



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 14 Nollaig 2021

Tuesday, 14 December 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility to protect themselves and others from the risk of Covid-19.

We move straight away to Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 36. Deputy McDonald, are you going to introduce some of the Christmas spirit today?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have dressed in red for the occasion. I thought it would be a bit much to don the beard and the hat so I left them.

The Taoiseach: I will not take off Chris de Burgh.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: However, I might get a more positive response from An Taoiseach if I were attired in that manner. In any event, happy Christmas in advance to all.

I wish to raise with the Taoiseach his Government's management of the Covid booster roll-out. This morning, on his way to Cabinet, the Taoiseach said it is now a case of all hands on deck because of the Omicron variant, but his urgency comes late in the day. The truth is we needed an all hands on deck approach over two months ago, long before the emergence of the Omicron variant, because at that stage we knew we were facing into a difficult winter. We have known for quite some time that an efficient booster roll-out would be needed to protect people and to safeguard our progress. The fact is the Government's lack of forward planning has led to real issues with the roll-out of the booster. We have seen problems with the alignment of the booking system between the HSE, GPs and pharmacies. This means people have received multiple appointments which stay on the system even when people try to cancel. One person has reported receiving nine appointments and has been declared a no-show for each one, despite no longer living in the State. There have been many instances of people receiving up to five appointments, so I am glad to hear that is being updated, but it is late in the day. The lack of Government planning has also hit the number of vaccinators we have. We are down 500 vaccinators since the summer, which means the booster campaign is now operating at two thirds

the capacity of the original roll-out.

How has this happened? Clearly, the Government made no contingencies for maintaining capacity in the vaccination network, which is madness. We should not now be facing the need to scramble for vaccinators again. That capacity should have been hardwired into the system. Two years on there is still a lack of preparation and leadership from the Government. That is why we see winding queues and big delays outside vaccination centres. It is why some people have been turned away from the centres and why we are now in a rush to get out doses that are close to expiring. We should not be in this position. All the evidence reflects that the vast majority of people want their boosters. The problem we have is a Government that moves far too slowly and is always playing catch-up. We saw it when it came to use of antigen tests, we saw it when it came to the ventilation of our schools and we see it now again with this booster campaign.

Tá an Rialtas ag bogadh go rómhall ar an bhfeachtas teanndáileoige. Tá an t-am le haghaidh fógraí móra thart. Tá sé thar am anois dul i ngleic leis seo. Tá sé thar am na hacmhainní atá ag teastáil a chur ar fáil chun go n-éireodh leis an rolladh amach. The Taoiseach says it is all hands on deck, but the time for big announcements and big targets is over. It is now time for delivery. He says the Government will ramp up the number of vaccinators. Will he tell us by how many? Will he tell us when they will be in place? Will he tell us what additional supports will be given to GPs and pharmacies? Will he guarantee the problems experienced with the appointment system will not be repeated as the campaign is accelerated?

The Taoiseach: I wish the Deputies opposite a very happy Christmas. I am off to the European Union Council meeting tomorrow, so I may not get the opportunity to do so then. I wish the Ceann Comhairle a happy Christmas and thank him for all his facilitation during the year and his tolerance and patience. I hope it can last another session. I thank the ushers, the Captain of the Guard and the team here for their co-operation and guidance during a very difficult situation in relation to Covid-19.

In response to Deputy McDonald's questions, I want to start by thanking everybody involved in the vaccination programme. I pay tribute to those who have led it from the beginning. It is one of the most successful programmes in the world in terms of the first and second primary doses, which have given significant protection to the population against severe disease and illness. I thank the general practitioners in respect of the booster campaign. GPs have moved very quickly from the outset in respect of the older age cohorts, those with underlying conditions and with healthcare workers. I thank the pharmacists and vaccinators across all the different centres. I wish to make the general point that the vaccine booster programme commenced on 4 October 2021, following advice from the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, to go ahead in advance of that. We are currently fourth in Europe on the administration of the booster thanks to the efforts of all involved.

The arrival of the Omicron variant does lend considerable urgency to this, given the rapidity at which it spreads. It has been designated a variant of concern for about three weeks. We have been in touch with public officials at the office of the CMO, who are concerned. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, is concerned at the rapid spread of Omicron, and that it has a significant advantage over Delta in terms of its infectiousness. That is a concern.

However, the Deputy should be in no doubt that we have been working with the HSE public

officials in terms of expanding and extending further the vaccination programme. There are three essential channels: the vaccination centres, the GP surgeries, and the pharmacies. Discussions have been under way with the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, for example, in terms of GPs throughout the country being able to do more, if possible. To be fair to them, they have done a fair degree of vaccinations in the booster campaign so far. Those engagements have been taking place. There is a generally good response. Those in the primary care system want to respond and to be of assistance to the country at this particular juncture, with the arrival of the new variant. We know the booster gives significant additional protection against Omicron. That is the general view of public health officials and the expertise that it will give cellular immunity against Omicron. That is the general view and belief right now in terms of preventing severe disease and admissions to hospitals, which is the key agenda and objective of the booster vaccination programme.

There were some operational systems issues. However, in my view, we have to look at this in balance and perspective. They were not the key issue. The key issue now is to get as many people vaccinated as quickly as we possibly can. That means extending the opening hours of the vaccination centres and expanding the roll out in the other two channels, utilising our primary care system through GPs and pharmacies. We are going to utilise all capacity at our disposal. We have administered 1.25 million doses between third doses and the booster, which gives the vital older age cohorts significant protection in the time ahead.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach does not have to convince anybody in this House or beyond in respect of the booster. All of the evidence is that people wish to receive their boosters. We have a highly vaccinated population. Therefore, the issues that arise are operational. There is a question mark over the management and leadership of the Taoiseach's Government in rolling out this booster campaign. We have had huge confusion, as I have said, about appointments, we have had long queues, and we have had people being sent away. Now we have a considerable volume of vaccine that will expire that has to be administered to people who wish to get their boosters.

I have asked the Taoiseach a series of questions. We clearly need additional vaccinators. How many will we get and when will they be in place? What additional supports does the Taoiseach propose for GPs and pharmacists? It is clear the Government is attaching great importance to and putting great stock in the booster campaign. The issues of capacity are essential. It is not enough to thank those on the front line. We have to enable them to do their job and to deliver this. When the Taoiseach takes to his feet, will he tell us precisely and concretely how many additional vaccinators there will be and when they will be in place? What supports will there be for our GPs and pharmacists?

The Taoiseach: I was taken somewhat by what was said yesterday in Stormont by Deputy McDonald's colleague, the deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill. She said, "If ever there was a time for a united front on the public health message, it's today, because we are facing into a very, very difficult period in the weeks ahead". I make this general point across the House. It is a fair comment.

That said, with regard to a number of points Deputy McDonald has raised, there is no issue with the Moderna vaccine. It is not being rushed out. I took Moderna myself on Friday. I waited in a line. The mood was good. People spoke to each other. Many people are waiting in line and are happy to get the booster vaccine. There needs to be balance and perspective in the commentary on this. Thousands of vaccinations were done last week. Two days were lost

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because of Storm Barra. The highest number was last Thursday with 43,000 doses administered. It is more complex than the first campaign. The interval date was one issue and it is also because of doing multiple age cohorts together. GPs, pharmacists and vaccination centres are vaccinating the same patient cohorts at the same time. It is being done differently from the first phase. This has brought an additional layer of complexity. Genuinely, across the country-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So we are not getting more vaccinators I am assuming.

The Taoiseach: Yes, we will.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How many and when?

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, we are working through the three channels with regard to additional output, if we can, on the GP side, the pharmacies and extending the hours of the vaccination centres.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How many vaccinators? The Taoiseach does not know.

The Taoiseach: The acute hospital system has been told as well and has been engaged with in terms of reducing some activities with a view to engaging with the vaccination programme.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Taoiseach does not know how many he should just say so. I would appreciate an answer. It is a very straightforward question.

The Taoiseach: It is not that simple.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Omicron already comprises 11% of cases in this country, as the Taoiseach knows. It will likely be the dominant strain by early next week. Therefore, we need a steely resolve and an absolute focus on ramping up the booster campaign. This is not to denigrate in any way the work that has been done to date. There has been a lot of very good work but at this stage there is a need for an increased national effort to ramp up the booster campaign in every way possible.

At the height of the vaccine programme 400,000 doses were being delivered every week. Last week, there were only 220,000 in total. We need to ramp this up very substantially in all settings. Clearly the suggestion that vaccine hesitancy was an issue does not hold up. We also know the supply of vaccine doses is not a constraint either. What are the limiting factors? What can be done to remove them immediately?

Clearly we do not have sufficient staff in the vaccination centres and clearly we need to open these centres for a sufficiently long time. In looking for staff the Taoiseach needs to look in all quarters. Is there potential for vaccinators to be drawn from the Army, for example, or from other agencies? Decisions about this need to be made very quickly. Walk-in centres are open for only two hours. This is entirely insufficient and it is quite short-sighted. Should we not be seeking staff everywhere we can? The booking system itself has been causing havoc. These issues are still not resolved and need to be tackled immediately. GPs and pharmacies clearly have capacity to do much more. I spoke to representatives from both today and there is capacity to do much more. We could be drawing pharmacy and medical students in to do the work. They can be trained very quickly and much of that training already exists and they could help out in the effort, under supervision. We should be bringing that resource in very quickly.

There are also nurses who are currently unemployed for one reason or another. Can they

come in, even on a part-time basis? We need to look everywhere for additional staff.

It would seem that the rules on age cohorts should also be loosened for GPs and for pharmacies. At the end of November, the National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC, approved boosters for everybody over 16 years of age. Why are there constraints on that now? We should be opening it up for everybody to have as many vaccinators available as possible. It does not seem to make sense that GPs and pharmacies are forced to adhere rigidly to age cohorts in the roll-out as mandated by the HSE and only administer to people over 50 years of age. I am particularly concerned about people under 50 years of age who got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in the early part of the summer. That is a very rapidly waning vaccine. They are the cohort that are most likely to be out and about, mixing and socialising. There needs to be specific approach to that.

Will the Taoiseach ensure that there is quick decision-making on the part of the HSE, which has been a problem, and that there is an immediate response to issues raised by the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, and the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, this morning? Will he consider the age constraints that currently exist?

The Taoiseach: First, there has been constant engagement with the IMO from the leadership of the HSE and indeed the Minister for Health has also been in touch over the week and before that to explore more ways to expand the number of vaccines that can be administered through the GP network and system.

It is important to pay tribute to them and to all those who have worked in this area. Sometimes, some of the commentary does not give due recognition - I am not speaking of anybody here - to the enormous efforts that some people are making out there already in the vaccination programme. When one thinks about it, from 4 October to now, delivering 1.25 million vaccines is a very significant performance in itself. The Defence Forces are, have been involved and will be increasing their involvement in supporting the vaccination programme.

The testing is also being ramped up. It is at 225,000 to 230,000 capacity at the moment and it is envisaged to ramp that up very significantly by the end of the year to 300,000 plus, involving both PCR and antigen testing. The Defence Forces are involved and there is also engagement with the pharmacy union, IPU. Resources are simply not an issue in respect of resourcing the booster campaign and supporting those who are administering the vaccines.

There has been an extensive recruitment campaign underway for the past number of weeks in respect of vaccinators, of part-time and retired people. Basically, all are welcome. We want people to join in the national effort to vaccinate and to help out. There are very structured discussions going on with pharmacists. Not all pharmacists are involved in the vaccination programme. Some 500 plus pharmacies are involved at this stage, together with a very large number of GPs. We want to do more and get more people involved and we will be supportive of those who are involved in administering the vaccine itself and in extending the hours of the vaccination centres to facilitate more and more people being vaccinated.

I spoke to someone this morning who was in Swords who said that everyone waited in line and people were generally in good form and anxious to get the booster. There have been, of course, challenges in other locations but by and large across the country much work has been gotten through.

I want to assure the Deputy that all of the issues raised by her are being addressed in respect

of those who could be recruited and we have been assured that that programme of recruitment has been underway for quite some time in getting additional people involved.

The health service itself has also been releasing and redeploying people. The Deputy mentioned the middle of the summer. Of course, there was a peak in the summer but then it edged down very considerably for obvious reasons and people were redeployed back into the health service.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach did not address the issue of removing the age restrictions. It is a really important issue. I spoke today to a GP who told me that when a patient comes into his surgery for something else, he will ask if the patient has received a booster. He is quite happy to provide it and that can be done quickly, but if the person is not over the age of 50 or within the recognised cohorts, he cannot administer the booster. Equally with pharmacists, if people are coming into their pharmacies, there are opportunities to administer the booster but those people have to be over 50. In particular, the issue of the younger age group who got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and are especially vulnerable now because they are not included for the boosters needs to be addressed.

There does not seem to be any way of recording the fact that a person has had a booster. Increasingly, other European countries are placing limits on people who do not have proof of having received a booster. Austria, for example, is not allowing people in unless they have proof of a booster. We do not have any records in that regard.

How many additional beds is the Taoiseach making available from the private sector in order to deal with what is likely to be a very substantial increase in the need for hospital beds?

The Taoiseach: First, the older age cohorts sequence is the established public health approach to the vaccination programme. In other words, those most at risk by dint of age, illness or underlying conditions are vaccinated first. That has always been the process.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is a constraint.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but it also protects us against the worst the virus can do in terms of hospitalisation and ICU. It protects people who are more at risk of being severely impacted by the virus. That has been the case from the beginning of this pandemic. Older age cohorts and people with underlying conditions are most impacted by the virus, unfortunately. That said, we are hoping that we will shortly be in a position in relation to the 40- to 49-year-olds to bring that date forward. I take the Deputy's point in terms of flexibilities with general practitioners and pharmacies. These are issues that can form part of discussions that are ongoing. It is critical that we get those older age cohorts done because when you look at the data - I looked at them before lunchtime - they are very clear. For those who get the booster, hospitalisations are reduced significantly. That is clear in the over-80s, the over-70s and, indeed, now the over-65s. I take the Deputy's point and her positive perspective in terms of flexibility for those on the primary care side in terms of their interface with patients.

On the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, it is my understanding that it has been raised with the Chief Medical Officer and NIAC in terms of the Johnson & Johnson cohort. I, too, am concerned about that cohort because of the waning efficacy of that first and only dose they received. That is an issue that NIAC has stated it will keep under constant review.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach. In fact, we are over time.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What about records of the booster?

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish all present, and the entire parliamentary community, a Happy Christmas.

I wish to raise with the Taoiseach the situation in Ukraine because I know it will feature at the European Council meeting he will attend tomorrow. It is a very serious situation. There are more than 100,000 Russian troops on the border, backed up by armour, artillery and aircraft. As every day passes, it looks less like posturing and more like genuine preparation for an assault on Ukraine. I mention that because the HSE, to be fair, was ill prepared for the pandemic because that is the nature of pandemics. Also, our cyberdefence people were ill-prepared for the cyberattack because that is the nature of cyberattacks. One thing that is for sure is that the Defence Forces are hopelessly ill-prepared for any outbreak of hostilities on the Continent and any overspill that may arrive on our shores. Whenever I am in Europe, my counterparts there always tell me that all they are asking Ireland to do is to be able to police its own skies, patrol its own waters and not be a burden on its neighbours in the context of defence and security. That is an entirely reasonable request of a supposedly sovereign independent republic. On that basis, I was very happy to see the commitment in the programme for Government last year to establish a commission on the Defence Forces. That commission, to be fair, was established at the start of this year and is due to report approximately 17 days from now. I am very much in favour of the principle and I support the concept. Last week, however, there were some concerning reports in the media, particularly relating to the independence or perceived lack of independence in the commission's process, whether the report will be ready on time and whether there will be enough resources on the table to implement its findings. I am particularly concerned about the independence or otherwise of the commission's findings. It would be a very retrograde step if the secretariat appointed to the commission did most of the writing and drafting of the report, with the commission only really there to rubber stamp any recommendations.

Will the Taoiseach provide any reassurance to the House that the Commission on the Defence Forces is autonomous, is independent, has editorial autonomy and is free from any bureaucratic interference? If the commission requires more time beyond 31 December to furnish its report, would the Taoiseach be supportive of such a request? If it needs an extension in order to submit the report, what would be the Taoiseach's views on such a request?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important matter. On the question of Ukraine, there is a range of EU meetings tomorrow and Thursday, including an EU Council meeting. Ukraine and the position pertaining to Russia will be raised. We have already had preliminary discussions and preparatory meetings late last week in respect of that matter. It is entirely unacceptable that this type of pressure is being put on Ukraine by the massing of so many Russian military personnel on Ukraine's borders. The European Union is making it very clear that this is unacceptable and there will be consequences - certainly economic consequences - as a result of any infringement or violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. The matter is being taken very seriously in Europe and we know it is being taken very seriously in the United States. It is a global matter and the more major players are engaging with Russia on this to avoid any conflict. It is critical that we avoid such conflict.

In the context of our Defence Forces, there is a Commission on the Defence Forces, as the Deputy said. It was established and is independent. It is to examine structures for governance, joint command and control, the arrangements for the effective defence of the country, the composition of the Defence Forces and its pay structures. A separate organisational capability

review of the Department of Defence is currently under way.

The commission is independent and is mandated to make recommendations as it sees fit within its terms of reference. The commission's report, when submitted, will be fully considered. I have looked at the list of the people on the commission again to refresh my memory and they do not sound like people who would stand for any rubber stamping by any secretariat of any report. There are strong personalities on that commission. There are people on it with experience in the military world, the public service, the Civil Service and the industrial relations world. These are people generally with solid experience in life so the scenario does not arise where somebody will write a report and they will rubber stamp it. That will not happen at all.

It is a real opportunity to look radically at the entire matter. We need to change and improve in respect of our capabilities. There is a range of matters, including specialists that need to be recruited to the Defence Forces across the board. The Deputy instanced cybersecurity as an example and even across Europe we need a Europe-wide response. The most important defence against cyberthreats is a collective defence, where we can pool our knowledge and experience of cyberattacks and dealing with them, as happened in our case. Poland came to help us, as did the United Kingdom and others.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Taoiseach for the very helpful response. On the implementation of the recommendations, we have a very poor track record in this country of implementing defence policy once it is decided. There was a White Paper from 2015, for example. Dozens of projects from six years ago have yet even to be commenced, let alone completed. Can the Taoiseach guarantee or assure us that the resources and the political will required to implement the findings of this report, if it is finalised, will be forthcoming when required to make our armed forces an armed forces for the 21st century?

