say that that is not the end of the world. However, it is for a community that relies on that ATM to access services.

I also commend Core Credit Union for its proactive nature in expanding its services. That is exactly what the credit unions want to do. They want to expand services, such as loans, savings, current accounts, debit cards, apps, online banking and so on. With the right support from Government and from the Central Bank of Ireland, credit unions say that they can continue to be present in towns and villages, which is important. I acknowledge what the Minister of State is saying about that. The Minister of State might please keep in contact with me about that engagement, to ensure that once the review is complete we know exactly where we are.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I look forward to briefing the Deputy, as well as the opportunity to brief the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, on developments as we progress. A total of 19 credit unions were approved in early 2021 for participation in the Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme. The Government has provided substantial funding for retrofitting. There will have to be some elements of providing funds by the homeowners themselves. The credit unions are the ideal movement to provide that vital type of extra information. The Central Bank of Ireland is looking at some of the services already provided that require its approval, with a view to seeing if some of these can be made exempt. I will come back with further information on that. Some legislation may be required in the areas we are talking about. However, the Central Bank of Ireland is independent of the Government for good reason. Collaboration is the way forward for credit unions because many of the issues I have mentioned are onerous for small individual credit unions. If they collaborate, they can work strongly.

Insurance Industry

75. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to enhance the National Claims Information Database, NCID, in relation to insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54357/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: On behalf of Deputy Crowe, I ask the Minister for Finance his plans to enhance the NCID, in relation to insurance.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): The NCID contains information on the cost of non-life insurance claims. Life insurance is not part of my brief for this particular purpose. The Central Bank of Ireland is responsible for collecting this information, as well as for managing the NCID under the Central Bank Act 2018. It can allow the scope of the NCID report to evolve in line with requirements. The Central Bank has already identified a number of enhancements it is planning to make to future reports. For motor insurance, this will include increased historic income and expenditure data; information on

catastrophic weather events; and duration of claim settlements. For employer and public liability, it plans to collect additional data including more detail on costs related to re-insurance and commissions. In addition, the bank will investigate information of policy excesses and limits, and the collection of further settlement channel data following the introduction of the new personal injuries guidelines. In this regard, there is ongoing technical work being undertaken by the Central Bank and our officials. I hope that the bank will consider publishing certain NCID data more frequently than is currently the case. Many of the reports come out annually. We would all benefit from a higher frequency than just annual reports.

Separately, the Government has also agreed to draft the insurance (miscellaneous provisions) Bill, which will include further NCID enhancements. I believe it is worth highlighting that the NCID provides a level of information into the insurance sector that is unique to our market. The level of information available from our Central Bank is the greatest level of transparency of any country in Europe, including the UK, which is bringing in some measures. They do not benefit in the first case from the information from an NCID report that we already have in Ireland. I want to make that point clear.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: That is welcome news. I welcome the proposed extension of the national claims information database. I note that last week, at an Oireachtas committee, Oliver Gilvarry, head of the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council secretariat made the point that enhancements to the NCID database would provide greater detail on claims which would help to drill down on the cost of the awards. I note what the Minister of State has said about the volume of information available here compared with other jurisdictions, especially the breakdown between awards and legal costs. We have seen with the database that the more information that comes through, the more information policy makers have to move forward and identify what changes need to be made. Is it the intention to make sure that more data are provided?

Deputy Sean Fleming: Absolutely. We will have an outstanding level of transparency about these issues. The first thing that I should say every time I talk about insurance, especially about home and motor insurance, is that we know about the loyalty penalty for the motor insurance industry. Many people who have a policy for more than ten years are paying 10% or 15% more than they should be. We will make arrangements to ensure that that is dealt with. The same happens with home insurance but the penalty for people who stay with the same insurance company, sometimes for decades, can be over 30%, and we want to deal with that issue too. My main message regarding insurance is to shop around. When people get a bill, they should make a phone call or go online. My experience from listening to all the people I speak with is that they regularly get a reduction in the cost of their premium when they make an effort. It is a bit like going into a shop, complaining about the price of a product, and going to the shop next door to see if it is offering the same product at a lower price. I have a number of upcoming priorities. The speaking time does not permit me to provide the information so I will forward it to the Deputy.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State. It is certainly good information for consumers. The first Central Bank report on the national claims information database was published more than a year ago. It identified that in reality, the award to the individual, whether through PIAB or the courts, was pretty much the same. Coming back to the database, that is why, according to the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, it is so important to see the information flow so that the industry can be challenged about why prices are not falling. When can we expect to see the changes take effect? What impact does the Minister of State

anticipate it will have on the cost of insurance overall?

Deputy Sean Fleming: The most common claims being dealt with by the new guidelines were for soft tissue injuries, whiplash etc. They did not deal with catastrophic injuries. People who have lifelong catastrophic injuries need all the funding they can get. I should have said earlier that the Minister for Justice gave a commitment today, when guidelines were announced, to prepare a report at the end of this year, which is only a month or two away. That commitment is on the public record. We will shortly see a report from the Minister about that area. We are looking at the publication of the third national claims information database on motor insurance. We are reforming the duty of care legislation. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is giving that immediate priority. We are establishing a database in the Central Bank for new entrants with greater transparency. We are continuing Ireland's engagement at a European level with regard to Solvency II reviews. We are preparing legislation to enhance the role of PIAB. I met with the Garda Commissioner about uninsured drivers. The road traffic legislation that was recently published will have an impact on motor insurance.

Banking Sector

76. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on recent engagement he or his Department have had with a trade union (details supplied) in relation to the future of banking in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54338/21]

Deputy Brendan Smith: The banking landscape in this country is changing dramatically. The departure of Ulster Bank will impact seriously on the Border region in particular. KBC is also leaving the country. The decision by Bank of Ireland to close one third of its branch network has also caused great disquiet in many communities throughout the country. At the same time as these bank closures are happening, households and businesses still need traditional banking services as much as ever. I hope that the Minister can give some good news about a banking forum.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Is this the question tabled by Deputy McGuinness?

Deputy Brendan Smith: Yes.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank Deputy Smith. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, my officials and I have had regular contact with the Financial Services Union, FSU. Over the past year in particular, in light of the rate of change in the sector, this has included increased engagement in relation to the future of banking. The issues that the Deputy has referred to are serious. I am well aware of the different developments he has detailed and the concern they have caused in the community that he represents. I will finalise a memorandum to bring to Government in the coming weeks on the terms of reference for a review of our banking sector. Once they have been presented to Government, I intend to publish the terms of reference shortly afterwards. This process will involve ongoing engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Financial Services Union.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. I note that the Financial Services Union appreciates the direct engagement that the Minister and his Department officials have had with it. I have raised this on a number of occasions in the House, during Topical Issue debates, especially when Ulster Bank announced its departure from this country and when there was a

dramatic reduction in the number of Bank of Ireland branches. I asked the Minister to ensure that there was good engagement with the Financial Services Union. We all had representations from members and employees of the banks who were concerned about their future. A forum, or whatever body the Minister establishes, needs to include all stakeholders. I hope that along with the banks, customers, staff, management, trade unions, business, employers and employers' groups, that community interests can also be represented on that forum. It is important that the views of communities throughout the country are represented, as we reflect them in this forum daily. It is important that communities have a mechanism to deliver their views on the banking sector and how we go forward.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for that point. I anticipate that the review we will bring forward will have a provision within it for submissions to be made and for communities to make their views known about development or the absence of banking services in their local communities. In the interests of complete transparency, I envisage a review which will be conducted by the Department of Finance with Government approval. As part of that review, there will be ample opportunity for important stakeholders in the Irish banking sector, those who work in it and those who depend on it for lending and investment to engage in this process to make their views clear.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. As a society, we want to be more conscious of the people who do not have good literacy skills and who have not had the opportunity to adopt IT skills. Those people find it difficult to transact business today, especially when they cannot call into a local branch. It behoves all of us to ensure that there is an opportunity for people to transact their business in a practical way, especially people who may not have had the opportunity to acquire IT skills or who may not have access to broadband etc. It is important that those views are represented.