The Taoiseach: I have discussed this with the Minister for Defence. We want a strong and accelerated follow-through on the recommendations of the commission. It cannot be a report that is just left on the shelf. It has to be activated, followed through on and implemented. Obviously, we will have to see the nature of the recommendations and make an assessment of them, but it is critical to the country. We have seen since the beginning of the pandemic that the Defence Forces have been outstanding in a range of areas to do with the pandemic and in different ways. In the beginning, they helped out in nursing homes. They have helped out with the logistics of distribution and in testing and tracing. The Defence Forces have been a significant underpinning of the national effort in respect of the pandemic. Even to this day, there are further discussions between the HSE and the Chief of Staff in respect of additional help and work the Defence Forces can bring to the table to respond to the Omicron situation.

We are very conscious of that. I hope the commission represents the dawn of a new era for our Defence Forces.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, for whom I am standing in today. He has asked me to raise this issue. Contractors are finding it increasingly difficult to stand over tendered prices for periods of up to two years, which many projects run to, because of the rising cost of materials. In the past year, construction material prices have increased every month, by 26.7% on last year, which is a shocking amount. That is according to the Central Statistics Office's most recent wholesale price index; they are not my words. This represents a truly staggering statistic.

The materials shortages have started to ease but the rising cost of materials will probably continue well into 2022. The price of rough timber, meanwhile, has increased by more than 80%, the cost of plaster has increased by 20% and the cost of steel has doubled. Several local authorities have highlighted the effect this has had on housebuilding. Construction costs inflation is impacting on tender prices and contractors are finding it increasingly difficult to price and even to procure prices themselves from suppliers for that length of period. If somebody gets a price today, whether for a house, a house extension or whatever, the building suppliers will give him or her only three days or maybe one week at most. It is not that they want to blackguard people but that the prices are increasing weekly.

The crisis in this sector is jeopardising major initiatives such as homebuilding and national infrastructure projects. It is completely untenable for the construction industry to take on all the risks for the exceptional price inflation under current State building contracts. This impacts on all contractors, and on subcontractors down the line. A builder may find out, whether in the case of a school project or whatever, that he or she cannot complete the project within the tender price because the material is old. It could be a year and a half, because of delays with the Department and everything else, from tender time to getting the job. Builders then end up in crisis and cannot complete the job, despite their efforts and despite being good builders, and cannot pay their subcontractors, with the knock-on effect they cannot pay their suppliers.

This is a huge issue and it impacts on the construction economy as well. Rising material and labour costs could hurt competition going forward and will have a significant impact on our post-pandemic recovery. The materials crisis means there is an urgent need to overhaul how the industry procures and manages supply itself, yet the Government will not look at that. It has promised to do so, but the construction industry has not seen any cogent plans offered nor anything changed.

Higher energy costs and prices, whether for gas, coal or diesel, along with carbon tax have had a considerable impact on site clearances and on industrial machinery and lorries hauling cement, gravel and other aggregates to sites. Costs are spiralling. These are good builders who work as *duine amháin*, maybe with *duine eile*, and small builders who work with ten, 20 or 50 people. They cannot survive because of the cost of labour, insurance and materials.

What is the Taoiseach's Government going to do to alleviate the pressure on this worthwhile sector that needs to be respected?

The Taoiseach: First, I want to pay tribute to the sector, which I think has responded very well since we reopened society and sectors of the economy. Since the springtime, the construction sector has really rebounded, to be fair to it. From October to October, we are looking at approximately 31,000 housing commencements, which is a significant piece of work in terms of getting housebuilding back on track to the kinds of levels we need to deal with the housing crisis and the situation facing many people.

The Deputy correctly points to cost inflation in respect of construction, mainly because of global supply chain issues resulting from Covid-19, which have been a big problem across Europe and the globe. Some date it back to the blockage in the Suez Canal, which the Deputy may recall. Then Brexit can be added, which has not been helpful either in terms of some supply chains. There has been inflation and it has affected and impacted public sector contracts. We have had some situations where people who won tenders did not take them up on the basis that the costs have now overreached what they bid and could afford. The Minister for Public Expen-

diture and Reform is introducing changes and they are being put in place now for new tenders. The fixed-price period is being reduced by six months to 24 months, material price variation can be accommodated, subject to certain limits, and guidance is being issued for current contracts. The Minister acknowledges the issues the Deputy has raised. He brought the matter to the attention of Government some weeks ago. Measures are now being introduced to try to ease the situation and create additional flexibility to accommodate the new realities arising out of the supply chain issues and the increase in costs that have affected the industry.

The view from the ECB and others is that this should not be a long-term issue and that things will come back to an even keel towards the end of the first quarter of 2022, but that remains to be seen. There can never be any certainties in life, particularly in the middle of a pandemic, but we are very conscious of the issues. The Minister has moved on the tender front to recognise the realities of the situation and ensure construction projects that we want to get ahead have the capacity to get ahead, be they schools or housing across the board. There is a significant piece of infrastructural work that we require to be done and we have very large capital programmes. We want value for money and we want to be responsive to the current situation also.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach paints a picture of a perfect storm. We saw this coming over the past 12 months and the Government and its advisers must have seen it too, because it is crippling. There is a huge delay with people working from home in getting the tenders out, getting documents back to schools and builders and all of that. Contractors are tendering in good faith and we need them now to engage the new apprentices we are taking on in Thurles and elsewhere, who are badly needed in the construction industry. If the builders cannot stay above water level, they are in trouble and they will get no mercy from Revenue and less from the banks. We need to deal with this seriously and we are coming late to the table. This storm has been brewing and it is a hurricane now. We have no red alerts about it. People are going to the wall and projects cannot be finished, with knock-on effects on subcontractors and suppliers, all of whom are local. Most of these people spend money locally in their own 25-mile radius. They have track records in supplying, building and delivering the best projects on time. They want to do that again.

I did not catch the figure the Taoiseach cited for the reduction in fixed-price tenders. Are they down to 24 months? That is way too long. Did he say they are down from 30 months to 24 months? We cannot have a fixed tender for 24 months. It cannot be done. It can hardly be done now for eight weeks because the situation is so serious with prices going up by the week.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I acknowledge the Deputy's experience in the contracting world and so on. The Minister has responded to the issues. Contracts will now permit mutual cost recovery for material price changes of more than 15%. Therefore, where costs rise by more than 15%, the contractor can recover that. Measures have been taken in response to this issue. The balance always has to be struck between achieving value for money, protecting the taxpayer, getting a fair deal for the taxpayer and - I take this point - ensuring people have a viable situation in terms of tendering, getting work done and getting projects completed. That is clearly important also.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What is the new fixed-price term?

The Taoiseach: The period is 24 months.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed. I have been asking the Taoiseach to take action on soaring energy bills for months and Cabinet has now responded with a €100 credit for electricity, which is modest but welcome. People are facing record levels of inflation and skyrocketing prices not just for electricity but for oil, gas and other fuels. This credit will bring some small relief. I ask the Taoiseach about the timing of this initiative. It is crazy and unacceptable that people are required to wait until February or March to get the benefit of this €100 relief. I ask that the Dáil meet next week. I understand that legislation is necessary for this measure. We should meet next week to legislate for this and get this modest relief delivered families now in the height of winter and not have people waiting until next spring.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I sought time for a debate on National Broadband Ireland. Both *The Currency* and the *Business Post* have published very useful articles showing the opaque nature and the level of investment by the principals that would be a cause of concern for the stability of this important project. Last Sunday the *Business Post* reported that a review was to happen but it appears to have concluded at this stage. It is essential that we do our job in holding the Government to account. This is a very expensive project. It is important to have a debate in this House to examine the matter. It is also important that the contract is published in full. As there was no competitor, I cannot see where the commercial sensitivity is. It was agreed by Deputy Bruton when he was the Minister. That has not happened. We need to scrutinise this at this stage.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I ask for a debate on the lack of a roll-out of the national broadband plan, NBP. People are trying to operate from home and are unable to do so. The waiting times are too long and the responses we get are just futile. I ask that we sit on Friday to have a debate on it.

I also include the crazy proposal to bring water from the River Shannon up to Dublin. We are losing 35% of the water here. This will be another runaway train project like the national children's hospital and the broadband plan. This would be just as crazy and costly. We must examine it and have a proper meaningful debate on it.

Deputy Mick Barry: Some news reports are suggesting that this €100 emergency energy payment might not be paid until March or April of next year because legislation will not be introduced until the new year. I believe €100 is too low a sum given the scale of rising energy costs. Why can this legislation not be introduced before Christmas? If it is a question of the Dáil having to sit one or two extra days, my group would strongly favour taking that step. We would ask, at the very least, that the Business Committee would meet to consider the options.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We should have a debate on the NBP. As the Taoiseach knows, the Minister of the day was kept at arm's length from the procurement process and the Department itself was responsible for the governance of the NBP. If the review of this contract is now completed, it needs to be published. Departmental officials need to be brought before the

relevant committee to answer questions on the content of that review.

The Taoiseach: The assistance we are giving to people to help with their electricity bills is a good initiative. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has developed this. We were anxious to do something in addition to the budgetary measures on tax relief, increasing the eligibility threshold for the fuel allowance as well as increasing the fuel allowance to give additional help to people faced with significantly increased electricity prices and energy costs. This measure will be introduced. It will reduce the cost of an electricity bill. It is a good measure. It will necessitate legislation. The fact that people know it will be credited to their bill is something they will be happy with.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is no help to people on low incomes.

The Taoiseach: It will be done very quickly on the resumption of the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: With respect, that is no help to people on low incomes. That is insane.

The Taoiseach: On the national broadband plan - Deputy Denis Naughten probably knows more about this than most of us - the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will be in this evening for oral questions. He will be before the House at 9.25 p.m. for 90 minutes. Obviously, it will not all be about that issue but he will take questions and will be happy to comment on that. He wanted to clarify that as part of the work, the Department engages with the legal advice of William Fry and commercial advisors EY on an ongoing basis to assist in the oversight of the national broadband plan, NBP, contract requirements since 2020. As part of this work, William Fry and EY were asked to examine the claims made in articles published by The Currency last week on the funding, ownership and control of National Broadband Ireland. The Department says that this does not constitute a review of the NBP contract as alluded to, but that it is part of the ongoing work of the NBP contract governance team and the detailed contract compliance checking that is carried out by the Department on an ongoing basis. The Minister will gladly take questions from Deputies on that this evening during oral parliamentary questions.

The Rural Independence Group raised the issue of-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Broadband and rural Ireland.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy mentioned water as well.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I mentioned the madness of bringing the pipeline from Shannon to Dublin. There is a 45% leakage in Dublin.

The Taoiseach: What about the people of Dublin? They need a bit of water too.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is a 45% leakage.

The Taoiseach: What about national solidarity?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a bonkers plan.

The Taoiseach: The poor people of Dublin will be left with no water if you keep going.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: That is my position on it. On the issue of broadband, the Department and the Minister will deal with that this evening. Some 35,000 premises are currently ready for service. I have a whole list to hand but it would not be appropriate to go through it now. I make the point that the Minister will be here this evening to deal with the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is not specifically to deal with the issue.

The Taoiseach: There will be questions on it.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: At the Business Committee meeting, I suggested that it be taken as a Topical Issue matter. While we have already selected matters for today and tomorrow, we could look at giving a block of time during the Topical Issue debate on this matter, if that would be of help to Members, on Thursday.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish to press the issue, Taoiseach. The intervention of €100 relief is modest but we welcome it. The Taoiseach cannot ask that this takes effect in February or March. Where is the sense of urgency in this?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cad a tharla don Nollaig?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask that the necessary legislation goes through the House now, before Christmas. People are struggling out there. The Taoiseach knows this.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have another debate on it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The least they can expect from the Dáil is some recognition and a sense of urgency to deliver this relief.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can this be done before Christmas?

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Why not?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach said “No.”

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>Stاون</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	

<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Carers have had a particularly difficult road during the Covid crisis. In the early days of the emergency, respite services were withdrawn and they are still not back operating at full capacity. Before this virus ever came carers were under enormous pressure, but the curtailment in supports during the past two years has forced many of them to face real burnout. This morning carers took to the airwaves again to highlight their plight.

Incredibly, the Government has failed to prioritise carers for the booster. That happened with the initial vaccine too. It was wrong then and it is wrong now. Carers face the serious risk of passing the virus on to the vulnerable people for whom they care. Without protection, they live in virtual lockdown. When will full respite services be restored and will the Taoiseach ensure carers are made a priority group for the booster?

The Taoiseach: Generally speaking, throughout the vaccination programme the focus has always been on those who are most vulnerable to the disease and who need protection first. That is a clinical decision and it has always been the public health advice. Hence, the older age cohorts got vaccinated first, along with those with underlying conditions and those who are immunocompromised. That has always been the case. With regard to the primary dose and dose

2, it was the correct decision to move to the age cohort approach and to the vaccination centre approach once the older age cohort was vaccinated. It meant a much more speedy roll-out of the vaccination programme. It becomes far more challenging when selecting different groups who are not on any particular register. Many different groups at different times have come forward. Indeed, Deputies have come forward seeking to have different groups prioritised.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Carers are on the front line.

The Taoiseach: The system that has developed in terms of vaccine efficacy is based on prioritising those who need a vaccine most for health reasons. In the budget a number of measures were taken to support carers in the very valuable work they do and to restore respite services.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: Those of us who campaigned vigorously for the repeal of the eighth amendment were told at the time that, in terms of legislation underpinning reproductive rights for women in this country, there would be a review within three years. That gave an awful lot of comfort to those who were a little disquieted by some of the elements of the legislation. That review has commenced and consultation has started but there is disquiet over the intention of the Cabinet not to revisit the legislation itself. Can I ask the Taoiseach bluntly whether he has ruled out any changes to the legislation that underpins the right to terminate a pregnancy in Ireland?

The Taoiseach: No, I certainly have not, and nobody in the Cabinet has either. Therefore, I am a bit surprised by the Deputy's comment. There is no foundation to it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: In the past two weeks we have learned that two eating disorder hubs have been delayed in Dublin. The 2018 strategy aimed for 16 specialist treatment hubs throughout the country. There are currently three operating for the entire country. As the Taoiseach knows, I have continually raised the fact there are also only three adult inpatient beds for eating disorders in the entire country. Also, no funding was allocated under the national eating disorder treatment plan for 2020. Of the €1.6 million allocated in 2019, not one cent was spent. While these delays and blatant inaction continue here, people with severe eating disorders are being forced to travel to the UK to get the treatment they desperately need. I have been assured repeatedly this is a priority area of the Government, but the reality is those intentions are not resulting in service improvements. Will the Taoiseach, in addition to the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler, seeing as she is here, reassure people this area will finally be prioritised?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The continued development of specialist services for eating disorders, including improved access and shorter waiting lists, remains a key priority for me and the Government. Funding was made available in 2021 to complete the three existing specialist eating disorder teams and establish three additional eating disorder teams — one in the Deputy's community healthcare organisation, CHO, namely, CHO 4, adult; another in CHO 9, adult; and another in CHO 2, child and adult mental health services.

When I entered my post last year, the money for eating disorder services had been suspended. I reinstated €3.94 million immediately to develop another three teams this year. In next year's budget, I have allocated €1.5 million to put in place another three eating disorder teams. Therefore, by the end of 2022, we will have nine full eating disorder teams and two part-time teams. I have to work incrementally because, as the Deputy knows, there are challenges with

staff recruitment.

With regard to the Mount Carmel site, which the Deputy mentioned, there is a team in place. It consists of eight staff. It continues to operate and provide vital services from the existing location in St. Vincent's University Hospital. The other premises will not be ready to move into until quarter two of next year, but the multidisciplinary team is in place, with eight staff working.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last year sales were up 14% at Tesco Ireland, and the parent company made an operating profit of more than €2.25 billion. While the company added up the pandemic profits, Tesco workers risked their health day in, day out working at the front line. Is the Taoiseach aware that this company is now trying to remove from staff all premium payments, including payment for working Sundays, bank holidays, unsociable hours, etc.? Is the Taoiseach aware that this company is trying to persuade workers to agree to work three months of Sundays in a row in return for a one-off lump sum payment and that this overall package could result in pay losses of up to €5,000 a year for some workers? The programme for Government rightly highlights the importance of work-life balance. Will the Taoiseach join me in opposing the actions of this money-hungry corporation and in saluting the stand being made by its workforce, which, to its credit, has rejected this rotten deal, with 88% of workers voting no?

The Taoiseach: I pay tribute to the workers in Tesco and indeed workers across the country in the retail sector, who have consistently performed magnificently in the middle of the pandemic in very challenging circumstances, and to all the companies involved for the overall team effort involved. It is important in the retail sector, as in every other sector, that proper pay and conditions apply. The industrial relations framework is there to negotiate and to resolve issues arising that are put forward by either management or union representatives. I think the union in this case is there to represent the workers on this issue.

Deputy Denis Naughten: In September 2000 the Government signed the optional protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. While the Government has stated over the past 21 years that it is strongly committed to the ratification of the protocol and has enacted significant legislation to ensure Ireland is in compliance with the obligations under the protocol, the country is still not in a position to ratify it. Will the Taoiseach intervene to ensure the protocol is ratified as early as possible in 2022?

The Taoiseach: I will explore that with the Minister and we will come back to the Deputy on it. I accept his strong commitment to the issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach visited South Tipperary General Hospital recently and met with management there. They implored him to provide funding of circa €7 million to finish the refurbishment of the old St. Michael's unit, which was a wonderful institution, to create 33 extra beds. The hospital is at double the capacity it was at 15 years ago, and many patients come to it from west Waterford. The building is three quarters finished. The Taoiseach was quoted in the media as saying he could not understand why this has not been done and that it is the low-hanging fruit. Whether apples, pears or oranges - I hope not bananas - we want this fruit. It has to be delivered for the management there, the very hard-working and dedicated staff and the patients. They have the beds and the other furniture. The heating and a few other elements are to be fitted out properly. Above all, there are 80% of the staff for it, management informed me last night. When will the Government give them the low-hanging fruit?

The Taoiseach: Bananas are very good for you and you should take one a day.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They can repeat on you.

The Taoiseach: They contain plenty of potassium.

The Deputy is a bit late to this issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Am I?

The Taoiseach: Yes. I think Deputy Cahill and others have been advocating on it, but Deputy McGrath is correct in quoting me and can rest assured that I have approached the Minister for Health and the HSE on this and we are pushing issues of additional capacity. I commend the staff in Clonmel. I was given a wonderful tour there. The staff have displayed great enthusiasm and teamwork in the midst of the pandemic and in the context of the extension we are opening and the additional facilities that have been already invested in in the form of the modular building, which has transformed the hospital, to be fair, but more work is needed now. I particularly enjoyed the visit to the paediatric ward. I got a very good presentation on the issue-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cad a dhéanfimid feasta gan airgead?

The Taoiseach: -----from the head of nursing there, who knew her stuff.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We need the money.

The Taoiseach: The hospital has always required money.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Low-hanging fruit, the Taoiseach said.

The Taoiseach: This is not new.