As the Minister is aware, the central banks of Britain and in New Zealand are conducting reviews on the subject matter of access to cash. We often think of ATMs as a mechanism to withdraw cash, but they are an important lodgement facility as well. In public banking meetings throughout the country, local communities expressed concern about hospitality and other retail businesses having to carry large amounts of cash and not having the opportunity to lodge that cash in a timely manner locally. We need to address the issue of access to cash.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: There has been a decline in the use of cash for transactions, but for many it is still the preferred method of making payments and performing transactions. I take the Deputy's point and the issue he raised about financial literacy is tied to the need for financial inclusion. To ensure that all citizens have the ability to participate in our financial system, there must be a place where they can make deposits and a way in which they can make payments in shops. This is the kind of issue that can be covered in the review of our banking sector and policy, which I expect that the Government will agree to shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

77. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if he is considering extending enhanced employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, supports for childcare providers indefinitely; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48657/21]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I ask the Minister to consider extending the enhanced EWSS sup-

ports for childcare providers.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy. The objective of the EWSS is to support employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. It has been an important part of our response to the Covid-19 crisis. While the criteria for eligibility for business in general is based on a reduction in turnover as a result of the pandemic and having regard to the importance of maintaining the provision of childcare facilities so as to enable parents to continue in or take up positions of employment, the legislation provided that childcare businesses in possession of tax clearance and registered in accordance with section 58(c) of the Child Care Act 1991 are eligible for EWSS. On budget day, I announced an extension of the scheme in graduated form until the end of next April. Since the introduction of EWSS, there has been detailed engagement between my Department and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Analysis undertaken by the latter Department and the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, informed the approach taken with regard to the childcare sector.

I assure the Deputy that the childcare sector will continue to benefit from the EWSS exemption until the end of April. As announced by the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, it is intended to put in place a transition fund between May and August 2022 which early learning and childcare providers can access. From September of next year a new funding stream will be in place to support providers in meeting their operating costs in return for a commitment that fees for parents will not increase.

To answer the Deputy’s question, a coherent approach has been taken with regard to the exit strategy from EWSS and the introduction of a new funding stream for the childcare sector. As such, I do not believe there is a need for a further extension of EWSS for the sector because it should be accommodated between the extension of the scheme and the work the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, will do.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister. He rightly pointed out that this measure was in response to Covid-19 and, importantly, it kept people working in the sector and provided jobs and income. At a higher level, we need to demonstrate how we value childcare in that whole sector before primary school. They do immense work in educating our young children and preparing them for national school. During Covid, we have been haemorrhaging staff from the sector. When that happens, women in particular are challenged and it creates further barriers for them taking up the positions the Minister talked about and being able to go back to work and take up roles outside the home. I welcome what the Minister has said and in his conversations and discussions with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, I ask him to take that formal step when it comes to early childcare providers.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: In recognition of the issues the Deputy referred to, we ensured that the childcare sector would be able to participate in the EWSS even if particular providers did not meet the revenue decline threshold. It is also the reason that it is the only sector referenced in the scheme. A provider who is in it now will continue to be in it until next April. The sector is undergoing huge change. We need a successful and viable sector to support families, particularly when parents decide to go back to work or to be in the office or workplace for some of their working day. Between the extension of the scheme that I have confirmed, the continued participation of the childcare sector in the scheme and the work the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, is doing beyond that, it should meet the issues the Deputy referred to.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: That is welcome. I call for a whole-of-government approach when the Minister is around the Cabinet table and conversations are happening with the Ministers for Education and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in order that we can start to look at the sector in a formal setting and see it as part of the Department of Education. They are teachers and educators and provide so much value. We need to value them in terms of our State's response to that.

I thank the Minister for his reply. The sector, like many others across the board, was in jeopardy for many people providing the service and it was haemorrhaging staff. Ultimately, for women who have lost their jobs or are considering going back to work, if the childcare providers are not in place, it creates further barriers.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I echo what has been said. We need to look at this sector as a matter of urgency. The staffing situation in the childcare sector is at crisis point. The facilities cannot recruit staff. There is something fundamentally wrong when childcare staff using baby wipes are, in some instances, being paid less than the staff who pack those wipes onto supermarket shelves. The system needs to be looked at urgently. In a small county like Roscommon, some childcare facilities did not open in September. I got word today that another childcare facility will close at the end of December. The situation urgently needs to be addressed in the context of staff and, more importantly, of providing access for women into the workforce.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I accept many of the points the Deputy has made. I know how important the childcare sector is in supporting parents to go back to work and giving young children the support they need at the start of their life. I repeat what I said to Deputy Niamh Smyth. She made the case for a whole-of-government approach. I cannot give any better example of such an approach than saying that the childcare sector will continue to be in the EWSS, regardless of how an individual provider performs. Access to this scheme has been one of the most raised issues over the era of the pandemic. Deputies are aware of the debates we have had regarding whether sectors should be able to come into schemes, how long they should stay in schemes and what support they get. The childcare sector is the only sector where, regardless of the performance of an individual provider, the provider stays in the scheme until the end of April.

Tax Code

78. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to ensure that the new 15% minimum global corporate tax rate will be an effective rate given the many reliefs, deductions and allowances which the largest and most profitable corporations avail of to substantially reduce their taxable profit and which results in many of these companies currently paying far less than the 12.5% headline rate on their gross pre-tax trading profits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54402/21]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Growing public outrage and international pressure has finally forced some moves towards having a minimum effective corporate tax rate to deal with the phenomenon of aggressive tax avoidance by some of the wealthiest corporations in the world. Although the Government resisted quite hotly, it has now agreed to an effective rate of 15%. Will it actually be an effective rate, because the 12.5% was not effective, and these companies utilise loopholes in the tax code to avoid paying their fair share of tax?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: On 8 October, Ireland joined 135 other member jurisdictions of the OECD framework in reaching a two-pillar agreement to address the tax challenges that have arisen from digitalisation. Pillar 1 will see a reallocation of a portion of the income of very large companies from source jurisdictions to market jurisdictions. Pillar 2 will introduce a global minimum effective tax rate of 15% on businesses with a global turnover of greater than €750 million.

It is important to note that 95% of the companies operating in Ireland are outside the scope of this agreement and will continue to be subject to a headline corporate tax rate of 12.5% on their trading profits. I take further comfort from assurances from the European Commission that it plans to propose a faithful implementation of the OECD agreement within the European Union.