Anyway, the Deputy should not forget the odd banana in future.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Could we move off bananas for a while and get a direct response to the Tusla review of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence? Despite the Garda's very good response during Covid, the rise in numbers is frightening. This is the most basic research, being the review into the adequacy of the accommodation. It has been promised. I understand it is there. It has not been published. Can the Taoiseach give us a date as to when it will be published?

The Taoiseach: Early in the new year, I am told.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We might be safer on banana skins.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I have no doubt but that in the climate Act we have world-leading climate legislation setting out ambitious targets. Last week, however, the Climate Change Advisory Council identified a significant gap between climate action policy and climate action delivery, saying there is little evidence of necessary responses in individual Departments. Climate Case Ireland has today warned that the Government faces legal action if it does not publish the State's final long-term climate strategy by January 2022, two years after required by EU law. This morning I read reports that the ice shelf holding back Antarctica's Thwaites Glacier is destabilising and that there will be dramatic change to the front of the glacier probably in less than a decade. The loss of this glacier would result in a sea level rise measured in feet,

not inches. My simple question, which I put on behalf of my children, is this: are we going far enough and fast enough in this country to live up to our climate commitments?

The Taoiseach: We are not going fast enough. We need to deliver more. This Government has brought in groundbreaking legislation in the form of the climate law. The climate action plan has been published. A detailed annexe to that plan will be published. It will include hundreds of detailed actions that have to follow from the plan. Not only do we need public buy-in, but everybody in the Houses of the Oireachtas should support the plan rather than knock it or seek to pick holes in it. We are racing against time to protect the planet for future generations in order that they will be able to have a reasonable quality of life. The time has now come to start delivering on the targets we have set ourselves and on the objectives in the climate action plan that has been published.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: As Christmas approaches and we think of children at this magical time, I wish to ask the Taoiseach about child poverty. I know families in my area with children who have been moved from one school to another where the hot meals programme is in place. I feel I am addressing this issue constantly. I call for all schools to have a hot meals programme. I see people come into my clinics looking for food parcels. I ask the Taoiseach that we work on this. We cannot have children or families looking for these food parcels. We want to work with them and we have to make sure this does not happen. Where are we on the EU child guarantee?

I welcome the €100 to all households towards their electricity costs. It is a start. I know there are a lot more measures to come, but at least we are making that change. Again, I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a key issue at this time of year and throughout the year generally. We in the Government prioritise poverty across all key social policy areas. The budget reflected that in the form of increased supports for those on low incomes, those in poverty and those at risk of poverty, including improved access to services. The hot meals programme was extended and expanded. If we can expand it further, we will, targeting it at families, children and schools that require it. There was an increase of €10 per week to the working family payment income threshold for all family sizes. There were increases in the rate of increase for a qualified child to €40 per week for children under 12 and €48 per week for children 12 years and older. There was an increase of €5 per week to the maximum rate for all working-age payments in the social protection measures in the budget, including carer's allowance, disability allowance and the one-parent family payment, with proportional increases for reduced rates and qualified adult rates. There was an increase of €10 to the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance and the increase in the fuel allowance from €28 to €33 per week.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are over time, a Thaoisigh.

The Taoiseach: The total fuel allowance payment over 28 weeks is now €914.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The dental treatment scheme is on the verge of collapse right across the State. I raised this with the Taoiseach previously and nothing seems to have happened. All medical card holders, including people with cancer, kidney transplant patients and people with diabetes, have no access whatsoever to dental treatment. Dentists are leaving the scheme in their droves because funding for the scheme has not increased in almost 15 years.

Some 80% of medical card holders right across the State have no access to dental treatment, and that has been going on for almost a year. At what stage will the Taoiseach treat this as a priority? What is the Government doing to resolve this and how long will it keep these people waiting for access to dental treatment?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of Health and the Department of Health are engaging with the representatives of dentists throughout the country on this issue. There have been ongoing issues, but resources have been provided. These are essentially contractual issues that have to be resolved.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: A committee headed by Mr. Justice Charles Meenan of the High Court has recommended a vaccine compensation scheme be introduced in this country to fast-track compensation for people who have been damaged as a result of taking the vaccines. This is along the lines of schemes that have already been put in place in other countries, especially countries such as the UK, where, like Ireland, the manufacturers of those products are indemnified by the State. Are the recommendations of the Meenan committee acceptable to the Government? Is such a scheme going to be put in place? If so, when?

The Taoiseach: I am aware of the scheme. It will be given serious consideration by Government. I hope the Deputy will acknowledge the pandemic has not been the most opportune time or the optimal time for dealing with the issue in detail. It is a scheme I am particularly interested in advancing in consultation with my Government colleagues and the Attorney General.

Deputy Richard Bruton: While I know that speed is of the essence in rolling out the booster programme, are there plans to ensure the EU-compatible digital Covid certificate, which is the record of vaccination, will include information on the administration of the third dose? As the Taoiseach is aware, for example, from tomorrow, France will require people over a certain age to have had three doses before they can participate in certain activities. There will be a need for the record of this third dose.

The Taoiseach: There certainly will. To be frank, the Deputy prefaced his question with the reply in the sense that, at the moment, the focus is on getting the booster rolled out. We have administered around 1.25 million doses. It would not be fair at this stage of the booster campaign to differentiate in terms of access and so on. It is an issue and there will have to be records. The whole focus of the energy of the HSE, the Department of Health and the Minister is on maximising the administration of vaccines right now.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: On page 51 of the programme for Government, it acknowledges that the impact of Covid-19 has been especially difficult for older people. It rightly states: “Learning from COVID-19, we will assess how we care for older people and examine alternatives to meet the diverse needs of our older citizens.” When will the promised commission to examine care and supports for older people be established? Will the views of groups such as Sage Advocacy, ALONE and many other groups that provide support for our older people be considered in this?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising in the issue. In devising any strategic framework for older people, consultation will be a prerequisite, and engaging with all of the organisations the Deputy has identified will be something the Minister will be doing in due course.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In light of the publication of the cost of disability in Ireland re-

search report last year, which showed that having a disability can cost on average between €9,500 and €11,700 extra per year, and given the commitments to the disability sector in the programme for Government and the fact the costs cut across all different sectors from transport to medicines to housing adaptations, will the Taoiseach confirm all Departments will respond with a plan to cut the costs for people with disabilities as soon as possible early in the new year?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue. Certainly, the cost of disability report will be assessed by every Department and there will be a cross-departmental approach to easing the costs of disability for people. One of the critical areas will be increasing access to work for people with disabilities. That is something that we can do better as a society. The public service needs to up its game in respect of employing more people with disabilities within the public service.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There was a commitment under the programme for Government that a review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, would be conducted. That review has happened and is sitting on someone's desk at the moment. There was a report by John Mooney in *The Sunday Times* this week that gave a very bleak and stark analysis of what is in that report. Will the Taoiseach commit to publishing that report immediately, warts and all, so that we can see exactly how dire the situation is for our National Parks and Wildlife Service and ensure we get the required reforms done as quickly as possible?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Ireland's provision of refuge places for women who have been victims of domestic violence is hopelessly inadequate. We signed the Istanbul Convention in 2015. Adherence to that convention means we should have 498 refuge places throughout the country. We only have 143. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown has no refuge places at all. A report produced this week suggested that, this year alone, 2,816 women and girls over the age of 15 will suffer from domestic violence. There is no refuge in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. I was also contacted by a group campaigning in County Carlow. There are two refuge places for two families for just 48 hours in the entirety of County Carlow. That is completely unacceptable. Groups campaigning for refuges in both those areas have contacted me to ask the Taoiseach about this, given his Department is involved in this area. One of the problems is there are about three Departments involved in this, including the Department of Justice, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of the Taoiseach, and nobody is really responsible. Who is going to deliver on our commitment and requirement to have refuge places in adequate numbers?

The Taoiseach: First, I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising the issue of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. We came into government and put into the programme for Government that we were determined to change and enhance substantially the resourcing for the National Parks and Wildlife Service. In opposition, I engaged on this issue with interested groups. The Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Malcolm Noonan, has secured additional moneys already in the 2020 July stimulus without having to await the review, and he significantly increased NPWS funding by almost 50% in budget 2021. I want to make that point. In October the Minister of State announced that funding would increase again to more than €47 million in 2022, bringing it back to a level not seen since before the financial crisis. There has been very good work done very quickly to resource the NPWS.

Review, Reflect, Renew is a strategic action plan for the future of the NPWS. The review part has been done, the reflect part is under way, as I understand it, and the renew part will fol-

low. Some people put things together in a certain way. Suffice to say it will be published. It is not complete in terms of all three phases, but a lot is being done. Some 3,000 people were consulted, which is fantastic. Ultimately, what will happen is that Review, Reflect, Renew: A Strategic Action Plan for the Future of NPWS will equip-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his patience and tolerance. In fairness, he did the wildflowers in Leinster House, which is part of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: I did. I did not sow them myself, but they grew well.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, in fairness, the issue in terms of Carlow has been raised consistently by Deputy Murnane O'Connor. Three core Departments, namely, the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Justice, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, are involved. The audit has been completed. Resourcing will be provided to cover those areas where there is no provision or too little provision in respect of refuges for victims of domestic violence. It is a key issue that is being led on by the Department of Justice. It is ongoing and the Department is working on a new strategy.

Appointment of Ombudsman and Information Commissioner: Motion

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

That, pursuant to subsection (2) of section 2 of the Ombudsman Act 1980, and subsection(4) of section 43 of the Freedom of Information Act 2014, Dáil Éireann recommends the appointment of Mr. Ger Deering, by the President to be the Ombudsman and Information Commissioner.

Question put and agreed to.

Special Committee on Autism: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): 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 Autism is hereby established, with Orders of Reference as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled '*Orders of Reference for Special Committee on Autism*', a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 8th December, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Rotas for Leaders' Questions and Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That—

14 December 2021

(a) notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, the sequence in which Leaders shall be called upon to put questions between 19th January, 2022, and 14th April, 2022, pursuant to Standing Order 36(*ca*), and

(b) notwithstanding anything in the report adopted by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, the sequence of allocation to parties and groups of Parliamentary Questions nominated for priority pursuant to Standing Order 49,

shall be in accordance with the rotas contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 8th December, 2021, entitled ‘Rota for Leaders’ Questions pursuant to Standing Order 36 and rota for Priority Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 49’, a copy of which was laid before the Dáil on 10th December, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Committee on Gender Equality: Motion

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

That the Joint Committee on Gender Equality may meet, notwithstanding the fact that in advance of its first meeting, the full membership of the Committee has not yet been appointed.

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, in accordance with section 8(3)(a) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003, as amended, appoints Deputy Seán Sherlock to be an ordinary member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in place of Deputy Duncan Smith who has resigned his office in accordance with the aforementioned section 8.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f)(iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2018, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to defend Workplace Relations Commission proceedings against a member of Dáil Éireann entitled: ADJ-00035230, and which proceedings arise solely out of the performance by the member concerned of their parliamentary functions as a member of Dáil Éireann.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Departmental Strategies

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress of the Strategy Statement 2021-2023 of his Department. [58551/21]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress of the Strategy Statement 2021-2023 of his Department. [60111/21]

3. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress of his Department's Strategy Statement 2021-2023. [60574/21]

4. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress of the Strategy Statement 2021-2023 of his Department. [61415/21]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach he will report on the progress of the Strategy Statement 2021-2023 of his Department. [61471/21]

6. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress of the Strategy Statement 2021-2023. [61735/21]

95. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach the main policy achievements and initiatives undertaken by his Department during 2021; and his main priorities for 2022. [62205/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, and 95 together.

My Department's Strategy Statement 2021-2023, published earlier this year, reflects the role of the Department to support me as Taoiseach and the Government to ensure a sustainable economy and a successful society, to pursue Ireland's interests abroad, to implement the Government's programme, and to build a better future for Ireland and all its citizens. My Department will provide progress reports under the six strategic priorities set out in the strategy through the normal annual reporting cycle.

My Department continues to work at the centre to ensure that policies developed support the Government's commitment to develop Ireland in a sustainable way which supports economic development and social progress. It achieves this mainly through the Cabinet committee structure. Through the work of the ten Cabinet committees supported by my Department, a range of work across government has been advanced under the new strategy statement. Included in this is management of the whole-of-government response to Covid-19 including the national vaccination programme roll-out. The economic recovery plan, which was published in June, is also included. The implementation of this plan is helping to drive a sustainable recovery in economic activity and employment, while also investing in the transition towards a decarbonised and digital economy. The strategy statement also includes delivery of an initial

well-being framework for Ireland and supporting information hub, which are being developed to better understand and measure our progress as a country. It also includes support for the cross-Government work to manage the ongoing economic and political impacts of Brexit, the establishment of a social dialogue unit in my Department, which is working to co-ordinate and support the Government's overall approach to social dialogue, and the delivery of our shared island commitments on a whole-of-government basis through the shared island unit in my Department and the shared island fund.

The strategy statement also includes the Future of Media Commission, which has now concluded its work, the completion of the work of the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality and the launch of the revised national development plan, setting out the roadmap for investment of €165 billion in new and upgraded infrastructure over the decade ahead. Included also in the strategy statement is the publication of the Housing for All plan, which is an ambitious and far-reaching plan to address the provision of housing. Support for the development of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Climate Action Plan 2021 is also included. These are key elements of a suite of measures introduced to alter fundamentally Ireland's approach to climate change. The strategy statement also includes supporting Ireland's role in Europe and the world, including through my participation in the European Council and Ireland's seat on the UN Security Council, and with respect to continuing EU-UK discussions on the Northern Ireland protocol. The strategy statement also includes the recent publication of the National Risk Assessment 2021-2022 - Overview of Strategic Risks and three legislative programmes published setting out priority legislation across the Government.

My Department's priorities for 2022 will include continued focus on the whole-of-government response to Covid-19 and vaccinations, economic recovery and investment, driving delivery of the housing plan and measures on climate action, progressing health and wider social reforms, EU engagement and Northern Ireland, and advancing specific new work relating to the citizens' assembly and a new digital strategy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The programme for Government makes a number of significant commitments to those working in our Defence Forces, and the Department's strategy statement commits to implementing them, but members of the Women of Honour group have been to hell and back and have been let down again by their Government. They have demonstrated incredible courage, strength and dignity in disclosing the horrific sexual assaults as well as the disturbing emotional and physical harassment they experienced in the Defence Forces. These women were failed in the worst way imaginable. The very least they are entitled to is the full support of the State as they seek truth and justice. It is unbelievable that the Government intends to do the exact opposite. The group has expressed its deep disappointment with the insistence of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on committing solely to an internal review of their allegations, which will not have the power to compel witnesses or hold perpetrators to account. Essentially, the process will see the Department investigating itself. These women have no confidence this will deliver justice. Why is this happening? Has the Taoiseach spoken to the Minister, Deputy Coveney? Does he stand over the process the Minister intends to follow? The Women of Honour must have a robust, impartial and independent investigation, one that can compel witnesses and hold accountable those who inflicted the abuse and those who mishandled the women's initial complaints.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The programme for Government commits to assist owners of latent defect properties by identifying options for those who have been impacted by defects to access low-cost long-term finance and to bring forward law reform to improve the legal rem-

edies for homeowners dealing with defects. Last night, I had a meeting with the Construction Defects Alliance. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Department have put together a working group which is investigating this issue, as the Taoiseach is aware. We are anxious to know whether the working group is still on schedule to report by the second quarter of 2022 so that any financial implications that may arise from the working group can be included in the budget for next year.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The Department's Strategy Statement 2021-2023 lists the restoration of the economy as one of the key Government priorities. While the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and countless other sectoral specific supports helped to stabilise the economy and bolster it during the pandemic, the construction sector remains very much in a state of flux with huge volatility in the price of materials. Throughout Covid we have seen a 30% rise in the price of steel and similar increases in the costs of timber and insulation. Over the weekend, I saw three letters from building suppliers in Clare indicating a further price hike in January 2022. Construction prices need to settle and stabilise. Supply chains need to be fixed. Has the Government engaged with the Construction Federation of Ireland and other stakeholders? At the European Council, has the Government used its voice in Europe to look at the breakdown of supply chain materials in construction at European level?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I also want to raise the case of the Women of Honour. They have been battling for justice after their experience in the armed forces for a number of years and not just in recent times. Their particular case has become centre stage due to the work of the Katie Hannon documentary a number of months ago. Their allegations are with regard to sexual abuse, bullying and discrimination and that the State has stood idly by in relation to these actions but it is not only about this. The key issue is that there has been a systemic battle against these women in their efforts for justice. Their careers have been held back for decades within the armed forces as a result of them standing up for themselves. It is incredible that we have armed forces where people suffered these crimes and when they fought those crimes they were identified and pushed out of the armed forces over a period of time. They were promised an independent external investigation. They were promised they would be able to add into the terms of reference. This has been refused to them. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has met them only once since the crisis broke a number of months ago. Will the Taoiseach ensure that there is an independent external investigation and that these women feed into the terms of reference that govern it?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A sustainable economy as referred to in the strategy requires at the very least that the earnings of workers keep pace with inflation. With inflation running at approximately 5%, many people are limited to 1% pay increases and some are getting nothing. Workers are in effect taking a pay cut at present. I want to know what the Taoiseach will do about it. I will ask him very specifically about one group who were absolutely critical during the pandemic. These are private security workers. There are approximately 28,000 of them in the country. Their earnings are capped at €11.65 an hour. They work in our hospitals, schools and public transport. They were recommended a 4% increase at the end of 2020. They still have not seen a cent of it because it was not signed off by a Minister and because some nasty employers in the sector are resisting pay rises. It is a miserable 4%. These are workers who carried us and worked all through the pandemic to provide security at every level of our society, in supermarkets, hospitals, public transport and concerts, you name it. I asked the Taoiseach to look into this before.

14 December 2021

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows the answer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not know the answer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy does know the answer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The workers are asking me if they are ever going to get a pay increase on those miserable levels of wages.

Deputy Paul Murphy: As the Taoiseach knows, for a long time we have been stressing the importance of ventilation and filtration in a strategy to fight Covid-19, which is an airborne pandemic. We were therefore very glad that People Before Profit's Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021 received the support of the entire Dáil. The Minister of State, Deputy English, who contributed to the debate on behalf of the Government, pledged that he would contact me that afternoon to arrange a meeting to discuss how its aims could be rapidly implemented via regulation. During that debate, the Government promised that this would not be "a case of sending it to [the] committee and setting it to one side", but that seems to be precisely what is taking place. I never got that call. We contacted the Minister's offices seeking a meeting, but we never received the arrangements for a meeting. Instead, we got a long letter raising various legal questions over our Bill and saying that the Minister is going to write to the Health and Safety Authority over the coming days to ask it formally to review the regulation. The absence of urgency on this crucial question of workers' right to clean air in schools, colleges, pubs, restaurants, offices and factories is a central issue. Will the Taoiseach intervene to ensure we have regulations before the end of the year on this issue?

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald raised the question of Women of Honour group. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, met with the group's members. My understanding is that he was very taken by their presentation and was anxious to do the right thing for and by them. When the Deputy talks about an external investigation to compel witnesses, what does she have in mind? She needs to spell that out. Is she talking about a commission of investigation?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The women have said it.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to Deputy Tóibín, who also used that phrase. It is very important to know what we mean by that here in the House. We can all promise things and say we will do them but if crimes have been committed, and I think the Deputy is saying that crimes were committed, they need to be investigated. In the first instance, they have to be investigated by An Garda Síochána. Any abuse of women is clearly a crime and needs to be referred to An Garda Síochána to be investigated in the first instance. The challenge is how we arrive at a proper review of this and have it dealt with-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach think what is proposed is appropriate?

The Taoiseach: -----without undermining any investigation by the gardaí. That is the problem and the challenge which I think the Minister may be grappling with. I will talk to the Minister again on this but we need to have clear lines of demarcation between different types of reviews. There is no question but that this needs to be addressed as an issue. I would like to think that any crimes should be referred in the first instance to the gardaí and should be pursued through that channel. Failing that, there would have to be further consultation with the group involved in this issue. I will talk to the Minister in respect of what has been said here today because it was not his intention in any way to have a development here that would not be in

keeping with the spirit of his engagement with the group at his meeting with them. I will follow that up on behalf of the Deputies. It is important to point out once an investigation is initiated - if it is an impartial commission of investigation under legislation, for example - that has all sorts of implications for any other actions subsequent to or parallel with that. If the Deputies wish to engage with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, I am sure he will talk with them on this issue to work out what the optimal way forward is for the women involved, in particular.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is proposed will not work and the women have-----

The Taoiseach: On the Construction Defects Alliance, Deputy Ó Ríordáin has said that the report should be due by the second quarter of 2022. The Minister is very conscious of this issue. We have already had a number of issues in the context of pyrite, mica and so forth. We will be moving on that and responding to the issues that arise out of that report.

Deputy Cathal Crowe raised the issue of the construction sector. Earlier in the House I dealt with some aspects of raw materials price inflation. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has changed the approach to tenders, for example on the fixed-price period and the material price variation. Anything over 15% can now be recouped by the contractor. Changes have been made to the tendering to recognise the supply chain difficulties that have been partially responsible for the increase in prices of basic raw materials for the construction industry. These difficulties have been largely related to Covid-19 on the international plane. They have been discussed at European Council level and I have no doubt that they will be discussed again. This issue is also affecting fertilisers and other agricultural prices, which are going very significantly higher as a result of a range of economic pressures that have arisen from the rebound from Covid-19, which has placed very significant strains on supplies generally. Brexit has also been a bit of a factor, adding to and compounding the overall Covid-19 situation. The Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform is very aware of this and is trying to facilitate greater flexibility and change within the public sector tendering process in this area. That being said, the economy has rebounded overall. Ireland enjoyed the fastest economic growth in the third quarter of any European country. There are 30,000 job vacancies in the economy now compared to 19,000 in the same period two years ago.

I dealt with Deputy Tóibín's question in response to Deputy McDonald.

Moving to Deputy Boyd Barrett, my understanding is that the joint labour committee, JLC, was legally challenged.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was legally challenged.

The Taoiseach: Therefore, the Minister cannot sign off on it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister was supposed to sign off -----

The Taoiseach: The Minister cannot sign off on it if has been legally challenged.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He could have done so before. He was supposed to sign-----

The Taoiseach: I love the way the Deputy casually throws in that the Minister did not bother to sign it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He was supposed to sign off in the summer.

The Taoiseach: That is not the way it worked.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was.

The Taoiseach: In any event, our view is that we support the JLC process and we believe the awards should be followed through and fulfilled by employers in respect of JLC recommendations.

On the issue of ventilation raised by Deputy Paul Murphy, the legislation has been passed and very extensive guidance has been issued. To illustrate my point that one cannot have a universal approach, yesterday I was in a 1970s-built school where every door in every classroom opens out onto the yard. I was told that the school has no issue with ventilation as a result of the construction of the school in the 1970s.

Government Communications

7. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service unit. [59968/21]

8. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service unit. [61363/21]

9. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service unit. [61497/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take the Questions Nos. 7 to 9, inclusive, together.

The Government Information Service, GIS co-ordinates cross-Government communications and comprises the Government Press Office and the Merrion Street content team. The GIS co-ordinates communications on cross-Government priority issues such as Housing for All and the State's response to Brexit and Covid-19. The GIS manages press conferences and media briefings, both for the Department and the Government in support of cross-Government programmes and priorities. The GIS also manages the Government of Ireland identity, and supports and encourages capacity-building in the area of communications and engagement across the Civil Service and the public service, including through training and development and the holding of meetings of the Government communications network on a quarterly basis.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I think it is fair to say that the past few weeks have not been the Government's finest hour in Covid-19 communications. For months parents were told that schools were safe, and then suddenly they were not. Measures were introduced with little explanation to the general public. The initial circular from the Department to schools was militant and divisive. I note that the Taoiseach sought in his commentary over the weekend to lay blame for these failures at the door of the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, and his team.

The Taoiseach: I beg the Deputy's pardon?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Despite failing to prepare the ground for additional public health measures in schools, the Government is still dragging its heels and mixing its messages on the substantive investment in ventilation needed to keep the school community safe. There is no clear communication from the Government on this issue. When he is pressed on the mat-

ter, the Taoiseach continues to lay responsibility for his Government's shortfalls in classroom ventilation, for example, at the CMO's door. This needs to be rectified and clarified. Government communication on the booster roll-out has not fared much better with the Taoiseach making particularly divisive comments last week. There has been a myriad of issues with the booster roll-out campaign but instead of recognising that the Government strategy was to blame, the entire population was blamed for these shortfalls. We know that people have attended walk-in centres across the country in their droves, queueing for long periods to get the booster vaccine. People are going to their GPs and waiting for appointments with their pharmacists. Throughout the pandemic, people have demonstrated time and again their commitment to keeping themselves, their families and their communities safe. I urge the Taoiseach and his Government to be much more considered and thoughtful in their communications on Covid and to shoulder responsibility for shortfalls when the responsibility rests with them and not with other agencies or individuals.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Is the Cabinet insisting on some form of investigation taking place in respect of the leaking of NPHEH guidance in recent weeks before it came into the public domain or even, at times, before it came to the Cabinet? It is very frustrating. As a backbench Deputy, I sometimes feel like we are fighting fires with some of that information. It is circulating in the public domain and then, hours later, comes out officially and is clarified and subsequently clarified again.

As we negotiate our way further through Covid and the fourth wave, with the Omicron variant now taking off, I ask that daily Government Information Service, GIS, briefings be provided for all Deputies, particularly those of us who support the Government. I do not think it is fair for us to have to phone the Minister for Health on his mobile phone to get a brief. The GIS should circulate the short scripts daily. There is a short script, but it needs to be disseminated again now that we are in a fourth wave. There was a time when the public did not want to consume Covid statistics every single day but I think the GIS should circulate the short script daily to make that communication through the tentacles of democracy a little bit easier.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Taoiseach stated last week that NPHEH had not been gagged after the announcement that all Covid communications and requests for interviews were now to be put through the GIS. Who decided that is the way it will be? He also stated last week that he had checked back on what happened the weekend before last and that nobody was stopped from going on any media programme. Is that still his position? Is an investigation under way into who leaked the NPHEH decision in the first place or was that just a fabricated row for the Government to distract from the communications omnishambles of the past two weeks? I remind the Taoiseach that I appeared on a media programme last night in respect of the HEPA filters grant that has just been announced by the Government. That RTÉ programme could not get a Government representative to appear on it to discuss the issue.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government information on HEPA filters in schools has been all over the place, to put it mildly. After months of campaigning by People Before Profit, trade unions, parents and teachers, the Government has been dragged, kicking and screaming, to accept the necessity, in some limited circumstances, of HEPA filters in schools. It is progress and some new money actually promised this week, but it is inadequate.

I ask the Taoiseach to consider the amount of money involved. I recently spoke to the principal of a school with 400 pupils and 15 classrooms. It will get €6,000 extra according to the Government figures and will be able to put one HEPA filter in every third classroom. The prin-

cial will have to choose. The principal stated that the school absolutely does need the HEPA filters. It also means the burden is placed on teachers and principals to go out into the market and buy these filters for themselves rather than the Department of Education getting them.

It also raises a question in respect of something the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, stated twice. He stated it first on the “Today with Claire Byrne” programme on 29 November and dealing with HEPA filters, when he claimed that the advice the Government has from HSE antimicrobial resistance and infection control, AMRIC, which looks at this in great detail, is not to put them in. He effectively repeated the same on RTÉ “Prime Time” on 30 November. The claim was a surprise to me and to the NPHET expert group on ventilation, so I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister, asking for a copy of the advice where AMRIC advises against HEPA filters. It is clear from the reply that no such advice was ever given. AMRIC did not advise against HEPA filters. Once again, it seems the Minister was simply making it up as he went along. The advice the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, hid behind on two RTÉ programmes to defend the absence of HEPA filters to keep students and teachers safe in school did not exist. Can the Taoiseach have confidence in a Minister who is making things up on RTÉ programmes to explain away the disastrous policy of the Government on Covid?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government needs to get clear information out to people whose incomes and employment are impacted as we head into Christmas. I do not know how many times in the past two years I have raised the issue of the plight of musicians and entertainers. They are in a dire state at the moment because the public health measures and restrictions and the voluntary decisions of many people to scale back their social outings and social activities mean that the work of musicians and entertainers has collapsed. Some of the venues are getting money and so on but the work of jobbing musicians, of whom there are thousands, has collapsed. These are people who have been hit again and again and again. They have had to fight all the way along to get little crumbs of support in terms of the music and entertainment business assistance scheme and the other Covid support scheme, but both of those funds are now depleted and apparently will not be reviewed until January. As we head into Christmas, some of these people are not able to get the full PUP. They are on lower payments and jobseeker’s payments and so on. There is no fairness or consistency and their incomes are hammered. Some of them are now experiencing banks moving against them in terms of their homes. They wrote to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, on 22 November, asking for an urgent meeting which she has not given them. A cross-party group that meets with entertainers met yesterday. They are seriously worried about the situation facing musicians and entertainers. I plead with the Taoiseach to make it easy for them to get the PUP, to reactivate the support funds and to ask the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, to meet as a matter of urgency with representatives of musicians and entertainers before Christmas.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This day last week, the Taoiseach stated that only 93,000 of 180,000 people showed up for their booster appointments. He suggested there was not the same urgency for boosters as there was for the first doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. Does he stand by that statement? Is it still correct? Was it even correct last week? My office and those of other Deputies are getting calls from people who want the booster shot and are eligible but have not received a text message, people who have received a text message but already got the booster shot elsewhere, people who are being told by their GPs that there are no boosters available to them and people who have gone to the open vaccine centres and waited several hours in a queue for a vaccine. On Sunday morning in Navan, for example, there were hundreds of cars stretching far up the roads outside the vaccine centre. People were queueing for hours at that vaccine centre.

In many ways, the confusion in respect of this mirrors the confusion in respect of the roll-out of the vaccines at the start of the Covid crisis. I remember that at that stage there were people on consultants' lists and other doctors' lists who were getting two invitations. I know a person with stage 4 cancer who could not get an invitation from either list and had fallen through the stools in that regard.

What the country actually needs - the Taoiseach probably knows this because he has experience - is a centralised patient database to enable us to roll out these programmes efficiently, as countries such as Denmark have done. Until we have that central patient database, we will always have this type of confusion in respect of what is happening to patients and the messages we are getting. Will the Taoiseach commit to the development of such a centralised patient database?

The Taoiseach: I have to stand back and reflect on some of the commentary that is emerging. Deputy Tóibín stated that this reminds him of the confusion at the start of the vaccination programme. We have a great capacity to knock ourselves as a country. I will go to the European Council meeting tomorrow. When I have gone to such meetings recently, the refrain has always been about the extraordinary achievements of Ireland in vaccinating close to 93% of the adult population. All Deputy Tóibín can say about that is "confusion". That is the only comment he can make about it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Was anything I said incorrect?

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, just to make the point-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Was anything I said incorrect?

The Taoiseach: I am just reflecting on it. It says a lot about the lack of balance and perspective in terms of his commentary in respect of what has been achieved by those involved in the vaccination programme. In terms of GPs, for example, stocks can be supplied to a GP within two days now. Those are the logistical operations the HSE has established with GPs.

4 o'clock

I have heard that GPs have said they are short of vaccines but they can get on to the HSE and within two days they will have a supply.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What about the idea of this being centralised?

The Taoiseach: More broadly, without doubt the Omicron variant has created a very strong sense of urgency. There is no question about that. It is vital that we vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible. To be fair, every effort is being made. We are working with GPs and pharmacies and the Defence Forces are helping by providing additionality with logistics support for the booster campaign.

We are number one in Europe in terms of the primary vaccination programme and the number of people vaccinated. We are fourth in Europe with our booster campaign, with approximately 1.25 million boosters administered, starting on 4 October based on advice from the national immunisation advisory committee in respect of when to commence those vaccinations.

Deputy McDonald raised the issue of communications, people's behaviour and so forth. People took up very quickly the core message over the past two months, particularly our inter-

vention around behaviour, working from home and so forth. They were not confused by the central message on the need to adjust behaviour in response to the Delta variant wave, getting hospitalisations and ICU admissions down. The result has been a reduction and stabilisation in the numbers admitted to hospitals and ICUs. People have got the message fairly clearly in terms of behaviour and so forth.

I take issue with a comment from the Deputy when she said that at the weekend I laid the blame on the CMO and his team. I certainly did not and whoever wrote that script for the Deputy should rewrite it and stop being divisive like that now because I do not lay the blame on the CMO, nor have I ever laid the blame on him. I have great respect for the CMO and his team, NPHE and public health advice. I have been very consistent since my days in opposition when the pandemic started that public health advice had to be central to combating this pandemic. The Deputy knows this because she was in the same room when I said it to the then Government. Deputy Shortall and others were in the room at that stage. That has always been my view and I do not lay the blame on anybody. I do not know the context but it seems to have been a deliberate “mis-spin” from the Deputy or her scriptwriter in respect of my behaviour at the weekend.

On the question of schools, we have again followed public health advice all the way. It has been the consistent approach from the beginning of the pandemic. A specialist team from the HSE has advised consistently on how to approach schools in respect of that.

The overall picture is that the booster vaccination programme is gaining momentum. There will be further developments and expansion of it. Our focus right now is on really expanding the programme and ensuring people are conscious of the significant threat that the Omicron variant represents. Its potential impact is a matter of real concern to us all.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Could I get an answer about musicians?

The Taoiseach: The Minister with responsibility for tourism has been given additional funding by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for performers. We want performers to perform and venues to stay open as much as possible. There is the Omicron variant threat but we have supports put in place because we acknowledge such people have been hit by the Delta variant threat and guidance we have issued in respect of people not congregating excessively and so on. We accept that and we have provided supports.

Economic Policy

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly published response to Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [60208/21]

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly published response to Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [60211/21]

12. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly published response to Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [61472/21]

13. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly published response to Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [61499/21]

14. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Government's response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [61495/21]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not agree with the language-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will allow the Taoiseach reply to the questions first.

The Taoiseach: I do not know what language he does not like because I have not answered yet. Was his comment anticipatory?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 14, inclusive, together.

The National Competitiveness and Productivity Council published its annual Competitiveness Challenge report in September. This makes recommendations to the Government across a range of policy areas. On 30 November, the Government published a formal response to the council's recommendations. This response was co-ordinated by my Department, drawing together material from relevant Departments. This is the second year in which a formal response was issued by the Government to the Competitiveness Challenge report.

The council outlined a set of 20 priority actions or recommendations across a broad set of areas for Government consideration. These areas include business, environment, boosting productivity and infrastructure, with issues such as insurance, climate action, childcare, housing, skills and the changing world of work highlighted. The Government welcomed the focus of the council on the priority areas outlined and agreed both on their importance and relevance to Ireland's continued competitiveness. The Government's response demonstrates that the council's recommendations are aligned with the Government's own ambitious agenda for economic recovery and sustainable development.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What I was about to say was that I do not like the language of competition in terms of a sustainable economy but nonetheless some of the matters discussed in the document are important. This relates to my previous point about musicians. If we do not support key sectors such as music and culture, we will really pay for it. I ask the Taoiseach to look at that because although some venues are getting some supports, individual jobbing musicians are not getting the support they need. Many of them will go out of business and they will not be musicians and entertainers on the other side of this pandemic. That will be a great loss to our society and economy, including our competitiveness, much as I dislike that term.

This is also true when it comes to low pay and the cost of living challenges that large numbers of working people are facing now. Another of my hobby horses is the plight of taxi drivers. If we are to be competitive, we will need taxi drivers at the airport for tourism and all the rest of it but not many will be left in business if they do not get the support they are being denied now? More generally, there are many low-paid workers in critical sectors and we cannot get people into those areas. The Government is complaining that everybody is on the PUP and that is why we cannot get people. It is not the reason; it is because the pay is too low for large numbers of workers in many areas.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Recommendation 3.4 of the report is:

To increase certainty for individuals and businesses, publish a timetable that shows how the national broadband plan roll-out is being brought back on track

This was clearly conceived before the latest and emerging very significant scandal relating to National Broadband Ireland. I found the Taoiseach's answers earlier wanting in him seeking to kick the matter to the Minister's regular questions later today. To be blunt, we know from very good work of *The Currency*, in summary form, about what looks like a massive swindle perpetuated on the public, facilitated by a lack of transparency from the Government and all to the benefit of a shadowy hedge fund. In essence, the requirements for providing equity have apparently been satisfied not by providing equity but instead by providing loans at extortionately high rates. All this is done while very substantial fees are collected, paid for by the public.

There is a list of 14 very appropriate questions on *thecurrency.news* but I will not get a chance to ask all of them. I will ask some and encourage the Taoiseach to look at them and provide answers. Why has the contract not been published in full as promised to the Oireachtas by the then Minister, Deputy Bruton? Why are the sections of the published contract governing how investors contribute capital to National Broadband Ireland redacted? Why was this deemed commercially sensitive after the contract was signed and the parties were no longer exposed to competition? There is a series of other relevant questions.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The *Sunday Independent* reported last weekend that the Cabinet was secretly briefed about massive job losses and warned that tens of thousands of jobs could be lost when the EWSS ends next April. Can the Taoiseach confirm this is the case? Is the Government carrying out an analysis of companies that have been getting this support and what supports will be put in place to save jobs?

The rising cost of living has been mentioned and it is having a major impact on workers and businesses. Private sector unions are to seek pay claims of up to 4.5% next year to reflect the surge in inflation that is eroding what people can afford and standards of living. As the Taoiseach knows, issues around energy bills have been well ventilated in this House.