As regards the suggestion that companies currently pay far less than the 12.5% headline rate, I remind the House of the published statistics of the Revenue Commissioners, which show that for the year 2019, the most recent period analysed, companies paid an effective corporate tax rate of 10.3%, with foreign-owned multinationals paying an even higher rate. While this is below the headline corporation tax rate of 12.5%, it is relatively close when compared with many of our competitors, and this close alignment of Ireland's headline and effective rates contributes to the tax certainty which so many investors say is an important factor in choosing to locate operations here in Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Revenue figures to which the Minister refers, which I have in front of me, do not say what he just said. What they say for 2019 is that there was €195 billion worth of pre-tax profits, before deductions and allowances, and that €10 billion was paid on that. That is not 10% or anything like it, it is 5.6%. The reason the Minister can claim that it is 10% is because about €84 billion of their pre-tax profits are not taxed at all because they benefit from deductions, allowances and reliefs. It is in that area that these companies have exploited loopholes in the tax code to write down their taxable profits, so they end up paying tax on only about half of their actual profits, mostly through intergroup transactions, paying themselves royalties and paying for the use of patents from their own company, which is a scam. How are we actually going to make them pay the effective rate?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have the figures here in front of me as well. I am sure I got them from the same place Deputy Boyd Barrett did. He is correct, in the sense that credits and deductions are used, but that is not the same as tax avoidance. That is where we differ. Credit, for example, with regard to recognised research and development is not tax avoidance, it is a legitimate way of the tax code recognising that something is happening inside a country that is valuable and that can create employment and investment. It is a common feature of business and corporate tax policy all over the world. The figures – I am sure they are from the same website and publication as Deputy Boyd Barrett has - are very clear. All companies had an effective tax rate of 10.3%; foreign-owned multinationals had an effective tax rate of 11.1% and US-owned multinationals had an effective tax rate of 11.5%.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I want to pre-empt what will probably be the Minister's final comment by saying we value the jobs these companies bring to this country. They do create employment and we want those jobs here. That does not mean they cannot pay their fair share of tax. Revenue figures show the major reliefs and allowances they benefit from are intragroup transactions worth €16 billion in 2019 as a cost to the Exchequer. They are from amalgamations, losses brought forward and other reliefs like that, not research and development. I refer to

the big ones. That is why they are paying themselves money, which is profit, but writing it off as a cost. It would be like me saying my ma came up with a brilliant idea and I have to pay her for that brilliant idea and then I claim that as a deduction off my income tax. Revenue would laugh me out of the room, but that is what these corporations are doing. They are writing their own tax bill. The Minister knows it, and the OECD knows it. That is why there is a reform process. What are we going to do to make sure they pay an effective rate?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: In his efforts to pre-empt what I was going to say, we had a bit of a hallelujah moment. Deputy Boyd Barrett just said he values the jobs that are here. It is the first time in our years of debating this that I have heard him say that. I think he and I have had a little bit of a breakthrough in this debate.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Give him the application form.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: It is great that all this is being recorded. If he does value them, surely he can then understand why we want them in the country and that we need to have a tax code that is competitive, which is why we have had this debate regarding the low rate. While we now agree on something regarding these jobs being valued, where we continue to disagree is that Deputy Boyd Barrett sees, for example, the write-down of an expense as tax avoidance, whereas I see the write-down of an expense in the tax code as a tax policy recognising that there are costs involved in something that will ultimately generate a profit or an income, and that is recognised in how something is taxed. That is our difference.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is what is recognised by the Minister.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Let us recognise all we have agreed on this evening.

Tax Credits

79. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the relief available under the incapacitated child tax credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54323/21]

132. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the incapacitated child allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [53577/21]

Deputy Denis Naughten: The financial pressure that is placed on families providing full-time care for a child can be horrendous. A recent study from the National University of Ireland, Galway, found that the average annual cost for families of an autistic child amounted to €28,000, relating to private services, lost income and informal care. The current incapacitated child credit is just €3,300, which is insufficient to meet the costs facing parents.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I propose to take Questions Nos. 79 and 132 together.

The legislation governing entitlement to the incapacitated child tax credit is contained in section 465 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, as amended. The legislation provides that an individual is entitled to a tax credit of €3,300 per qualifying child for a year of assessment if he or she proves that at any time during the year of assessment, he or she has a child who is under 18 years of age and is permanently incapacitated by reason of mental or physical infirmity, or if over the age of 18 years at the beginning of the year, is permanently incapacitated from main-

taining herself or himself and had become so permanently incapacitated either before reaching 21 years of age or after that age while receiving full-time instruction at any university, college, school or other educational establishment.

A child under 18 is regarded as permanently incapacitated by reason of infirmity only if that infirmity is such that, if the child were over the age of 18, there would be a reasonable expectation that he or she would be incapacitated from maintaining himself or herself.

For the purposes of the credit, “maintaining” means the ability to support oneself by earning a living from working. In order to establish entitlement to the credit in respect of any such child, medical evidence provided by the child’s medical practitioner is required to confirm both the extent of the incapacity and whether the incapacity permanently prevents the child from being able in the long term to maintain himself or herself independently when over the age of 18.

Detailed information on the operation of the tax credit is available on Revenue’s website.

9 o’clock

This is a matter that was assessed, albeit some time ago, in 2009, when the former Commission on Taxation recommended for reasons of equity that, ultimately, “the appropriate level of State support be provided to all incapacitated children through direct expenditure and that the tax credit be discontinued”. Such a course of action would obviously require very careful consideration and is not on the agenda at the present time. Equally, while tax measures are monitored by my Department as a matter of course, I currently do not have plans for a detailed review of the credit. I am sure Deputy Naughten wants to raise particular issues in regard to the operation of the credit and I will respond at that point.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Minister. The 2019 research by NUI Galway was carried out by Áine Roddy and Ciaran O’Neill. That research showed that the annual average cost per child for families amounted to €28,464.69 and was related to private autism services, lost income and informal care. By comparison, the annual State expenditure per child with autism in terms of related health, social and education resources was €14,192. That means families were out of pocket to the tune of €9,489.60.

The key findings have shown there is a significant economic burden associated with autism among children and adolescents in Ireland and that a considerable proportion of this is being borne directly by parents rather than by the State. This is also being reflected in the costs faced by other parents of children with disabilities. That is why I believe we need to look at this again in light of this research.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy. I would be interested in seeing that research if it is possible for the Deputy to give me a copy.

Deputy Denis Naughten: That is no problem.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy will be aware there is tax relief available on medical expenses and on many different forms of healthcare. I entirely recognise that for a family looking after a child who has a very high level of medical need, the financial costs involved are exceptional. What the Government tries to do through the supports we make available to that family, through measures in the social welfare code and through our tax code, is to provide a meaningful contribution to the costs those families face. I know that, in many cases, costs are

rising, they can be great and they can happen at very difficult times for a family. As I said, I am very happy to look at the report to which the Deputy referred to see if there is anything in it that should lead to a revision of our thinking in regard to the operation of this credit.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Minister for his constructive response, which I acknowledge. The out-of-pocket expenses for private therapeutic interventions and assessments were the highest category of medical costs associated. The average cost incurred by families was €948 but there was a considerable variation in that, ranging from zero right up to €14,400. Part of that variation is the variation in access to services. I will give one practical example. The waiting list at present for occupational therapy and assessments in the west is in excess of two years. Families are forced to go privately to get an assessment, which costs anywhere between €500 and €1,500, and the ongoing costs per session are between €75 and €100.

The State is failing in its obligation to provide early intervention to these children. They cannot get access to public services and families are forced to go down the road of trying to source private services. This whole area needs to be looked at and resourced properly to give every child, regardless of family resources, the opportunity to get early access to those vital services.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The issue of the funding of the very important services to which Deputy Naughten refers is separate to the operation of this credit. I know the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Health did an awful lot of work in the run-up to the recent budget to increase significantly the funding available for many of the services the Deputy has referred to. The Minister, Deputy McGrath, also worked with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, in regard to the help that can be given to young children who need additional support in our schools. To go back to the original point the Deputy has raised, if he gives me a copy of the report, I will be very happy to have a look at it.

Tax Code

80. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the last time the threshold was increased of the gift a parent can give to a child for them not to be liable to have it assessed as part of their life gifts or inheritance from a parent; if he plans to increase the tax-free ceiling of the annual gift a parent can give a child from €3,000 in the forthcoming Finance Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54332/21]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: One of the ways of increasing taxes is to leave tax thresholds the way they were. A threshold was introduced some time ago where people could give a gift to a child of €3,000 per annum and it was not assessable as part of the lifetime gift to that child in terms of inheritance or gift tax. My question is twofold. When was that threshold set and is it intended to increase the threshold?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for his two questions. That threshold was last changed in section 149 of the Finance Act of 2003. The Deputy will be aware of the operation of the credit. It was set in 2003 and I do not at this point have any plans to change it further, although I am aware of the role it plays in supporting families in the gifts they make from a parent to a child. However, with all of the other competing demands on the Exchequer at the moment, I was not in a position to change it in the recent budget.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As I pointed out, not increasing thresholds is actually increasing taxes. The Minister might tell me what is the increase in the consumer price index since 2003 and, in other words, in the real value of a gift. Would the Minister not agree that many parents give gifts to their children at a time of crisis for their children, at a time when there are childcare costs or child costs that were unforeseen, or at a time when they want to get their own property and furnish it, and so on? It seems it is an awful lot of bureaucracy if a parent gives €4,000 or €5,000 in that they then have to make a whole lot of tax returns for that extra €2,000 over a lifetime. I am not saying the person would ever reach the threshold and they might never actually have a tax liability because the inheritance tax threshold is €335,000, but it is all of this paperwork for very little merit. Would the Minister not consider increasing it to, say, a modest €5,000 given that would probably only give the real value of what was there in 2003?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy is correct that the non-indexation of different thresholds more often than not leads to an increase in tax revenue. As to what has been the change in inflation since the last change was made in 2003, the change in inflation in recent years alone would mean that the real impact of that threshold has now increased, given it has been left unchanged. I cannot at this point give the Deputy an indication as to what will be in next year's budget as we are still dealing with the Finance Bill for this year's budget. As I said, I was not in a position to make a change for this year but I accept that, because it has not been changed for some while, it is now covering off a larger share of any gifts that might be made at the moment from parents to children.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the Minister have any idea what an increase to €5,000 would cost the Exchequer?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Yes. An increase to €5,000 would have an approximate cost of €1.1 million.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: This is just going to ordinary people who are giving a gift because many parents are now supporting children. Will the Minister give me an outline of what is the total tax take of the State? Thereafter, we will do a little sum in our head as to how much €1.1 million would be out of the €60 billion, €70 billion or €80 billion income and revenue the State is taking in. The Minister might tell me what the tax take of the State is.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I gave a short answer to the Deputy's first question and I will give a short answer to the second one as well. It is a very low share of the total amount of tax that we take in. I accept that it has not been changed for some time and I thank the Deputy for bringing it to my attention.

Question No. 81 replied to with Written Answers.

Insurance Industry

82. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance the way he plans to increase competition in the insurance sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54355/21]

123. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance the engagements he has had with insurance underwriters to bring more into the market; if an update will be provided on the work of the Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market in this regard; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [54345/21]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I want to ask the Minister of State his plans to increase competition in the insurance sector and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I propose to take Questions Nos. 82 and 123 together. As the Deputy may be aware, in July the Government published the first implementation report of the action plan for insurance reform, which shows that work is progressing well, with 34 of the 66 actions contained therein completed. The sub-group's focus now is on implementing the outstanding actions on time.

One of the key achievements of the Government's reform agenda is the new office to promote competition in the insurance market, which I chair. The office is an important element of the Government's ambitious insurance reform programme to help to enhance competition, reduce costs and increase the availability of insurance cover. Accordingly, the office has held meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, including insurance companies, representative bodies, civil society groups and State regulators on the issues surrounding competition. Its aim is to help expand the risk appetite of existing insurers and explore opportunities for new market entrants in order to increase the availability of insurance.

I met the CEOs of the major insurance providers in Ireland earlier this year and intend to meet them again in the next few weeks to discuss a variety of issues, including expanding their risk appetite. Separately, I am meeting various specialist firms that operate here and that are seeking to expand and provide cover in particular areas of the market. The office is also working closely with IDA Ireland to bring new entrants into the Irish insurance market and to improve its overall competitiveness. This will, in the first instance, seek out providers that offer insurance in areas which have been identified as pinch points in the Irish market where some customers are encountering difficulties in obtaining cover. This is exacerbated by Brexit in some cases.

The Government is committed to securing a more sustainable and competitive market through deepening and widening the supply of insurance in Ireland. It is my intention to work with my Government colleagues to complete this progress as part of the action plan for insurance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will only have the chance to come in once, along with Deputy Ó Murchú, as we have run out of time.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I know the Minister of State has taken a real and personal interest in this issue because he knows it has created huge barriers for people in business, the voluntary sector and the community sector. Sadly, the Alliance for Insurance Reform has done significant and extensive surveys of more than 450 businesses and voluntary and community groups and it has reported increases rather than decreases. The Minister of State talked about personal injuries and there are certain caps in that area. How can the Government act to improve competition and get additional underwriters into the market as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister of State to give a bit of detail on the specialist insurers he is talking about engaging with. I dealt with the Minister of State before on the matter of a particular business that is now facing the cliff edge. We are talking about a pile of firms and Deputy Doherty and others brought up the case of another firm in Dundalk earlier. We will be hitting that cliff edge in February, March or April. We need the duty of care legis-

lation and then we need more providers to come into the sector to provide what is necessary. Otherwise we will have community centres, community groups and businesses closing. I know other specific answers will be required for the likes of the leisure industry. I ask the Minister of State to give some detail on that and I have no doubt that I will be talking to him about this afterwards as well.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputies for their comments and I want to give practical examples of what we are talking about. I met the Alliance for Insurance Reform last week and I hope to meet it again next month and the month after. It has indicated a number of pinch points where some groups are having difficulty getting insurance and that is a particular problem. The survey it referred to only included a number of businesses and is not reflective of all those businesses that have no problem getting insurance. The average price of insurance for a business, which includes sole traders, is about €2,000 per annum. That is a Central Bank figure; not mine. I will also meet Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland to discuss the areas in Irish society where there are particular difficulties obtaining insurance. Ice rinks were mentioned in this regard a week ago in a Topical Issue matter. Sometimes if four, five or six groups are operating in the country they might have to come together to help them help themselves in getting insurance collectively. That is the principle matter I will be pursuing in the coming weeks.