Will the Taoiseach reflect on the fact that going back to normal is not what many people in this economy need? A total of 23% of Irish workers pre-pandemic were in statistical low pay, according to the OECD, and 40% of young people under the age of 30 were in insecure work. That is not an economic model we want to return to and that is not the type of competitiveness that does young people or vulnerable workers any good at all.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I too would like to raise the reports of over the weekend that the Cabinet received a memorandum earlier this month warning that thousands of businesses may fail and tens of thousands of jobs may be lost when the EWSS ends next April. We are told the memorandum highlights that many of these jobs are in the hospitality and entertainment sectors. Did the Cabinet receive this memorandum before the latest round of restrictions was announced by the Taoiseach? Will he provide us with more detail on the projections given to the Cabinet? It seems astonishing the Government ploughed ahead with closing the schemes, knowing they needed to be extended at current rates so that workers and businesses would not face a cliff-edge scenario.

Speaking at an Oireachtas committee last month, representatives from the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council underlined the need to create a more robust economy that is less vulnerable to economic shocks. What is the scale of job losses and business closures that are expected next year and are they to be concentrated in a limited number of sectors? Data provided to the Government need to be analysed but it also needs to be shared with those most affected. Has this happened? If not, is it the intention of the Government to share this informa-

tion and data?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The *Sunday Independent* reported that 300,000 jobs are being supported and approximately 25,000 businesses are under pressure as a result of Covid and the restrictions that have been implemented. IBEC has stated that in hospitality, there will be 40,000 fewer jobs in 2022 than in 2019, an incredible figure. The majority of these jobs will be lost by women and the second greatest proportion of these jobs will be lost by young people aged between 16 and 25.

We have recently seen the emergence of zombie businesses, that is, businesses that are surviving only because of the supports the Government is providing. They are racking up massive debts monthly. I know of one café with four staff that had no debt in 2019 but, because of debts to the landlord, suppliers and Revenue, it now owes €100,000. Some of those businesses are saying they will lash out for Christmas period, in order that they can earn as much as they can, but close once January comes along.

Many of these businesses are not going to survive. As a State, we have to look at dealing with the debt they are experiencing and support it in some way. The Taoiseach did it for the banks a number of years ago; now, a large cohort of SMEs are in a similar debt situation and need the Government's support. The livelihoods of tens of thousands of workers hang in the balance as a result.

The Taoiseach: The questions related to the competitiveness challenge report. Deputy Boyd Barrett, to be fair to him, spoke to the report and the question that was asked. I acknowledge his aversion or discomfort with the word "competition" but we need a competitive economy. Competition at a certain level can bring standards, although it can have the opposite impact in different contexts. We need a competitive economy and that needs good infrastructure, which needs to develop. Housing for workers, for example, is a big challenge for us in order to continue to create economic opportunities in cities and towns across the country. People need places to live in comfort and there needs to be a good public realm to facilitate the attraction of companies, whether foreign direct investment, FDI, or indigenous companies, to various towns and cities. "Competitiveness" is a broad term but it is an important aspect of national policy. It is important we have the annual competitiveness challenge report and that the Government benchmarks its performance against emerging issues.

On the issue relating to EWSS, PUP and CRSS, the intervention by the Government has been unprecedented in supporting incomes and in supporting companies and businesses to keep workers on their payroll in order that we will be in a position to bounce back when we come out of Covid. We have done well this year since March and the emergence of the Alpha variant crisis. We have reopened society and the economy and our exports have done very well since then. Manufacturing has increased, construction is going well in terms of activity levels and house construction, and retail has had a bounceback. Revenues are strong. The Exchequer deficit will be much smaller than originally envisaged. We were facing a deficit of €18 billion to €19 billion but that could be closer to €10 billion at the end of the year.

The economy has been managed well and competently by the Government so far. Of course, there are challenges in respect of how we evolve from a pandemic era back to normality. Because the EWSS and CRSS supports are so unprecedented, there has to be a judgment call at some stage as to how to amend them or evolve out of those schemes, which are economy wide, with a view to, perhaps, having more bespoke supports for different sectors. We need a bespoke

support-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to meet musicians in that regard?

The Taoiseach: There is no issue there. I recently met more than 30 organisations with the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. Separately, I also met individual musicians with Senator Murphy to discuss issues they had. What comes to mind in the context of music, performance, entertainment and hospitality is the wide diversity of interests and sub-sectors within the sector, so we do-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are a number of other questions and we are out of time. I do not mean to interrupt the Taoiseach but we will have to address the questions.

The Taoiseach: This is the final set of questions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is it? I beg your pardon.

The Taoiseach: The ideal way forward is more bespoke models.

I am not responsible for headlines. The only briefings we get relate to the numbers on EWSS. We certainly did not get a headline saying hundreds of thousands of people could be laid off. In fact, what seems to be emerging - this is not a fact but rather it is suggested by trends - is there has been less scarring of the economy than we might have thought at the commencement of the pandemic that there would be, but many people are still dependent on EWSS. We have brought in the rates waiver for the first quarter of 2022 and restored the PUP in limited circumstances. We are working very hard to support people.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There was no memorandum at the meeting, as reported.

The Taoiseach: I did not say that. I have answered the questions. Come on, now. The Deputy is trying to put words in my mouth, as she has done previously.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Was there a memorandum?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am moving-----

The Taoiseach: I said the memorandum was got did not relate to the headlines. I am not responsible for headlines. There was no memorandum predicting that 300,000 jobs would be lost.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am moving on.

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 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss a new qualification threshold for special needs assistants, recognising their essential role; (2) Deputies Kieran O'Donnell and Joe Carey - to discuss the findings and recommendations of NewERA's medium-term financial review of the Shannon Group; (3) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the planned closure of the long-Covid clinic in

Tallaght University Hospital; (4) Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan - to discuss what measures are in place to control the purchase of land or property in this jurisdiction without a tax clearance certificate; (5) Deputy Louise O’Reilly - to discuss a shortage of secondary school places in north County Dublin; (6) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the need to resume day care services at Abbeyleigh hospital; (7) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - to discuss the dire financial circumstances of musicians and the need for an urgent response from the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media; (8) Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - to discuss water quality and water treatment issues along Waterford’s copper coast; (9) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the status of the neuro-rehabilitation strategy; (10) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the removal of older people from West Kerry Community Hospital due to nursing shortages; (11) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss fuel poverty over Christmas; (12) Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Thomas Gould - to discuss the need to fund the regeneration of Noonan’s Road in Cork city; (13) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the refurbishment of the Dean Maxwell unit in Roscrea under the national development plan; (14) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss an update on the proposed Garda station for the Dublin 13 and 17 area at Northern Cross; (15) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the 14.4% cost increase in school transport for children with additional needs in south Dublin; (16) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss planned changes to the British immigration rules and the implications of the UK nationality and borders Bill; (17) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss a review of the decision to outsource catering facilities in St. Francis day centre, Newcastle, County Galway; (18) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss overcrowding at Naas General Hospital; and (19) Deputies Martin Kenny and Pauline Tully - to discuss the lack of a transfer system for HSE speech therapists wishing to relocate to rural Ireland.

The matters raised by Deputies Pádraig O’Sullivan, Ó Cathasaigh, Ó Laoghaire and Gould, and Griffin have been selected for discussion.

European Council Meeting: Statements

The Taoiseach: Amárach, beidh mé ag cruinniú tábhachtach sa Bhruiséil, ag labhairt agus ag plé leis na páirtnéirí ó gach cearn den Eoraip. Tá mé ag súil leis. Gan amhras, beidh anchuid ábhar faoi chaibidil againn i rith na laethanta atá le teacht. Tomorrow, 15 December, I will attend the eastern partnership summit in Brussels. On Thursday, 16 December, I will attend a meeting of the European Council, followed by a euro summit, also in Brussels. At the eastern partnership summit, European Union leaders will be joined by our counterparts from Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan for discussion on the theme of recovery, resilience and reform.

At the European Council meeting, EU leaders will discuss Covid-19. That discussion will deal with the epidemiological situation, including in light of the Omicron variant, vaccinations, including boosters, and internal co-operation, including vaccine sharing. Energy prices remain a topic of concern across Europe and leaders will follow up on our discussion in October on this issue.

Under the agenda item on security and defence, we will provide guidance on the ongoing development of the strategic compass, which aims to set out a common strategic vision for the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, over the next decade. The external aspects of migration continue to require the focus of the European Council and we will assess

implementation of conclusions from June and October of this year. We will also discuss several important EU external relations issues. I will provide more detail presently relating to Belarus and Ukraine. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, will provide more detail on the EU-Africa summit and the situation in Ethiopia in his concluding statement. He will also address the pressing issue of energy prices and the planned stocktake on crisis management and resilience.

Before I turn to the European Council meeting, I take the opportunity to update the House on the eastern partnership summit. The eastern partnership, launched in 2009, is a framework that aims to deepen and strengthen relations between the EU, its member states and six of its eastern neighbours, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It is regrettable that Belarus's participation in the eastern partnership was suspended by the Lukashenko regime earlier this year. Belarus will be represented at tomorrow's summit symbolically by an empty chair. In the meantime, the EU, including Ireland, will continue our engagement with, and support for, citizens, civil society and independent media in Belarus.

Robust democratic processes, diverse media voices, gender equality, good governance and the rule of law are essential to enable our societies to face the challenges of the 21st century. They are ultimately key to enhancing the resilience of eastern partner countries and the EU itself and will provide a stable and just basis from which we can continue to tackle Covid-19, the climate crisis and new security challenges such as disinformation and cybersecurity. That is why I endorse the "more for more" principle at the heart of the eastern partnership, which means that greater economic links and investment are linked to increased reforms in support of good governance, democracy and the rule of law. In particular, the promotion and protection of civil society space is an important priority focus for Ireland. While we recognise the many challenges faced by countries in the region, it is vital that all are committed to ensuring the will and voices of citizens are at the heart of decision-making. Despite challenges, the eastern partnership has been a valuable platform for co-operation that has reaffirmed shared values and brought improvements in trade and investment, infrastructure, people-to-people contacts, environmental standards and quality of life generally.

Wednesday's meeting will be the sixth such meeting and the first in-person one since 2017. The theme of the summit will be recovery, resilience and reform. It is clear there is a willingness and enthusiasm among a number of partner countries to accelerate integration and co-operation with the EU. This week's summit will be an opportunity to agree on a way forward, taking the different aspirations of the six partner countries into account, and affirming that this is a partnership that is at its heart values-based and a driver of reform. I particularly welcome recent moves in the region to tackle corruption and the strengthened action in promotion of gender equality, including adherence to the Istanbul Convention. As members are aware, this summit is taking place at a time of heightened tension across the region. It will be a timely opportunity to recall the importance to the EU of an active and positive relationship with partner countries, our support for de-escalation of tensions and the promotion of stability and prosperity across the region.

Covid-19, unfortunately, continues to be a cause of concern across Europe as we enter into a new phase of the pandemic. Many member states, including Ireland, have decided to put in place further measures to protect public health. While the situation is uncertain, it is important to remember that we now have a range of tools and improved knowledge to address the situation in a way that was not possible in earlier phases. This week's meeting will be a timely opportunity to discuss developments, particularly the Omicron variant. This new variant of concern was only identified in the past few weeks. Scientists are working around the clock to

provide updated information and analysis each day, better equipping us with the evidence base for next steps as we look to the short and medium term.

I will be stressing to my EU counterparts our experience of the effectiveness of vaccines. Ireland's vaccination uptake is consistently among the best in Europe and this is bearing fruit. I thank both the people of Ireland for how positively they have embraced the vaccine programme and the workers who have worked tirelessly to deliver it. We are accelerating our booster programme based on the evidence showing the benefits of third doses. It is important, at EU level, that we co-ordinate our approach as much as possible. Leaders will also discuss international co-operation on fighting Covid-19. Universal and equitable access to vaccines around the world is a priority and Ireland remains committed to the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, COVAX, initiative. I firmly believe the COVAX initiative represents our best chance of bringing the global pandemic to an end.

The analysis underpinning the work to date on the strategic compass is that the global security situation at present is marked by growing strategic competition and complex security threats. Ireland supports efforts to improve the effectiveness of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, bearing in mind the very different approaches of member states, including Ireland. We are engaging constructively in work on the strategic compass. In addition to reflecting the challenges facing the EU, this initiative will need to focus on the actions we must take to contribute to international peace and security, project our values and protect our citizens. In particular, we see the compass as an opportunity to reiterate the importance of EU-UN co-operation.

Ireland has specific interests in the areas of crisis management and partnerships and the central role of a civilian Common Security and Defence Policy. We also welcome the strong focus in the compass on work to strengthen the EU's ability to respond to new types of threats, such as cyberattacks and hybrid threats. At this week's European Council meeting, I will be underlining the importance of ensuring the compass is anchored in our commitment to effective multilateralism and a rules-based international order with the UN at its heart. This week, leaders will provide guidance on the further development of the compass. It is expected that, following further work over the coming months by foreign affairs and defence ministers, the strategic compass will be on the agenda of the European Council next spring with a view to its adoption.

The European Council has discussed the external aspects of migration at two meetings so far this year, in June and again when we met in October. This week, we will revisit the implementation of our June 2021 conclusions. Ireland would like to see sustainable progress on irregular and forced migration issues. This should be based on a genuine partnership with countries of origin and transit and a common European asylum system that ensures effective member state management of migration flows. I fully support EU efforts to deal with migration in a comprehensive and holistic manner, including through co-operation with key third countries and by tackling root causes. Action plans have been developed at working level for eight priority countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tunisia, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria, Morocco and Libya. Those plans now need to be put into operation and adequately financed as quickly as possible. The social, economic and political stresses arising from the migration situation are considerable. No matter how difficult, it is essential that humanitarian and legal obligations continue to be met.

The complexities of the external aspects of migration have been apparent in recent months

on the EU's borders with Belarus, where the Lukashenko regime has been cynically exploiting migrants. Ireland was glad to co-sponsor the fifth package of sanctions in response to the Lukashenko regime's appalling misuse of migrants. This crisis was designed to put political pressure on the EU and to divide internally. In that it has failed and the response within the EU has been one of solidarity. The signs of de-escalation at the Belarusian border in recent weeks are encouraging. EU diplomatic work done with countries of origin and relevant airlines has been impressive. Nonetheless, it is important we continue to engage on this issue at the highest level. This includes ensuring international aid workers and experts are given access to both sides of the border so that the safety and welfare of the people still there can be assured.

This week the European Council will call for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Belarus and for an end to the repression of civil society and independent media. Ireland remains steadfast in our support for a sustainable, democratic and peaceful resolution of the situation in Belarus. It is the right of the Belarusian people alone to decide the future of their country.

This week Ireland will join calls on Russia to de-escalate the situation near Ukraine's borders, where there has been a concerning build-up of Russian troops. Ireland is a steadfast partner for Ukraine and, at this week's European Council, we will welcome broad, resolute European Union solidarity with Ukraine and support for its territorial integrity. Our first priority will be to see a de-escalation in the situation on the ground.

Leaders will also meet on Thursday for a euro summit, where we will hear from the President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, and from the President of Eurogroup, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. We will discuss the economic situation and review progress on the banking union and the capital markets union. The focus of the June euro summit had been on the economic challenges for the euro area in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. In June, we acknowledged the strong, swift and co-ordinated economic policy response of the European Union and its member states in preparing the ground for a robust, inclusive and sustainable recovery from the pandemic.

Strong fiscal policy co-ordination has clearly helped to mitigate the damaging economic impact of Covid-19, including through the application of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact. This has allowed member states to depart from the budgetary requirements, which would normally apply, to tackle the economic consequences of the pandemic.

The Commission also presented a communication in October, relaunching public debate on reviewing the European Union economic governance framework. This is open for public consultation until the end of December and the aim is to build broad-based consensus on the next steps well in time for 2023. The time is now right to discuss possible reforms to the existing economic governance framework, and Ireland will play a constructive role in these discussions.

In June we also reiterated our commitment to completing the banking union and strengthening the integration of our capital markets, including providing the Eurogroup with a strong mandate for advancing further work in this area. Our meeting this week will be an important opportunity to review progress.

I look forward this week to continuing to engage collectively and bilaterally with my European Union counterparts as well as eastern partners on a broad range of pressing issues. I will report to the House on our discussions in the new year.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I propose to share time with Deputy Brady.

I am very pleased to hear that the eastern partnership summit will be mindful of things like robust democratic processes, media diversity and gender equality. I welcome the moves to tackle corruption and strengthen actions in the promotion of gender equality, including adherence to the Istanbul Convention. Similarly, we might reflect on those things here at home.

The Taoiseach said the issue of energy prices will remain a topic of concern across Europe and that he would follow up on his discussion in October on the issue. Winter is now on us. We have dark nights with often very cold temperatures and our energy bills are soaring through the roof. People throughout the country have a cost-of-living crisis. Bills for electricity, gas and petrol are skyrocketing and people's pay packets struggle to keep up. I have raised this matter with the Taoiseach on a number of occasions and he has proved slow to act or respond to these realities. He has been slow to stand up in any meaningful way for ordinary workers and families.

The Government has at last proposed this scheme for a €100 relief. I again record my deep frustration and disappointment that the Government is unwilling to move swiftly on this matter. I proposed the Dáil would sit again next week if necessary to bring forward legislation on the matter and the Taoiseach has refused to do so, which I find astonishing.

Of course, people rely on energy other than electricity. The Taoiseach will know the statistics that 37% of households use home heating oil to keep them warm, and prices have increased by 71%. The cost-of-energy crisis is not going away and will be raised with the Taoiseach repeatedly. He will, of course, be aware that many of our European colleagues have made the decision to intervene in a meaningful way for their citizens. In October the European Commission launched a toolbox for action and support to tackle rising energy costs. Across Europe, governments have responded to soaring prices to shield households. In Spain, for example, VAT on electricity bills was slashed by 7%. In Italy the government has launched a package worth €6.2 billion to protect households from rising energy prices to the end of this year. I cite those two cases as a demonstration of ambition and commitment to delivery. I ask the Taoiseach to work with our European colleagues to deliver on this and put in place credible detailed plans to tackle the cost-of-energy crisis on an ongoing basis.

Of course, the Taoiseach will be aware that talks on the Irish protocol continue. Will he avail of the opportunity to make it clear the protocol has strong majority support in the North of Ireland among people, among business communities and at the elected assembly? Will he leave our European colleagues in no doubt the protocol is the best essential way to protect the all-island economy and the Good Friday Agreement, and to avoid a hard border on our island? Political brinkmanship from the British is a failure of leadership and cannot be pandered to. We must stand with our European colleagues in standing up for the protocol and the protections it contains.