Written answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Further and Higher Education

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am not disappointed by the Minister of State's presence but by the fact that the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is not here. The Minister of State will have heard me mention the urgent need for a new building for Cavan Institute on many occasions in this Chamber.

I am at a loss to understand why we have not seen movement from the Department on this. This is a college that has exceeded itself and that is a victim of its success. It was built for fewer than 500 students in 2006 and now there are over 1,100 students attending it. The college has gone above and beyond the call of duty in being relentless in its efforts to attract students and to do so by providing a broad spectrum of courses. The facilities it has are wonderful but it needs a greenfield site. This building has been on the building's list since 2015. It is not the only college of its kind; I have done some research and there are other education and training boards, ETBs, with the same type of problems. There is no logical reason, when it has been approved and sanctioned and when due diligence has taken place, that it has not been given the green light.

I appreciate that the Minister was in Cavan some months ago and announced modular buildings would be provided. In my mind modular buildings are temporary and they do not provide the longevity, continuity and stability that a college and its staff need for their future. I know there is a push in the Department for further education and training, FET, colleges around the country and this is an ideal location for such a college. I do not want to harp on about this but it has been on the buildings list from 2015 until this point and not a sod has been turned. The

college does not need to look for a site; it is on a greenfield site which is ideally located in the centre of the town. There is nothing to stop this project except commitment from the Government to do this. I did a little exercise because I know that this college, as I said, far surpasses its capacity. It is in a position where it is having to rent buildings around Cavan town just to be able to provide the facilities that it needs. Having done a tot on four of the premises that are being rented, I have to tell the Minister of State the amount being spent is staggering. Almost half a million euro per annum is being spent to rent temporary facilities. That has been going on for a number of years.

We are at a point where we need a commitment, not only because it is there in black and white that this building has been approved but because we need a start date. We need to know when this new building will be started and, more importantly, when it will be finished. The staff deserve it. The principal deserves it. The deputy principals deserve it. The drive and enthusiasm within that college is second to none. They are exemplary in the courses that they provide. As I said, it has far exceeded its capacity to deliver but it is doing it, and in rented premises. As I have alluded to, one of the buildings is costing €250,000. Another is €55,000 and another is €85,000. That is all rent that could be so much better used in terms of having a permanent facility.

I hope that the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has given the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, some good news to bring back to me tonight.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Deputy Niamh Smyth. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harris. The Deputy and I both know if there was good news the Minister, Deputy Harris, would be here. It would not be wee Anne from Galway delivering it. I am taking the Topical Issue all the same nonetheless.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity to set out for the House the position with regard to Cavan Institute and further education provision for Cavan town. Cavan Institute was established, as the Deputy said, in 1985 and has provided a high-quality educational service to the people of Cavan and beyond ever since. Under the management of Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, CMETB, the institute has played a central part in developments in further education through innovative course development and top-class, industry-standard facilities. The institute offers courses in business, humanities, creative practices, computing, engineering, healthcare, sport, physical therapies, beauty therapy, hairdressing and science. The institute was initially set up on Main Street in Cavan, and was formerly known as Cavan College of Further Studies. Cavan Institute has multiple rented locations across the town.

In March 2012, CMETB acquired a former Army barracks, a large site of 18 acres, with a view to refurbishing and adapting the site and its buildings to create, as the Deputy rightly said, a further education and training, FET, campus. Development of the barracks site provides an opportunity to centralise FET service provision, create opportunities for expansion and eliminate the need for various rented temporary accommodation around Cavan town. CMETB has secured funding to progress the development of a new FET centre of excellence in supply chain logistics and procurement. This will support the development of business transformation and workforce skills in Cavan, the north east and nationally. I suppose the location has been chosen in recognition of Cavan's status as a Border town.

This project is part of a €3 million investment for local projects under the Border enterprise

development fund, which is an economic stimulus package established for the Border region, and with additional funding from SOLAS and the Department. It is proposed to locate the new training centre at CMETB's FET campus. The project is a direct response to current industry requirements and emerging skills needs in the region, with a vision to have a positive impact on the region's competitiveness, job security and employment growth.

CMETB requested capital investment to relocate its FET operations from Main Street and Cootehill Road to the barracks site and also for the creation of the supply chain logistics and procurement centre of excellence, both by means of modular units. Funding was approved in August of this year by the Department for works associated with delivery of this interim accommodation. I suppose the use of the word "interim" in the Minister's script is an acknowledgement of what Deputy Niamh Smyth has referred to is an interim arrangement. The project is currently being progressed by the ETB, with discussions ongoing with the modular unit provider.

I will take on board everything that Deputy Niamh Smyth has said. The Deputy has raised some valuable points in relation to the cost of the buildings leased. As a former chair of Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, I would say that sometimes we have to look at what is left on the leases. Maybe that is a stumbling block, as to what length is left on the leases and whether they are able to come out of the leases. In all fairness, they have a site. There is a willingness from the Government to come totally on board. Other than the fact that we have issues regarding containers or whatever, I do not understand why we are not progressing it further.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is not the Minister with responsibility for this but I would appreciate it if she would bring my remarks back to the Minister, Deputy Harris. It is my understanding that there is now a call-out to education and training boards, ETBs, for strategy assessment reports on new college buildings that were approved seven or eight years ago. What are we asking the ETBs to do? Are we asking them to do a rerun of the process of validating their required need? That is crazy. I make the case that due diligence and approval of this new building occurred years ago and they have been left in limbo with no building.

I note that the response that has come from the Department talks about the Army barracks out on the Cavan Road. It is difficult for the Minister of State to know when she is not from the area. We are talking about multiple areas and multiple campuses. We are not talking about an all-in-one campus, which should be the case. In my mind, the location of the current Cavan Institute is ideal. It is in the centre of the town. I would like somebody from the Department to tell me that is not ideal for the extension, expansion and delivery of a new building for Cavan Institute.

Modular buildings do not cut it in this day and age. The teachers, the staff and the principal have been more than patient. They have had to reinvent themselves.

The Minister of State asked a question about leases. It is my understanding - the Department can come back and tell me differently - that the leases are expiring at present and decisions have to be made. I want to see the right decision made. No more taxpayers' money of nearly half a million euro should be wasted annually because some of the buildings they are renting are not fit for purpose and are in a poor state.

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As I said, the principal, the teaching staff and the students attending Cavan Institute have been patient but they deserve their new building. The next time I want to hear a start date for the new building.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will take on board everything Deputy Niamh Smyth has asked. I recognise, as the Deputy said, the commitment of the principal, the teaching staff and the parents of the students who are attending there. In relation to the Deputy's ask about the development of the greenfield site which she has clearly articulated, needless to say the Deputy has her work done there in relation to where the leases are at, etc. I will present that to the Minister, Deputy Harris, and perhaps he might be able to meet with the Deputy to discuss progressing the project further.

Hospital Trusts

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for coming in tonight to take this important debate which I was keen to table here in the Dáil. I am disappointed that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is not here. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, who is doing an outstanding job in her area. I have been hugely impressed with her work and with her energy in her specific area within the Department of Health but this is a matter relating to an acute hospital and I would have expected that the senior Minister would have shown up for the debate. It is not good enough. It is happening far too often that senior Ministers are not coming in to take debates from Deputies under Topical Issues. It is not the Minister of State's fault. I appreciate the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, being here. I know that she will take back what I am about to say here tonight.

From speaking to consultants, doctors, patients and everyone at University Hospital Kerry, UHK, the situation never seems to have been as bad at the hospital. As someone who cares deeply about that hospital, it pains me to say that. It is our hospital. It belongs to the people of Kerry. To sum up the challenges that are there at present, I will read into the Dáil record and convey to the Minister of State some of the highlights from a letter that was sent recently by consultants at UHK to the CEO of the South/South West Hospital Group. I will take snippets from it. It makes for grim reading:

We have lost confidence in the ability of the Health Service Executive locally, regionally and nationally to provide safe, timely and effective care for our patients in UHK.

We do not see evidence of strategic leadership to bring about the necessary changes to enable UHK to maintain and develop services for the population it serves.

We feel management processes have not progressed with each successive crisis. UHK, and the people we serve deserve better.

In relation to patient safety, it states that patient safety is at risk due to the current bed limitations in UHK.

UHK still cannot provide PCR testing for Covid after 8 p.m. and has been asking for this solution for more than a year. Reduced bed capacity and daily staff shortages continue to cause huge delays in patient flow. On bed capacity, UHK has a totally inadequate number of single rooms which increases infection control risk by leading to frequent outbreaks as well as causing

a loss of further beds to deal with these outbreaks. The lack of single rooms has been highlighted repeatedly by infection control teams. UHK has never had a full-time permanent consultant microbiologist. This has been noted by HIQA which indicated that an urgent and permanent solution must be put in place. The consultants also highlight significant bed losses due to Covid and development works and ask why a contingency plan was not put in place in respect of these works. They also highlight the fact that an isolated modular unit has been urgently requested by the infection control teams to improve isolation facilities in UHK.

On surgical services, there has been no elective surgery in UHK since mid-September, with reduced activity for the last 18 months since the day ward capacity was reduced by more than half.

UHK is disadvantaged as its ability to record data accurately is seriously at fault. About 30% of physician activity in the emergency department is not recorded in iPIMS. UHK has no IT manager and no IT committee. It gets worse. Like other hospitals nationally, there is a shortage of nurses. Nurses in UHK are under additional pressure carrying out non-nursing duties. The director of nursing and her management team have repeatedly asked for extra support staff to perform these duties, but that support has not been forthcoming. The five fundamentals project to improve processes and pathways is now at risk because staff have been redeployed.

On the acute floor model the acute medical unit, AMU, opened for a few months during summer 2021 and demonstrated its effectiveness. Due to staffing issues the AMU is currently closed more often than it is open. On integration with community services, the consultants advocate that a formal integrated decision-making forum be created. On scheduled services, virtual clinics can only be done by telephone because the IT equipment and the WiFi will not allow video calling. On accommodation, consultants have a lack of office space as do secretaries and other grades of staff. There is no plan to address this. Finally, the consultants ask what is the plan in relation to the new oncology unit. They do not have a deputy manager in place since last summer.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy for bringing this matter to the House and taking the time to read in to the record exactly what the consultants wrote to him. It was hard to listen to. They were obviously pained that they felt they had to go to this extreme. I sense the Deputy's annoyance with the Minister not being here this evening to take this response. I have a response but I feel it falls far short of what it should be. I thank the Deputy for raising this and giving me the opportunity to provide an update to the House on University Hospital Kerry, UHK. I want to acknowledge the incredible work and commitment made by the staff of UHK in the provision of services during the Covid-19 and cyber-attack emergencies and in managing many difficult cases presenting in very challenging circumstances. UHK is currently experiencing significant pressure caused by a number of factors. These include increased presentations of acutely unwell patients with complex medical needs, as well a rising number of Covid patients presenting to the hospital in recent weeks.

Currently we are seeing extensive community transmission of Covid-19 throughout all parts of the country, including Kerry. There are cases in all age groups and particularly among the unvaccinated. The 14 day incidence rate in Kerry 1,061. As of this morning, there are 12 Covid-19 positive inpatients in UHK. In addition, there are approximately 141 staff on unplanned leave including 18 staff absent due to Covid-19 leave. This level of absence is contributing to the greatest risk in resourcing existing level of service and staffing surge capacity, in particular in critical care.

The HSE has advised me that the South/South West Hospital Group is currently providing support to UHK management for a minimum of two days a week for the coming month in order to support, stabilise and urgently address identified risks at the hospital and there can be no greater risk than not having access to an updated IT system within the emergency department. The focus of this support will be to identify delays within UHK patient flow streams and to propose solutions. This arrangement has been put in place to ensure that the hospital group is assured of the ongoing safe management of patients in UHK. The HSE has advised that a number of measures have been implemented at UHK to ensure the highest standards of patient care and safety are upheld. These include access to private hospital capacity, engagement with community healthcare services and additional staffing supports from the hospital group and other hospitals.

On staffing issues, the HSE has advised me that the approved consultant cohort for UHK has increased from 39 whole-time equivalents, WTE, in September 2017 to 52 WTE in September 2021. In addition, significant developments have taken place in the department of nursing with the appointment of advanced nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists roles and clinical facilitators. Locally, hospital management has ensured ongoing recruitment and further support is being provided at a regional level by the wider HR support network, including SSWHG.

The HSE and the South/South West Hospital Group have assured me of their commitment to augmenting the services delivered in UHK to meet identified local demands. This includes the provision of additional resources and staffing, and a capital investment plan of €69.75 million. Nationally, the winter plan is in active development by the HSE and will set out the measures to be implemented and the expected impacts. The Department of Health is continuing to engage intensively with the HSE on the issue. The winter plan will provide for the appropriate, safe and timely care for patients

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I appreciate the response but it does not address the many issues raised in the letter from the consultants. For any Deputy to have to come into this House and read a letter of that seriousness from consultants in any hospital in this country is an absolute shame and a disgrace. The people of Kerry deserve better than that type of shocking, embarrassing and depressing information which is effectively being ignored by the Minister's office. I have conveyed all that information to the Minister's office in writing previously. I have not got anything satisfactory back. There are rumours that senior people from the HSE will come to the hospital on Friday. Nothing has been confirmed to the hospital staff and today is Tuesday. That is fine. It has happened before but we need to know what is the plan beyond Friday? Will that be another box-ticking exercise so that they can say, "Yeah, sure we sent down people to Kerry. They had a good chat and heard all the problems.", and then they go away again for another while until the next crisis. It is not good enough. There has to be a full audit of what is going on at that hospital because it has degenerated beyond belief at this stage. The shocking stories of patient experiences that I have heard through my office and from meeting people in the constituency are infuriating and I am not sensing the urgency from the Minister on solving the problems there. It is time for the special delivery unit to come in all guns blazing. We cannot hold back any longer on this because what is going on is the worst it has ever been. I want the Minister of State to convey that back to the Minister. I hope he gets to see some of this debate and realises that we are not messing here. This is serious. It is critical and some feel it has gone beyond the point of no return. I am an optimist; I still think the situation can be retrieved but they have almost crossed the Rubicon and the Minister needs to get involved personally.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will take on board everything the Deputy has said. I want to

acknowledge that things are at a critical stage, whether due to the Covid numbers or absenteeism. Absenteeism can include those with long-Covid but people are also absolutely exhausted working in horrific conditions, trying to support patient care and patient safety. It is unbelievable to think that the IT system in an emergency department is not up to standard. That will be conveyed directly back to the Minister. The lack of single rooms is one of the gravest areas which the Deputy just presented. Only recently, a nursing home near me was closed because it did not have single rooms. HIQA's view was that it was done for health and safety and the protection of the patients.