We also have a duty to show political leadership on the TRIPS waiver. It is the best way and the essential first step to stand up for equality and ultimately to protect all against new variants of the virus. Despite more than 100 countries supporting a TRIPS waiver on Covid-19 vaccines, Ireland and the EU continue as a roadblock, which is an indefensible position. The waiver would facilitate the maximum roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines worldwide. This is necessary to protect everyone against the emergence of new variants. By refusing the waiver, we prolong the pandemic and the suffering of the poorest people in the world. I believe the Government's

position is out of step with the public mood. I ask the Taoiseach to do the right thing on behalf of Ireland and raise with European leaders the importance of this global solidarity.

Deputy John Brady: I begin by addressing the issue of Brexit. The British continue to behave in the most obtuse and difficult manner possible. Whenever a solution can be found to address outstanding issues, the British have invariably returned to the table with another problem. It has been suggested the Tory Administration is more intent on using Brexit to fight another election rather than to seek solutions to the issues with the protocol.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs held a meeting with Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič last week and I found his commitment that the EU would hold firm on the Irish Border and the protocol very reassuring. I welcome the stance, the solidarity and indeed the common-sense approach of the EU to date, which stands in stark contrast to that of the British and political unionism. The abject failure of leadership by political unionism must be called out and, in particular, the reckless and dangerous behaviour of Jeffrey Donaldson. His continuing threats to take down the assembly are much more a case of naked electioneering than anything we have seen by Boris Johnson. I want dialogue to continue between the EU and the leaders of political unionism. We need to be clear on the emerging situation, namely that unionist business leaders in the North have recognised the value of the Irish protocol and the advantages it offers. As the North is outperforming Britain economically, the EU must take cognisance of the fact that political unionism is increasingly at odds with the needs, ambition and sentiment of the business community. I would argue that the EU should commence the process of planning for the likelihood of Irish reunification to ensure a transition that is as orderly and as manageable as possible whatever the timeframe may be. We are on a trajectory towards Irish unity which increasing numbers of Irish people wish for and something that business and economic developments will establish as being inevitable.

As the first fatalities from the Omicron Covid-19 variant are revealed, the issue of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, waiver must be addressed by the EU Council. Current EU proposals offer little more than that which is already available. The approach of the EU to date appears to be one of delay and to derail any attempt to consider the TRIPS waiver. Ursula von der Leyen promised the world that the EU would make vaccines a global good which would mandate a change of position at the World Trade Organisation. It must be said that the EU has whitewashed its moral responsibility. It has defied the democratic wish of the EU Parliament and has refused to make a stand against the vaccine apartheid.

While the EU has claimed it has sent 1.4 billion vaccine doses to approximately 150 countries, these vaccines were not donated; they were exported. With close to half of them being sent to high-income countries such as the United States, Japan, Britain, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Australia, the EU has been deliberately misrepresenting its record on an ongoing basis. How will the Taoiseach respond to Mary Robinson, our former President, who described the European Union as “the biggest roadblock to [an] effective solution to ramp up the supply of lifesaving vaccines”? According to current estimates, there are six times more vaccines administered in high-income countries than in low-income countries. If the EU will not support the TRIPS waiver, will it put in place an alternative proposal? Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, COVAX, is not the answer. Even if the EU meets its goal to vaccinate 20% of the population in 92 target countries, it will be well short of the levels of immunity that are needed and that is what the experts say.

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

The Taoiseach: You hate the European Union. You condemn the European Union, and you are silent on Russia and Ukraine.

Deputy John Brady: I want the EU to deal with the global apartheid of the vaccine.

The Taoiseach: Very interesting.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are eating into Deputy Howlin's time. Can we stop the clock?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The stormy clock. I have a mere five minutes which is always something I complain about. After a referendum on European treaty's, we were given a firm commitment that we would debate in advance of and afterwards European Council meetings. I do not wish to use up my time, but we really need better than this. I wish to deal with a few of the agenda items that the Taoiseach is facing.

I welcome the fact that the issue of energy prices is on the agenda again, but it cannot be generalisms and tokenisms. Gas and electricity prices in Ireland are already among the most expensive in Europe. Despite significant moves in recent years to wind energy, we are still significantly dependent on fossil fuels, particularly gas, in this country for electricity generation. As a consequent, we are very vulnerable to international fluctuation in gas prices, even those that are motivated by political action. If Russia determines the price of gas is to increase, it will happen because Russia can simply reduce the supply into Europe and that is completely unacceptable. Irish tariffs, both transmission and distribution use tariffs, that suppliers pay to the State companies EirGrid, Gas Networks Ireland and ESB Networks, are also among the highest in Europe. These are all adding to the cost. A series of price increases throughout this year has made bills now landing in the hallways of households up and down the country completely unbearable for people. Families and individuals are barely keeping their heads above water and they simply cannot face that. We must take domestic action.

The tokenism of €100 per household that may come once legislation is passed sometime in the new year is no good to people who are facing bills and are frightened right now. When announcing the once-off €100 payment for every household, the Minister with responsibility for energy acknowledged that the European Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators, ACER, calculated that gas prices between April and October of this year - a matter of months - have increased by 400%. Tokenism will not work. I hope there will be a concerted action across Europe to deal with this real crisis. The Minister is saying that these are temporary increases and that by the middle of next year they will abate, but that will be too late for people. If that is a fact, let us take immediate action here. The VAT rate of 13.5% applies not only to the increase in cost - a windfall to the Exchequer - but to the public service obligation, which is also taxed at an additional 13.5%, and to the increases in carbon taxes. We really need action taken on that.

On the discussion of security and defence, I listened the Taoiseach when he said, "Ireland supports efforts to improve the effectiveness of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, bearing in mind the very different approaches of member states." What does that mean? We need a frank and open debate on this because everybody talks in general terms about defence. We are all scandalised by the actions in Belarus. We are scandalised by the fact that the Russians are building an army on the edge of Ukraine right now. What is Ireland's role on it? What are we going to do and what exactly do we mean by the "strategic compass"? There is Euro-

pean speak about the Taoiseach's contribution today. We need a frank, open and honest debate about Ireland's role in common defence.

We talked about cyberattacks. We have been the victim of a monumental cyberattack this year into which the Committee on European Union Affairs is preparing a report. There are so many issues about which we glibly say we are neutral. What does that mean in real terms? I would welcome if, in their concluding remarks, the Taoiseach and the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, would commit to talking in the new year about preparing a proper debate for this House, that is grounded by a position paper from the Government, on what the strategic compass means, how we will contribute to it and how we will build stability.

My final sentence – five minutes, as I said, is ridiculous - is this. I listened to the Lithuanian foreign minister this morning on television when he said that tensions in his part of Europe are at a greater level of height than they have been since the Second World War, which is something we need to take notice of.

Deputy Seán Haughey: There is a lot on the agenda of the European Council meeting, including the Covid-19 pandemic, crisis management and resilience, security and defence issues, the upcoming EU-African Union summit, the situation on the EU border with Belarus, energy prices and the external aspects of migration. Meanwhile, negotiations between the UK and the EU on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol continue.

As we heard last week, the Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič attended our meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs. He said he had just come from a meeting of the Commissioners at which the broad range of issues facing the EU at this time had been considered. These issues included the threat of an invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the crisis on the Belarusian border.

It is in everybody's interests for the negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol to be concluded as soon as possible. It now looks like the negotiations will continue into next year. However, it appears some progress has been made in respect of medicines. Although Vice President Šefčovič has been reported as saying time is running out and that it is now time to act, he has also said the EU is ready to move on its own if a joint approach is not possible. The vice president has consulted widely with business groups and civic society in Northern Ireland and has brought forward practical solutions to the real problems that have emerged in respect of the implementation of the protocol. These include problems concerning the supply of medicines and customs and regulatory checks on goods.

I welcome the apparent change in position from the UK side as regards the European Court of Justice. The UK seems to be acknowledging that the Commission has no mandate to renegotiate the protocol. Governance will no doubt be an issue in due course, but for the moment it is best to deal pragmatically with the problems businesses are experiencing right now.

Meanwhile, in a letter last week, the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, Jeffrey Donaldson, again threatened to collapse the Northern Ireland institutions unless progress was made on the so-called Irish Sea border. This new threat has been rightly criticised by the other parties in the assembly in light of the wide range of problems in Northern Ireland that need to be addressed. The management of the pandemic is just one of these. No doubt, these remarks are aimed at DUP supporters in light of next year's elections, but this new threat is not helpful in any way. I wish the negotiators success and hope all remaining outstanding problems can be

successfully resolved in the near future.

As we are on the subject of Brexit, I welcome last week's announcement of the approval by the EU of an allocation of €920 million to Ireland this year under the Brexit adjustment reserve fund. As we know, the EU has put in place a fund of €5.4 billion in total. We are the member state most affected by Brexit, so it is right we are set to be the greatest beneficiary of the fund.

This will be the first summit attended by the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz. The former Chancellor, Angela Merkel, will be missed by the EU. She was a problem solver and totally committed to the ideals of the European Union. Chancellor Scholz leads a centre-left government which is highly pro-European. I suggest that is a good thing for smaller member states such as Ireland. I hope the Taoiseach will use the opportunity presented by this meeting of the European Council to initiate a good personal working relationship with the new Chancellor as this would be in the interests of our two countries and the EU as a whole.

France takes over the Presidency of the EU next month. President Emmanuel Macron has been setting out his vision for this presidency. It can be summed up in three words: recovery, power and belonging. He outlined the wide range of issues the EU must confront at this time, including the threat by Belarus to push migrants into the EU and the issue of migration more generally. The EU also faces issues regarding the rule of law in Hungary and Poland and EU economic growth and development. President Macron has also been talking about European defence and the White Paper on defence, the so-called strategic compass. He wants a powerful and independent EU. That is all very well and good but any new proposals for further integration or for security and defence generally will have to be carefully scrutinised by Ireland because our interests do not always necessarily coincide with the French agenda.

I welcome what the Taoiseach had to say in his remarks on the strategic compass. He talked about the very different approaches of members states, including Ireland, and suggested we are engaging constructively in work on the strategic compass. He also spoke about the need to contribute to international peace and security and to protect our values and our citizens. He also mentioned the need to co-operate fully with the United Nations in the context of the strategic compass. In this regard, I encourage all citizens to engage with the Conference on the Future of Europe, which is now under way, so that the EU of the future will be one to which we can all subscribe.

I wonder whether the meeting of the European Council will consider the human rights situation in China. As we know, there are concerns about the fate of tennis star, Peng Shuai. The International Olympic Committee is coming under pressure to cancel the Winter Olympics to be hosted in China in February. Some countries have announced a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics, which means their government officials will not attend the games. This is something Ireland should consider. I would like to know whether the EU as a whole will be examining this issue at the upcoming meeting.

It has not been mentioned yet but I will make reference to Russia generally and the Russian veto on the UN resolution on climate and security this week. As we know, Ireland played a key role in bringing this resolution to the table. It was a terrible pity Russia vetoed it at the final hurdle. The issues still remain, however. I have no doubt the issues under consideration in this motion can be revisited and worked on again.

Speakers in this debate have already talked about the humanitarian crisis on the Belarusian

border with the EU. I too condemn the weaponising of these migrants. I welcome the Taoiseach stating in his contribution that the EU will call for the release of all political prisoners in Belarus. That would be a powerful statement.

I join other speakers in mentioning the position as regards Ukraine. US intelligence reports that up to 175,000 troops are being massed on the Ukrainian border. This is a big worry. Ukraine is talking about embracing NATO. That is Russia's fear. Again, we need to mediate a solution to this crisis. The crisis needs to be de-escalated. I hope the leaders at the European Council meeting will take such an approach.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many speakers have already mentioned the fact the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union recently met with Vice President Maroš Šefčovič. He spoke about the difficulties being faced, including the issues regarding Russia and Ukraine and hybrid warfare, or whatever term people want to use for the weaponising of the migration crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border. These are very significant issues. He was steadfast in his position.

The vice president is dealing with the British Government, which is never particularly easy. In fairness, he is a lot more diplomatic than me. I believe the term he used was that it can be "difficult". I do not believe I have burnt him in any way shape or form by saying that. That is the reality we have all being dealing with, whether 100 years ago, during the Brexit negotiations or now. Obviously, there is still a threat to the Irish protocol. We have good soundings followed by not-so-good soundings. We know a British government will always make hay politically. We are never quite sure what its endgame is in this regard. It has also created instability among political unionism which is at this time engaged in the politics of cutting off your nose to spite your face.

5 o'clock

We have all heard of or seen the research done concerning the major benefits that businesses, farmers and others have derived from the Irish protocol and its attendant protections and mitigations. It gives access to the British market and, equally and importantly, the EU Single Market. That is what we must work on. We want to have dialogue and to ensure that we have European solidarity in this regard. We want to ensure that we bring this uncertainty regarding the protocol to an end.

The only end, however, that will mean that the British problem in Ireland has been dealt with will come about when we get to grips with Irish unity. It is a conversation happening in wider society, among some of the people in this room and among the members of all political parties and those who are non-party. Even if people do not necessarily agree with unity, they must realise that it is a possibility. Therefore, it is utter madness if we do not prepare and plan for that eventuality and that must be done within this State and across this island. It is also necessary that conversations happen at EU level to allow for the required planning to be put in place. I reiterate the call that many of us have made previously regarding the need for us to have this conversation. We need a citizens' assembly in this regard and we even need an expanded shared island dialogue. It is necessary that we bring this conversation to the centre of Europe.

I agree with much of what has been said about the waiver of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS. We all know the difficulties we are facing with the Omicron variant, but we cannot have a situation continuing that has led Mary Robin-

son to say that the EU “represents the biggest roadblock” regarding what needs to be done in respect of vaccinations. I therefore call for the implementation of the waiver on the agreement on TRIPS and for the Government to support it. If that is not the case, then we must see the alternatives that are going to deliver. I say that because none of us is safe until all of us are safe.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In his opening remarks, the Taoiseach mentioned COVAX and support for that endeavour, which was very disappointing. COVAX does not increase the production of vaccines. We know that now because we are almost two years into this debate. COVAX is not working. It does not add to know-how in vaccine production. It is an extremely limited undertaking because it only involves a secure supply that is possible only through the purchase of vaccines on the open market. It is a *laissez-faire* approach when what we need is a hands-on approach across the board. COVAX relies on the open market and increases competition with the same rich countries that provide the funding for COVAX. It means that the countries we are hoping to support and to develop their vaccine output must now compete with the same rich countries they are seeking support from. It is illogical.

Fewer than 6% of people in African states had been vaccinated against coronavirus by late October. Global solidarity has been ineffective. COVAX has so far only shipped approximately 400 million vaccine doses globally, compared to its initial target that envisaged the delivery of 1.9 billion doses in 2021. COVAX is failing and I cannot reiterate this point strongly enough. Donations from richer countries are also failing to materialise. As of late October, developed countries had delivered only 43 million doses of vaccines, from pledges that had been made to donate approximately 400 million doses overall. Even that would still be far below what is needed. After one year of forecasting global vaccination timelines, our latest projections are the starkest of all. Our data show that most countries will have vaccinated the bulk of their populations either this year or not earlier than 2023. There is no middle ground and it is really a case of vaccinating people now or probably never. This shows how deeply unequal access to vaccines has become between richer and poorer countries. The data I refer to are contained in a report authored by Agathe Demarais, global forecasting director with the Economist Intelligence Unit, EIU.

If we cannot appeal to the sense of collectivism on which the EU was supposedly founded or to decency regarding vaccine equity, then surely we can appeal to our sense of self-preservation. If we do not help the developing countries with their vaccination programmes, and I mean really help them, instead of this hands-off, *laissez-faire*, let-the-market-help approach, through getting to grips with the production of vaccines via a waiver of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, and other mechanisms, then we will all be at risk. The variants that have emerged during the last year have stemmed from countries with low rates of vaccination. That is just a fact. We must get real and get serious about this. I am bewildered that the Taoiseach still comes in here and again mentions COVAX almost two years into a global pandemic. I remember when President Joe Biden intimated some months ago that the United States was going to support a waiver of the TRIPS Agreement. Very quickly thereafter, the Taoiseach came in and said that we might support such a waiver too. We cannot be subservient on this point and a little bit of courage is required.

I turn briefly to address what is happening on the EU’s border with Belarus and some of the responses in that regard. It is clear that Alexander Lukashenko is weaponising human beings for his own purposes. Poland’s response is no more decent in deploying 20,000 border police officers, firing water cannon and tear gas at asylum seekers, reinforcing its border fence and blocking access for journalists and aid organisations. The root cause of this weaponising of

people is the fear that has emerged in the EU since about 2015 and Brexit concerning the migration of people. This fear has been whipped up by elites in the Tory party in the UK and of the right wing. They have tried to create a scapegoat by saying that these people over there, who are fleeing starvation, poverty and the danger of being killed in their homes by bombs made in America, are the real source of concern and fear.

We have weaponised those asylum seekers because of a fear of migration. That fear has loomed over and dominated migration policies, which have included the deployment of illegal push-back practices at the external borders of the EU, the towing back of migrants in the boats in which they arrived, the rounding up of refugees on land and forcing them back into the sea and informal detentions. The Polish Government has long been implementing a strict immigration agenda and has been closing its borders in breach of EU law. In doing so, Poland has defied calls for the humane treatment of asylum seekers. Poland is no exception in that regard. Deals done by the EU with non-EU countries have set a precedent for this. For example, to secure the EU's deal with Turkey in 2016, member states turned a blind eye to that country's human rights' violations in return for Turkey stemming the arrival of refugees to Greek islands. By effectively paying Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to keep migrants out, it was the EU that first introduced refugees into foreign policy as bargaining chips.

Questionable migration deals and anti-immigration messaging not only undermine the right to asylum, but also threaten the very foundation of the European project. I could point to any number of other examples, but time is short. Essentially, I am asking for us to show a bit of decency concerning a waiver of the TRIPS Agreement and stopping weaponising people and using them as political pawns. If the Irish State could stand for those aspects, that would respect our own history of being people who migrated.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to raise several issues ahead of yet another vitally important European Council meeting. I appreciate as well the comments made by the Taoiseach. I look forward to the response from the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, as well, because I think this is the first time I have had the pleasure of hearing him respond to this traditional subject of debate. It is a jam-packed agenda because a great deal is going on. It is difficult, as we will all find, to try to address every issue due to come up at this European Council meeting and, indeed, the issues that are not on the agenda but that will undoubtedly arise. I will address one or two of those matters.

First, however, I will address the latest wave of Covid-19 infections caused by the Omicron variant and the importance of a couple of issues, the most significant of which is the roll-out of the third dose of vaccines, that some people call a booster dose, across the EU. There is a need for co-ordination and co-operation in this regard among member states. That is especially the case when addressing major issues such as vaccine hesitancy, which we see devastating parts of Eastern Europe, and the importance, when we go on to explore this aspect, of how we can retain the gains made through vaccination and co-ordination. I refer to keeping those aspects open during this difficult period.