I will take on board what the Deputy has said. I will get confirmation from the Minister's office as to whether the visit to Kerry is taking place this Friday. The Deputy, his constituents and, most important, the people who work there need to know that it is taken very seriously. We can see from the commitment in respect of University Hospital Kerry and the increase in the number of whole-time equivalent staff there that the Government is very serious in supporting the hospital. What the Deputy needs to see, however, is that those outstanding issues the consultants have written about will be addressed and that the special unit will prioritise the hospital in his area for the people he represents. Those people need to know that it is getting the priority it needs and, no different from any other hospital in any other part of the country, it is being treated equally and with the same level of urgency. I will get the Deputy those answers.

Drug Dealing

Deputy John Lahart: I am grateful that the Minister of State is present. I am not from Tallaght but I have been lucky enough to grow to love it and its people as one of the Teachtaí Dála who represents it. The people there have given me the honour and privilege of representing them in parliament on two occasions now.

Tallaght is a rich tapestry that is made up of city and region. Much of Tallaght's population is comfortable, well-educated, thriving and dynamic. The area has a fabulously rich history and culture and amazing people. It is my county town and is a dynamic driver of the local economy. It is a great place to grow up in and to live. However, part of its tapestry continues to face enormous social and economic challenges that alienate the people who live there and separate them from their rightful place in our society. If those in politics have decided, legitimately, that places such as Moyross and Dublin's north inner city are entitled to an abundance of resources, security and support, I hope the Minister of State will agree that Tallaght's time has come. In an era when we bandy about figures in the billions, the Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force, TDATF, is looking for €1 million. However, I am looking for much more because Tallaght's time has come. It is time that all the assets and talents the State put at the disposal of, and invested in, other places be focused on this beautiful but fractured place. Nothing less will do and nothing less is acceptable to the people the four Teachtaí Dála present tonight, who are all members of the TDATF, represent.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am going to assume that the Minister of State heard about and read some of the extensive coverage over the past couple of days regarding the tsunami of crack cocaine use in Tallaght. I hope she also read the report by the TDATF or that the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, has. The bottom line is that this is an appeal for help from those on the front line. The report in question states: "it is by far the biggest single problem facing the services and communities of TDATF, it is of epidemic proportions and if it is not addressed immediately,

it will dwarf the heroin epidemic of the 80's". That is a very stark warning for the Government. The latter is the case because the impact in terms of the devastation of people's lives and of communities is equally stark. It is a situation where women are pressured to engage in sex work and people are unable to go to the local shop for fear of being offered or given drugs or pressured about drug debts. It is absolutely destroying communities. There are incredible people doing incredible work in the various projects but they are supporting people with their hands tied behind their backs. On the one hand, this is due to the societal issues of massive inequality and deprivation, but it is also because, to put it bluntly, they are insufficiently funded. The task force is still suffering from the cutbacks made between 2009 and 2013, where mainstream and interim funding were cut by over 20%. It is incredible that with an increased population with increased drug use and addiction problems, the TDATA has €100,000 less than it did in 2010. It needs at least an extra €1 million and it needs to hear from the Government that it will get it.

Deputy Seán Crowe: We saw how crack cocaine hollowed out inner cities in America. Unfortunately, we are starting to see it happening in Ireland. Crack cocaine has the potential to destroy individuals and their families but it also puts enormous pressure on communities. The Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force, which also covers Whitechurch, serves a catchment area containing twice as many people and it does so with less money than it had ten years ago. That is not acceptable. The levels of intimidation relating to drugs are up. There is open drug-dealing in many estates and suicides have become more common. The age group of those involved is really frightening, with some as young as ten involved in selling and using drugs. One third of those involved are, as we heard, women and many are being forced into sex work in order to pay drug debts, but also, in many cases, just to buy a rock of crack cocaine.

Even before the cocaine appeared, many of our community-based rehabilitation services were under extreme financial pressure and losing staff. Staff have not had a pay rise in ten years because they are section 39 workers. Crack cocaine requires more complex interventions and resources, and addicts need more time. This means that many project workers are left exhausted and drained. It is a game-changer, so we need changes. With this new crisis, we are asking people to do more with less money and fewer resources while expecting better outcomes. This is a crazy approach. The lack of joined-up thinking must stop. It reflects in the past a complete lack of compassion, empathy or understanding of what is actually happening in many of our communities. The people I represent are really proud people. They do not want handouts; they want a hand up. That is what they are asking for in the context of the groundbreaking research that has been done. There are practical solutions and thus a way forward. That is the message we want to hear coming back from the Minister of State.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I begin by wishing the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, a quick recovery and thanking the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for coming in this evening. The crack cocaine epidemic in Tallaght is intensifying, with more open drug-dealing in public places, increased violence, drug-related intimidation and sophisticated marketing techniques being used by drug dealers to ensnare users. Consequently, the demand for services is increasing. While the local task forces are working on the front line to provide critically-needed services and projects, they are chronically underfunded and under-resourced. This has impacted on the longevity of projects, the number of staff they can retain full-time and, ultimately, the level of services they can provide.

If the Government is serious about tackling this issue that is destroying families in Tallaght and Whitechurch, and I have no doubt it is, we need to ensure €1 million in funding is allocated as soon as possible as indicated by the report published yesterday by the TDATA. It should

be noted the funding cut during the recession has not been restored. The population has, as the other Deputies have said, increased and the State coffers have grown by 50% since 2008. Furthermore, there has been a 75% increase in drug-related crime in Tallaght since 2018 but the area has the joint lowest number of Garda members per head of population in the Dublin region. Budget 2022 commits to recruiting 800 new gardaí. In delivering on this commitment, we need to ensure that gardaí are deployed in the areas in most need, such as Tallaght. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, the Department and the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, could give a commitment to allocate that €1 million to the local task forces in Tallaght as soon as possible and to increase the number of gardaí in the area.