In addition, we must ensure that basic freedom of movement is retained within the EU. Huge strides were made to maintain this ability through the introduction of the EU digital Covid certificate and its mutual recognition among member states. We now see our State, to be frank, introducing new testing requirements and various other discussions in this regard. We remember the fateful days leading up to last Christmas and the major concern that caused, but we must ensure that when invest in and agree on a system of co-operation concerning travel for vacci-

nated people, or those who have recovered or have proof of a negative test, that it is rigorous and can meet the tests posed by the various waves of the virus. That is a major challenge, not just for our Government but for the governments of all member states of the EU. This matter must therefore be taken extremely seriously at this meeting of the European Council to ensure we can maintain the gains we have made.

In addition, when we discuss Covid-19 and examine how the virus is impacting member states so differently, it will be evident that those countries with much higher vaccination rates are seeing much lower rates of hospitalisation and mortality. When we look at member states with a low level of vaccine uptake, particularly those in eastern Europe, not to pick on one geographic area, we can see how devastating that has been for people there. Solidarity is continuing in respect of medics going between member states and member states alleviating each other's ICU capacity. That is really important.

At this European Council meeting there is going to be a discussion on defence and security on the strategic compass. I am not going to discuss the supposed partnership in respect of NATO because it would be a false approach to discuss that in this House. Ireland has a very serious and important role to play when it comes to co-ordinating security and defence policy. The security and defence requirements of the European Union are changing rapidly. We got a very nasty taste of that in this jurisdiction with the cyberattack on our HSE. Those of us who are members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs heard testimony on this in recent weeks from the European Defence Agency's various experts and our own officials and Minister. The only way we can try to keep up with those malevolent actors who attack the very structure of the State for profit is to maintain co-operation between member states, sharing of information and best practice and investment in security and defence technologies, resources and skills. That leads into a wider discussion, perhaps for another forum. It is something we have to bear in mind. If we go to the European Council meeting when we contribute are we able to ensure that Ireland will meet its requirements? Will Ireland be able to engage in true levels of solidarity with European partners? There is no easy answer to that question.

External relations, as has been noted by both previous speakers, are an increasingly important aspect. We can and others will refer to harrowing scenes in Belarus and on the Polish-Belarusian border or the situation in Ukraine.

As was noted by Deputy Ó Murchú, it is our absolute duty to maintain the continuing discussions and negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom on the agenda even if they are not listed in the pre-Council press release. I refer to the full implementation of the withdrawal agreement and a genuine acceptance of the responsibilities that come with it and with the trade and co-operation agreement. Such responsibilities range from the rights of French fishers to, crucially, the maintenance of the Irish-Northern Irish protocol and its importance not just for this island but for all future negotiations, be they between the United Kingdom and other third countries or the European Union and other third countries. Those of us who have been engaged in the Brexit process for the last five or six years know that depending on the various issues of the day, the level of interest in and focus on Brexit will wane between other leaders and other member states. We are seeing changes in leadership in certain Governments. Brexit does not simply end because there is an agreement in place. Brexit is going to be with us for a generation and we will continue to be the member state most impacted, not just economically but also socially. Therefore it is our responsibility to put it on the agenda of every European Council meeting, regardless of whether there is agreement in the talks between Lord Frost and Commission Vice President Šefčovič this week. It is unlikely that there will be agreement,

despite them meeting twice. Hopefully there is progress on ensuring the free flow of medicines into Northern Ireland. We have to continue to ensure that the protocol is implemented, that the British Government meets the terms of the agreement it signed and, equally, that our European partners continue the level of solidarity and commitment that has been utterly unwavering over recent years. Much of that is down to the good work of politicians from all sides of the House as well as our public servants and diplomats.

I would like to make a couple of points about the last aspect of the engagement this week: the Euro Summit meeting that will happen after the European Council meeting and the address by our own Minister for Finance and president of the Eurogroup, Deputy Donohoe, and the president of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde. The Covid-19 pandemic will continue to dominate this aspect of discussions and rightly so. That is why it is so important that resilience and fiscal flexibility continue to be demonstrated by member states to ensure the economies and therefore the societies of all member states are as protected as possible from the damaging impacts of this pandemic that is shutting down our daily lives.

On the banking union and continuing discussions on a full banking union within the euro group, this is a significant opportunity for Irish consumers where we see banks leaving this market and other banks creating changes. It is serious upheaval and extremely worrying but we have to look to the Continent and engage with partners to ensure that Irish consumers are thoroughly protected and also provided for in respect of their business and commercial needs.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am sharing time with Deputy Martin Kenny. The reality is that the EU, Britain and Switzerland are the biggest barriers to the global roll-out of the vaccine because they are blocking the TRIPS waiver in the WTO. The EU, including this Government, is prioritising the profit margins of a handful of pharma companies over human life. The official death toll from Covid is 5 million but Oxfam puts that figure closer to 17 million due to under-reporting of deaths in poorer countries. That is 17 million human beings. We need to have a debate in this House on Ireland's role in denying poorer countries access to the Covid vaccine. This is not just something that is happening somewhere else. As long as the pandemic continues, new variants will cause ongoing restrictions, potential lockdowns, sickness and loss of life right here. Workers will continue to be hit hard. People are already struggling to make ends meet and cannot afford to be out of work. Our underfunded healthcare system will be overburdened and people will go without treatment that they need. Healthcare staff are already at breaking point. They will continue to shoulder the burden. The pandemic was a disaster but every new strain is a failure to roll out vaccines globally. How individuals and states act on this issue will be remembered for a long time. I ask the Minister of State to ensure this is raised at the European Council meeting.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is clear that the primary discussion at the meeting this week is going to be around the pandemic, the managing of it and how that is progressing. Really the TRIPS waiver is the issue for the world that we need Europe to lead out on. Talking about COVAX and everything else simply does not cut it. It has simply failed. There needs to be recognition of that. Ireland needs to take this opportunity to lead and make it clear everywhere that we need the TRIPS waiver. The world needs it. As long as we drag our feet on it, we are going to have continuous variants of Covid-19. It is going to cause problems and we are going to be in this crisis for years to come. That is one of the primary things we need to work towards.

We need to get our voice clearly heard in respect of the issues around European security and all that. I saw reports this week on inter-agency co-operation across Europe which were refer-

ring to some kind of “shoot on sight” by an authority from other European states. We have a crisis across eastern Europe and particularly in Belarus. Europe needs very steady heads here. Ireland needs to lead that out and needs to be very clear on our position. The Taoiseach has a job of work to do in respect of that.

The continuing use of migrants as political chips on the table is simply wrong and repulsive to the vast majority of people everywhere across Europe. In most countries in Europe we need new people to come in to take up jobs and progress our economies yet we see this fortress Europe being built at every opportunity. There needs to be a very hard conversation in respect of that.

Going back to the Covid-19 situation, many countries in eastern Europe have a low take-up of the vaccine and this also needs to be learned from. Indeed, many people from eastern Europe who live in Ireland are among the slowest to take up the vaccine here. That is another issue that we all need to work harder to ensure we address.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The role that the Irish Government is playing in blocking people around the world getting access to Covid vaccines is criminal, murderous and absolutely scandalous. We are one year into the global roll-out of the vaccines and just one in 12 people in poor countries have received even one dose. In Haiti only 1% of the population has been vaccinated. In many African countries vaccination rates are between 2% and 5%. Three quarters of healthcare workers across Africa are not fully vaccinated. It is not because of a lack of demand or capacity to produce the vaccines. Manufacturing facilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Senegal, Denmark and Canada have all said they could be producing vaccines. Why are they not? It is because they are being blocked by big pharmaceutical corporations, which are artificially restricting supply to protect their super profits. Massive amounts of public money are poured into the research but it is now benefiting the corporations in the form of private profits. One factory alone in Bangladesh estimates it could produce 1 billion vaccine doses if only the intellectual property rights could be waived. What does the Irish Government do? It says COVAX this and CTAP that, and that it is not against the proposal necessarily, but behind closed doors in the European Council it is lobbying on behalf of big pharma. It is scandalous.

Deputy Mick Barry: Absolutely scandalous.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In response to a parliamentary question last week, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, stated:

I have an open mind on the alternative suggestion of a TRIPS waiver. I have always said that if we receive a WTO proposal [in writing], we will examine it. That has not happened yet.

This is misleading, to say the least. The first formal proposal from India and South Africa to the WTO came in October 2020. As for the open mind, why is the Irish Government lobbying at European Council level against a TRIPS waiver? It is absolutely scandalous and causing the deaths of people around the world, including in this country, owing to the spread of new variants such as Omicron. We cannot afford more delays, variants, deaths and restrictions; we need to scrap the patents now and share the vaccine recipes worldwide. The vast majority of countries in the world have backed the call for a TRIPS waiver. Even the United States has backed it.

I want to deal with a different issue, that is, the crucial call for the cancellation of eurozone

countries' debt to the European Central Bank. The call, published across Europe last week, has been made by academics, activists, trade unionists and public representatives on the left, including the People Before Profit Deputies. The reason for the call is that public debt has expanded by over 20% across eurozone countries. This is because the governments refuse to go after the increased wealth and profits of the super wealthy that accrued during Covid. Instead, there is an increase in debt. That debt will be used later to say we need fiscal discipline and a return to neoliberal policy. Instead of these, we need a simple bookkeeping operation: cancel the eurozone countries' debt to the European Central Bank now.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister is supporting vaccine apartheid. In the European Union, 320 million people have been vaccinated and 70 million have received their boosters. That is fine and as it should be, but more than 3 billion people worldwide have not even received their first dose yet. In Africa fewer than one in five have been vaccinated. In fact, in one fifth of African countries fewer than one in 20 have been vaccinated. The governments continue to support holding the line against abolishing the TRIPS waiver or the intellectual property rights of the vaccine companies to allow generic production. Last week in the Seanad the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, stated:

[I]t is better to have governments and pharmaceutical companies working together to find a solution rather than trying to create conflicts and turn one against the other. I do not think that is the right approach.

In other words, there is a veto for the big pharmaceutical companies. The Tánaiste's alternative is the COVAX programme. The COVAX programme has delivered less than one third of the vaccines that have been pledged. The solution is to waive the intellectual property rights.

The Government must change its position. It is a scandalous position. We need vaccine production to meet the needs of people and not to be for profit. Furthermore, we need to take the big pharmaceutical companies into public ownership and run them under workers' control and management to meet the needs of people.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I acknowledge the unfolding circumstances at the Ukrainian border, as raised by other Deputies, including Deputy Berry, earlier today. As with other Deputies, I believe the amassing of troops at that border is deeply worrying. Ireland and the EU should be preparing and they should be hoping for a de-escalation. In that regard, we should be looking forward. We should be preparing a full suite of EU sanctions. These should be authorised and communicated in advance so that, in the event of an attack, they can be triggered immediately. We must keep an eye on our own territory. If hostilities are to break out, we should plan for an increase in incursions around Ireland and for more cyberattacks, potentially against our national grid. There have already been significant fuel price increases this winter, but we can anticipate more because the Nord Stream 2 project would likely be paused. Seeing as we have a new Irish Embassy in Kiev, we should use the facility to get a full briefing on the circumstances on the ground.

A number of Deputies have spoken about the TRIPS waiver. I first spoke on this as far back as 24 March. In that speech, I talked about Covid variants and the potential for vaccine escape. I emphasised that none of us is safe until we are all safe. I have acknowledged on numerous occasions that the TRIPS waiver is not a cure-all and does not do everything that needs to be

done in the global fight against the pandemic, but nobody has convinced me yet that the other approaches are working at the speed, and with the urgency, required. As Dr. Mike Ryan has told us, when dealing with a pandemic speed trumps perfection. The COVAX mechanism is falling short. The CTAP was an approach that I believed had promise but it failed to get buy-in from the pharmaceutical companies. The very fact that compulsory licensing has not been used to produce vaccines at scale is proof enough for me that it is not a workable solution. I just cannot accept the argument that we must safeguard research and development funding streams to produce vaccines when so much of the research into the vaccines was substantially underwritten by European and American taxpayers.

For the body of my speech, I will turn to another item on the agenda of the European Council meeting, that is, the upcoming EU–African Union summit. This is overdue by some two years, for entirely understandable reasons. It is supposed to be held every three years but the last one was in 2017. That in no way diminishes the urgency. Ireland can proudly stand over both its peacekeeping record in several African countries and its approach to overseas development aid. We may not be the biggest contributor in gross terms, but it is generally acknowledged that we make our expenditure on overseas development aid travel a long way. From my short time teaching in Uganda with the Réalt programme, I know at first hand of the warm regard there is for Irish people in our partner countries on the African Continent. Great credit is due in this regard to Irish Aid and the Irish NGOs, in particular. We must look beyond traditional aid structures, however. We must not consider aid structures alone. We must begin to ready ourselves to work with the African Union as an equal partner. The IMF recently declared Africa as the world’s second-largest growing region. Many are predicting it is well on its way to becoming a \$5 trillion economy, because household consumption is expected to increase at around 3.8% per annum to about \$2.1 trillion by 2025.

The 2021 EU–African Union summit represents a key moment at which African and European leaders will meet to determine their joint priorities for their common future. There is likely to be a focus on aspects such as conflict and fragility, and also climate change, as drivers of instability. This reflects the 2020 document of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa*. It proposes working together on five key global trends: green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace, security and governance; and migration and mobility. These are interlinked. They cannot be torn one from the other, especially considering the projection for the expansion of household consumption across the African Continent. This expansion may be from a very low base, and there is a clear global equity issue in this regard, so we cannot reasonably expect African peoples to restrict their economic growth or, in particular, their standard of living. However, we must reconcile that with the urgent need for climate action in the face of climate breakdown, which is perhaps more evident in Africa than anywhere other than the poles. The solution must be that we help not only Africa but also other developing countries to skip the fossil-fuel age altogether and decouple their economic growth from their emissions increases. This brings us back in a circle to the issue of intellectual property and whether some of those intellectual property rights relating to sustainable and renewable energy technologies need to be suspended, for example, to allow for what the comprehensive strategy terms a low-carbon, climate-resilient and green growth trajectory that avoids inefficient technologies, employing instead new renewable energy sources and hydrogen production.

Something else Ireland can be rightly proud of is its central role in producing the UN sustainable development goals. Ireland and Kenya led on that process. That must be the template

and must be put at the heart of how we interact with the African Union. Such progress can be achieved only by working together on the basis of shared global commitments such as the 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals, the Paris Agreement on climate change and Agenda 2063.

I hope the Minister will bring these concerns with him as he travels to represent us in Europe.

Deputy Chris Andrews: A couple of weeks ago in the Dáil, the Minister for Foreign Affairs said he believed it was not best for Ireland to act unilaterally in support of Palestine against Israeli abuse and terror inflicted on the Palestinians. He said he believed Ireland should work with Europe as a unit to try to deliver a two-state solution. That would all be credible if Ireland influenced other European leaders; unfortunately, we do not. We are takers, not influencers, of European policy. We seem to be passive observers in Europe. Yes, the Government states how serious the situation is, but nothing ever follows through with action. If the Government wants to influence policy, why does it not take action? One course of action would be to approach like-minded countries to publish a collective statement of EU member states denouncing the designation of six Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organisations and calling on the Israeli Minister of Defense to rescind the designation. That is not a lot to ask for. What is being done at Union level to protect EU funding of Palestinian human rights NGOs? Three NGOs have had their funding suspended by the EU as a precautionary measure based on the 74-page document of evidence for May that was widely condemned by member states as not substantiated. What is the Government doing to revoke immediately these precautionary measures on Palestinian funding? Where is the action? When will the Government put aside the kind words? People in Europe love us; of course they do because we are not being active, not delivering on change and not taking action. They are happy with us. We need action. We need to support Palestine and we need to make our support clear to the EU.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I wish to raise the case of Julian Assange again. Last Friday, it took just nine minutes for the British magistrates to uphold an American appeal against a district court judge's ruling that Julian Assange should not be extradited. That judge had accepted in January that hell on earth was what awaited Julian Assange and that extradition would mean he would likely take his own life. On hearing the news that this ruling had been overturned, Julian Assange had a stroke, such is the stress and mental anguish his extradition has caused him. To call that decision justice would be a crime against the English language for the extradition is not just a miscarriage of justice but also an onslaught against justice and on journalism and free speech. In an age when the media are now driven by clickbait, ad traffic sensationalism, conventional wisdom commentary, access and embedded journalism, Mr. Assange's work, which revealed war crimes, atrocities and the destruction of civil liberties by the US military and its allies, shone like a light in the darkness. I have raised this case several times in exactly this slot, statements on European Council meetings. When we see what happened last Friday and the anguish Julian Assange is in and see the work he did, it is time for the Government to step up and to speak up for journalism and for Julian Assange.

Deputy Denis Naughten: European leaders will this week discuss energy prices and resilience across the European Union. One of the ways in which they can improve resilience throughout the Union is to improve digitisation of the EU economy. To do so, they need to change what meets the definition of "high-speed broadband" at European Commission level. Today the threshold that has to be reached for high-speed broadband under EU state aid rules is just 13 Mbps. This will leave thousands of homes throughout this country with copper-wire

broadband connections. Most rural homes, just like their city cousins, will have direct fibre connections, but people in hundreds of villages across the country who live within 1 km of the green Eir cabinet and who have just 30 Mbps will be left with a copper-wire connection, even though they do not have one but two fibre cables running outside their doors. To address this, the EU needs to change its definition of “high-speed broadband” under EU state aid rules. The EU digital agenda set an ambition in respect of broadband of universal speeds of 30 Mbps, but today, under the EU digital compass, the ambition is to have universal access to gigabit broadband by 2030. Ireland is well positioned to be the leading member state in this regard and to have gigabit connectivity available universally across this country by the second half of this decade. However, people will be left behind by this outdated definition, and it is imperative that the Taoiseach uses his influence with the Commission to ensure that this outdated definition does not leave behind people in this country and elsewhere around Europe.

The second issue I wish to focus on is energy. I ask the Government to do something radical, that is, to think long term in Ireland. It is in our interests and in the EU’s interest, particularly when it comes to energy security, to do so. Colleagues have raised the situation on the Ukrainian border. Russian troops are massing at the Ukrainian border, yet the Russians are turning down the tap on gas coming into the EU. Over the medium term, Ireland will generate 60,000 MW of renewable electricity off the west coast that will be surplus to its requirements. We need to start planning now for a new Atlantic electricity interconnector running from the west coast directly into the European electricity grid.