Deputy Mark Ward: I feel like a bit of an interloper here because I am the only Teachta Dála for Dublin Mid-West present with my colleagues from Dublin South-West. However, I knew many of the people on the news report yesterday on a professional basis as a result of the work I used to do. I thank and commend the TDATA for its really stark report on the realities of living with crack cocaine. I am a former director of the Clondalkin drugs and alcohol task force and have worked in front-line addiction centres across Dublin over the years. As was said, these services are working with one hand behind their back because funding has been reduced over the years. As its report states, the Tallaght task force received €1.3 million in 2010, while the figure in 2021 was €1.2 million. Funding has gone down while the population has gone up and the problems have got worse. This has led to a situation where the task force and the drugs service, through no fault of their own, are starting to be reactive instead of proactive. I commend the Tallaght task force because it has done a proactive piece of work.

I was a task force director making tough decisions and what happened in the past, when we wanted to start a new initiative, whether it related to crack cocaine, weed or whatever it might be, if no other money was there something old we were working on had to go out. That was sometimes a very valuable piece of work, which led to the building blocks and foundations of task forces being eroded. One of the biggest issues concerns multi-annual funding. If one is not getting it, it does not allow planning for the future and for what is coming down the line. We need to start getting there. I will not make this parochial, but I 100% support the Tallaght task force call for €1 million in additional funding for that agency.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: As I said, I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. Like my colleagues, I wish him well. I thank Deputies Lahart, Murphy, Crowe, Duffy and Ward for raising this issue. I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the issue of crack cocaine in Tallaght, as highlighted in the report published by the Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force. In response to Deputy Murphy, I have listened to the report on “Morning Ireland”. I listened to it again this morning and I also have sight of the task force report. While I was shocked and horrified, at the same time, I was aware of what crack cocaine is doing to the Deputies’ communities.

I am conscious that I have not answered the question but I have more in my conclusions.

Deputy John Lahart: That answer is much less heartening than the Taoiseach’s response when I raised the same issue on the Order of Business. It is not enough. That is the very simple message I ask the Minister of State to bring back to the Minister. She might ask him, and his constituency colleague, why Bray Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force gets significantly more funding than Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force. Riddle me that one please.

The four of us meet the most senior gardaí - in fairness, they have been very accessible - and

they have told us they have no handle on crack cocaine. That is probably the scariest piece of all. I will read a brief excerpt from the report as it summarises what people have said: “Crack cocaine users are very visible in [our] community with increased begging at shops and public areas in many parts of Tallaght”. We all know this is not exaggerated and we have raised it with An Garda. The report further states:

It has a very detrimental impact on local communities in terms of public order, intimidation, dealing, violence, mental and physical health, child welfare, deprivation, neglect and forced prostitution. The location of a significant number of ‘crack houses’ are known to the local community. The public health risks within such houses are profound and ... may have young children living in them which increases exposure at an early age.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for her forbearance and I will do the same for her when I am in the chair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I hope the Deputy will not.

Deputy John Lahart: I had to play that card tonight. What is being done is not enough and we need more. That is the message we need the Minister of State to bring back to her ministerial colleagues and there is nobody better to do so than her.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Actions speak louder than words. Unfortunately, the actions of the Government show that it is not taking this issue seriously. In the budget a month ago, the entire spend allocated for measures against crack cocaine usage throughout the entire country was €500,000. It is nowhere near adequate.

Let me spell out what an extra €1 million in funding for the Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force would mean. It would mean €400,000 for front-line, community-based services. That translates as one additional staff member per community addiction project. It would mean money for youth work, extra money for projects on crack cocaine, money for study and research, and money for additional residential places. It is money that would make a real difference in the community and it is why we will all continue to push for a commitment to be given.

Deputy Seán Crowe: As my colleague said, what the Minister of State announced is clearly not enough. We explained to her that crack cocaine has been a game changer in our community. We are looking for help and support. As others have said, this is an intergenerational issue. We are still dealing with stuff from the late 1980s and the 1990s and now, in the 2020s, we have this latest problem. It is a major challenge.

I do not know if it will shock the Minister of State, but I know of families where grandparents, parents and their children in one household are involved in drug addiction. I do not know if it will surprise her that I am aware of people in their 70s presenting in Tallaght hospital with symptoms of drug use. That is the challenge we are facing. It is a societal issue. It can be tackled but it needs resources and supports. If we do not get those supports, as I said, we will hollow out our communities and we will have nothing left.

10 o'clock

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: It is very simple. This community needs help. We have a population of 5 million now. We are one big community and this is part of that and it needs help. It is underfunded. The funding has not been brought back even though it has been

brought back to various other areas. It is under-resourced with gardaí. I do not know how much more needs to be said. I heard yesterday from Pat Daly, who works in Kiltalown rehabilitation centre, that crystal meth is coming and when that comes you can forget about everything. I was going to say something else but I will not say it. The Government needs to get on board and help these people.

Deputy Mark Ward: As the Minister of State knows, crack cocaine is a dirty, hungry drug. There is no such thing as enough for the people who are using it and that is the problem with it. It is not a new thing. It has been around for years. I worked on drugs task forces more than 20 years ago and crack cocaine was on the scene then, but because of the lack of resources they had at the time, they were unable to deal with the impacts we are facing now. There are solutions. I have tabled a Bill that would provide that any money seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau would be put back into the communities it was taken from. This would allow communities like Tallaght and Clondalkin, and other communities throughout the State, to use that money in that fund. I cannot think of anything better for that money at the moment. This would allow communities to build resilience and stop our young people falling into drug use and drug crime. It would allow mothers and fathers to make sure they are bringing up their children in a safe space and are not worried. We need to look at other alternatives and look outside the box.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will read the Minister's script and I hope I will get 30 seconds to respond myself. I have listened carefully to the views of the Deputies. I reiterate the commitment of this Government to ensuring appropriate supports and resources are in place to tackle drug addiction, including crack cocaine. A strategic priority under the national drugs strategy for the next four years will be to address the social consequences of drug use in disadvantaged communities. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, looks forward to working with all relevant stakeholders, including drug and alcohol task forces, to address the underlying causes of drug use in poorer communities. He will shortly be announcing funding of €1 million to increase access to the provision of community-based drugs and alcohol services.

I hear very clearly that this community is looking for €1 million in its entirety, so straight away there is a funding shortfall there that needs to be addressed. This funding will support the work of drug and alcohol task forces and a portion of the funding will be allocated to community healthcare organisation, CHO 7, which includes Tallaght and south-west Dublin. In budget 2022, the Minister of State secured an additional €6 million for new measures to support the implementation of the national drugs strategy and strengthen the health-led approach to drug and alcohol use, as set out in the programme for Government. This includes €500,000 to address high-risk drug use such as crack cocaine and other drugs to expand harm reduction.

I take on board everything the Deputies have said in this debate, from the fabric of the community being hollowed out to the intergenerational aspect. It is not just the Department of Health that has to step up to the plate here. Let us be very clear. There is a role for the Department of Justice, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Department of Rural and Community Development. There is a role for every Department because unless we get a hold of what has been unleashed in the Deputies' communities, when the next wave comes there will be no fabric left for us to repair. I will take this on board. One of the pieces of the programme for Government I negotiated related to the drugs task forces. I was very passionate about that and the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is also very committed to it. Not only will I articulate these issues, I will also ensure the Minister for Health finds room within his purse to address them.

9 November 2021

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the multitasking Minister of State, who came in tonight and acted in three different roles.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.05 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 November 2021.