Last week, Dáil Éireann passed unanimously a motion that, among other things, called on the Government to design immediately a strategy in conjunction with the European Commission to fund and construct an Atlantic electricity interconnector that would connect west-coast and south-west-coast renewable electricity directly into the mainland European electricity grid. This could provide huge quantities of clean electricity to the Union, create tens of thousands of jobs right along the western seaboard, bringing about balanced regional development, and significantly reduce the cost of electricity to Irish homes, making it the cheapest electricity in Europe. To do that, however, an offshore renewable development authority needs to be established to would drive the type of change and the strategic thinking needed in this country. In tandem with that, the Government needs to engage directly at EU Council level pushing for the need for the Commission to spearhead the development of an Atlantic coast electricity interconnector, bringing that clean, green, Irish-generated electricity right into the heart of Europe. It is imperative that we lead from the front on this objective. I ask the Taoiseach to put it to Olaf Scholz, the new German Chancellor, when he meets with him later this week, that Ireland can help Germany to meet its long-term sustainable energy objectives. Germany has a significant challenge to meet its renewable energy objectives up to 2040. It is hoping to take all coal-fired electricity generation out of its system by 2040. To do that, it will require importing a substantial volume of green energy. Ireland can help provide that by having that interconnection from its west coast directly into the European electricity grid. It is not just to meet the renewable energy targets that are set throughout Europe, but it is to deal with those geopolitical challenges that we are now seeing amassing on the Ukrainian border. As we know, the Russian-owned Gazprom, the world’s largest producer of gas, typically supplies one third of the needs of gas to countries in the EU. However, this November, the flow dwindled to a six-year low. It is all right for the EU to talk tough, but it is very difficult to talk tough when the Russians are turning down the gas tap. Not only do we need to focus on electricity being transported into the European grid, but we also need to look at hydrogen from the west coast of Ireland being manufactured there and transported to many other member states. To do that, Ireland, which is one of the very few

EU countries without a green hydrogen strategy, needs to expedite that immediately.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I support the words of my colleague, Deputy Naughten. Everything he said is correct. We do not have any time to lose in harnessing the vast resource on the western seaboard. If we do that, we will set this country and Europe up for many decades to come. I commend the Deputy on his comments.

The Trans-European Network for Transport, TEN-T network, was agreed by the European Council in July 1996. It has been on the agenda at many European Council meetings since then, most recently back in June of this year, when the smart-TEN-T was discussed. This is relevant to events back home in Ireland because the TEN-T programme was cited by An Bord Pleanála as a reason the Galway city ring road project should be approved. I appreciate that different bodies are acting at different speeds when it comes to climate action, but the time for continuing with outdated planning practices is over. It is my duty, as a legislator, to remind the House that the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which I played a small part in bringing through the Oireachtas, is clear: public bodies must act in a manner consistent with the national climate objective of net-zero emissions by 2050 and the ongoing task to reduce emissions. The Galway city ring road will not reduce emissions; it will increase emissions. The act of approving the Galway city ring road is not consistent with our commitment to reduce Ireland's emissions. In the middle of a climate crisis, as we see the unprecedented political unity around climate action, a State body is approving a project that will scar the landscape, destroy homes and habitats and increase the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Building the Galway city ring road will be an act of vandalism against current and future generations. Permission should not have been given for it to proceed. I pay tribute to my party colleague, Senator Pauline O'Reilly, because she has been consistent about opposing the ring road, a stance that has not been universally popular. Sometimes, we must have the courage of our convictions. Some people think that the current congestion in Galway city will be solved by another road, but every transport planner agrees that the phenomenon of induced demand exists: new roads cause new traffic, more emissions and more pollution.

I also want to address the issue of the highway industrial complex in Ireland. I call it a highway industrial complex because it is a coalition of vested interests that co-operate to continue the road building mania that makes a mockery of our climate commitments and will do untold damage to our towns, villages and communities, both urban and rural. The highway industrial complex must be challenged and stood down. We have reached the patently ridiculous situation, as is apparent in Galway, where the existing bypasses are full, so we are trying to bypass the bypasses. It is utter madness. Other countries have managed to deal with this problem better. The Welsh Government has suspended all road building plans and is reviewing each road project in turn to determine whether it will increase emissions. It established a roads review panel led by Dr. Lynn Sloman, whom we heard from at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action earlier this year. The reviews are starting to come back, and even for bypass projects, the answer is clear, as Dr. Sloman outlined to our committee. More roads means more cars, which means more emissions. It is unconscionable that Ireland and the EU are trying to expand road building. It makes a mockery of our claim to be acting on climate.

At the European Council meeting there will be discussion of our foreign relations with countries in Africa, the continent that is perhaps most at risk of famine because of climate change. We are still laggards in EU terms. Depending on what base year is used, Ireland has either the third or the fourth highest *per capita* emissions in the EU. In his submission on behalf of An Taisce, the eminent figure, Frank McDonald, quoted Lewis Mumford, saying "adding car

lanes to deal with traffic congestion is like loosening your belt to cure obesity". It was picked up by the An Bord Pleanála inspector. I am sorry we did not listen to Frank McDonald. In fact, I am sorry we have failed to listen to experts like Frank McDonald for decades now. We would have a much better country if we had listened to them.

However, it is not too late. We know what we need to do. We need quality public transport everywhere. We need to plan new housing in a way that is not disadvantageous to those who do not or cannot own a car. There are a number of valid reasons to take a judicial review of the decision to approve planning for the Galway city ring road, not least the provisions in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act. I hope that campaigners in Galway will challenge the decision. My Green Party colleague, Senator O'Reilly, is supporting campaigners in this regard. I hope we can very quickly reverse course and turn away from being European climate laggards to European climate leaders. We cannot afford to waste any more time.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I want the Government representatives who are going to Europe to highlight the emergency situation that our farmers are facing in respect of fertiliser. Fertiliser currently costs in excess of €900 per tonne. Most outlets are refusing to even quote prices for it. I know of one farmer whose costs went up by 54% this year. At a time when farm prices had begun to increase, they are now being fully eroded by the fuel and fertiliser cost. Russia is easily supplying the world with gas, which is used to make fertiliser. The crisis is all about global politics. Russia is currently supplying China with all the urea that it can produce. Equally, it will supply Europe, but the gas pipeline is not ready. This needs to be highlighted as a matter of priority. If the EU is considering imposing sanctions on Russia, I ask it to bear in mind that Ireland and its agricultural sector will suffer the most through such sanctions. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and the Marine told Teagasc to advise farmers to use different clover swards for grassland management. What he did not say was that clover will not grow without nitrogen and will only grow when the temperature is at least 14°C, which is probably from May onwards. That is too late. New grass will die out without fertiliser. Old grass grows at a temperature of 7°C, but is less responsive when it is not fed with fertiliser. The EU advised all European countries to reduce taxes. What did the Government do? It increased taxes using a percentage model, setting the fuel tax at 56.23%, which raised the fuel cost in this country. Now, it is taking €1 per litre in fuel tax from every person in Ireland. In 2020, it was taking 81 cent per litre. It raised the tax by 19 cent, giving it an annual turnover from the increased tax on fuel of €5.6 billion, when it is giving back €170 million in the ESB. The Government is taking €5.6 billion from the people of this country. It should be ashamed of itself.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the opportunity to comment briefly on the EU Council meeting. I note the European Council will discuss the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of the emergence of a new variant, and that participants will also exchange views on how best to tackle vaccine hesitancy and disinformation and the effectiveness of various measures and strategies adopted in this respect. What I would like to know, and what I need to ask, is the following question: when will we have a debate in the House on the fact the Department of Health employed a social media monitoring company to gather and report all online and Oireachtas commentary, some of which was only questions, relating to Covid-19 and the Government's approach to the handling of the crisis? This was at a cost of almost €100,000.

In October, it was revealed to me following a parliamentary question I tabled on this matter that the Department employed Kinzen Media in early 2021 to monitor the online dissemination of misinformation and disinformation relating to Covid-19 and the Covid vaccine. Were

it not for Gary Kavanagh at Gript media the public would not have been made aware of these issues. I pay tribute to Gript for focusing on stories that are of real public concern. Our role as parliamentarians is to ask questions and find better ways to do things. Many Deputies were quoted in these reports. They include many statements of genuine concern from Deputies and Senators. There were also statements from others, including doctors. They were gathered together in daily reports to the Department and the HSE. This was unknown to us and without our consent. By an amazing coincidence, an enormous volume of the so-called misinformation and disinformation related to comments critical of the Government and the policies it has adopted. There was no tendering process for the particular contract awarded. There has been absolutely zero accountability for the fact that a private company was employed by the State to monitor and report the legitimate concern of Oireachtas Members as if they were a threat to the State.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Next.

Deputy Carol Nolan: We are merely doing our jobs of Deputies and Senators in bringing forward the concerns of the public and medical professions to the floor of the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I would like answers because I believe this is a very serious matter.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I know but we are under pressure.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is very serious.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute. I welcome what was set out in the Taoiseach's statement but what was absent is notable. I echo what Deputy Howlin said. The time we are being given is not sufficient to discuss the range of topics covered in the nine-page statement. There are notable absences as it did not deal with Ethiopia or Tigray, although I understand the Minister of State will come back on this. This has been an ongoing conflict for more than a year with 1.7 million people displaced in Tigray alone and thousands outside in the Sudan. It is not mentioned. It was not worthy of a line except that it will be dealt with by the Minister of State at the end of the debate.

Another matter not dealt with is Palestine and I will come back to this. Another issue not looked at is the TRIPS waiver, which has been mentioned by everyone. The statement by the unelected President of the European Commission that mandatory vaccination is on the way and must be considered was also not mentioned. I hope that when the Taoiseach goes to Brussels he will repeat that he is not in favour of mandatory vaccinations, as he said a few days ago. I make my comments as always in the knowledge that 5,788 people have died in this country. Today there are 4,688 cases with 108 people in ICU and 492 in hospital. I make these comments because I believe we are facing a serious public health crisis. We have been doing so since we recognised Covid in March, although it was here prior to this. Vaccination is just one part of the overall response. I have made this clear every time I have spoken.

As far back as a year ago, South Africa and India called for a TRIPS waiver. We are very interested in pushing vaccination whereby we get booster and further boosters while ignoring the rest of the world. I understand fewer than 7% of people in low-income countries have had a vaccine. We can pick many figures to illustrate our arguments. The Minister of State will have to accept we have utterly let down the countries outside of rich Ireland and rich Europe while we keep pushing that we need more and more boosters for the richer countries with the deeper

pockets. It is totally unacceptable. Many organisations, including Amnesty, have asked us to introduce a waiver for a while. It would mean a few pharmaceutical companies could not hold a monopoly on production and cost. It would lead to more production.

I have little time to get this out. With regard to vaccination we have utterly ignored the Meenan report, which was done not in the context of Covid but on the necessity to have some type of redress or compensation scheme for injuries from vaccination. We never considered it. There has been no discussion whatsoever on what point we will drop the Covid pass, which is utterly discriminatory. There is no evidence to show it has worked. It is inculcating a hatred rather than bringing everyone on board in a public health crisis.

In the time I have left I want to discuss Palestine. There has been no mention of what the Israeli Government is doing with regard to the occupied territories. I am tired of standing up and asking the Government, as my colleagues have done, to deal with the Israeli Government, among many other things, designating as terrorist organisations six human rights organisations, two of which we fund. This has gone a step further. If the organisations want to appeal the designation, they have to stop functioning. This was by military order. Between January and December this year, 86 Palestinian children were killed in the occupied Palestinian territories. As a mother, female and Deputy, I find this totally unacceptable. I find the designation of six organisations unacceptable. I find it unacceptable that we continue to express concern but we do nothing else with regard to Israel. However, we highlight the Ukraine and China, and rightly so, but what we do is extremely selective.

The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said Brussels had not received convincing evidence from Israel about the terrorism designations and that it was looking for more information. Two months later, there is no sign of more information. We have asked our Minister for Foreign Affairs whether the EU has evidence but we have not received an answer. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said the designation as terrorist organisations is an attack on human rights defenders. We speak about human rights. The Taoiseach's statement mentioned human rights. However, we make a mockery of language. HE stated, "The analysis underpinning the work to date on the strategic compass is that the global security situation at present is marked by growing strategic competition and complex security threats." This is an absolute insult to the English language. More importantly and significantly, it is an insult to the democratic process.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate. The agenda for this week's meeting of the European Council is being discussed by EU affairs Ministers at the General Affairs Council meeting today at which the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, is representing Ireland. The Taoiseach has outlined his expectations for the Eastern Partnership summit as well as the European Council's discussion on Covid-19, security and defence, external aspects of migration and external relations items on Belarus and Ukraine. He has also outlined his expectations for the Euro Summit.

I will turn to the issues of energy prices, crisis management and resilience and external relations items on the EU African Union summit and Ethiopia. The issue of energy prices is of significant concern for citizens throughout the EU. This week's discussion follows the EU leaders' discussion in October and that of EU energy Ministers earlier this month. In recent weeks, work has been undertaken to study the functioning of the gas and electricity markets as well as the EU emissions trading systems market with the help of the European Securi-

ties and Markets Authority. The Commission also undertook to assess whether certain trading behaviours require regulatory action. Many member states, including Ireland, have used the Commission's toolbox of measures to help address the impact of current price increases on consumers and small businesses.

6 o'clock

Here in Ireland, our focus has been on investment in energy efficiency and in renewables supported by competitive markets and enhancing electricity interconnection for the long term. With the support of the Commission's toolbox, Ireland allocates significant funding to targeted welfare support measures for energy costs and has added to them in budget 2022, such as the increase in the fuel allowance, the expansion of the eligibility for the fuel allowance and the announcement today on the €100 payment. While certainly not a panacea, the measures provided for under the toolbox should help assist Irish and, more broadly speaking, European citizens in dealing with the sharp increases in prices they have faced. Official representatives from the road hauliers group met with the Department of Transport last Friday to look at how the fuel rebate scheme could be modified to assist the haulage industry at this time.

In the medium to longer term, we need to take steps to avoid such pressures arising again in the future. This means building greater resilience into our energy systems and decarbonisation. Moving towards sustainable sources of energy will make a significant contribution towards that goal. It also means ensuring markets remain competitive with enhanced energy interconnection, as we are doing with the Celtic interconnector that will link Ireland and France.

This week's meeting of the European Council will assess the situation and review ongoing work on this issue. On foot of this discussion in June, the European Council will take stock of work to enhance our collective preparedness, responsibility, capacity and resilience to future crises. I expect the leaders will endorse the conclusions agreed at the General Affairs Council on 23 November and invite the council to take this work forward and to keep this important topic under review. Ireland supports these conclusions and sees co-ordinated EU-level crisis response as crucial to protecting and safeguarding the Single Market.

Building resilience against future crises means working now to strengthen the Single Market, especially in removing unnecessary barriers to trade in services where there is so much untapped potential. We see this as vital for continued recovery and growth.

The next challenge we face may be very different but we have learned we are best equipped when we act collectively. This is particularly evident in the case of vaccines. The integrated political crisis response arrangements developed in 2013 have proven to be a flexible and useful instrument for addressing immediate challenges in times of crisis and have been particularly useful during the Covid-19 period. It is welcome in this context that the HERA, the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, has been established with a budget of €6 billion for the coming years.

I note the issue of the vaccine rate in the developing world has been raised by many speakers in the debate, and it is something that urgently needs to be addressed. It is true there is a difference of approach in how best to accelerate the roll-out of vaccines to the developing world. As many have said in the debate and which we all can agree on, no one is safe until everyone is safe. We have a moral responsibility to ensure an effective roll-out to the developing world. We not only have a moral responsibility but it also makes sound economic sense.

While trade is a competence for the EU, I advocated a number of months ago for the need for us to have that debate on the waiver. In having that debate, we need to be truthful and honest on the impact a waiver would have on future research and innovation and whether there is sufficient capacity across the developed world if a waiver was to be implemented. We also need to acknowledge the role the EU has played to date, because to listen to some contributors today, you would swear it has done nothing. It is the largest exporter of vaccines across the world, and some who have been advocating for a waiver over recent months have pulled up trade barriers and currently are not exporting any vaccines to the developing world. We have already seen 166 million doses going from the EU to low and middle-income countries with a commitment to increase that to 500 million doses by mid-2022. Much more needs to be done and Ireland has a responsibility to convey that message to the EU, which I firmly believe.

Under the external relations agenda item, the European Council next week will discuss the preparations for the European Union-African Union summit on 17 and 18 February 2022. The summit will be an important milestone in the EU's relationship with Africa after two challenging years. The considerable preparatory work for the summit is a clear recognition our futures and future well-being are deeply intertwined. Ireland will wish to deliver a clear message of solidarity with Africa and, at the summit in February, an honest and ambitious assessment will be made by the EU and the African Union of what we can do better. It will be in the EU and the African Union's shared interest to put in place a more ambitious and effective partnership. We will need to acknowledge the particular impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Africa, not just on public health but also in socio-economic terms and the very important role African Union countries have played in managing the pandemic. Ireland looks forward to adopting joint, ambitious and concrete initiatives at the summit. Ireland will be strongly supportive of initiatives that support recovery from Covid-19, boost jobs and sustainable economic growth and trade, progress our shared priorities on climate action and enable the EU and the African Union to work together more effectively on the global stage.

At this week's European Council, EU leaders will also consider the implications of the crisis in Ethiopia. The situation on the ground is of great concern and requires both continued political engagement to secure a ceasefire and an urgent response to the acute humanitarian crisis in northern Ethiopia. Of course, as Members will be aware, Ireland was deeply disappointed by the Government of Ethiopia's decision, communicated on 22 November, to restrict the size of our embassy in Addis Ababa as a result of the positions that Ireland has taken on Ethiopia at the United Nations Security Council. These positions have been firmly based on the EU's Common Position with regard to humanitarian access, the need for a ceasefire and dialogue, accountability for violations of human rights, and a peaceful resolution of that crisis.

I thank Members again for their active participation in the debate, and the Taoiseach will report to the House in the new year following the European Council meeting.

Appropriation Bill 2021: Second Stage

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce the Appropriation Bill 2021 to the House. This Bill is essential financial legislation that must be concluded in the current year. The Appropriation Bill has two primary purposes. First, it provides legal authorisation for all of the

expenditure that has occurred in 2021 on the basis of the Estimates voted on by the Dáil over the course of the year. These allocations, known as the amounts to be appropriated for the supply of services, are set out in section 1 and Schedule 1. These relate to the Revised Estimates, further Revised Estimates and Supplementary Estimates agreed by the Dáil. In aggregate, these Estimates amount to €73.1 billion. The comparable amount in the Appropriation Act of 2020 was €69.7 billion. The amount to be appropriated this year, therefore, represents an increase of close to €3.4 billion or just under 5% of last year's net voted expenditure. This represents not only the substantial level of support provided to households and businesses in respect of Covid-19 but also the commitment to provide for the necessary infrastructure to support our continuing social and economic progress and significant investment in the delivery of our essential day-to-day public services on which, of course, so many rely.

In aggregate, taking into account expenditure on the Social Insurance Fund and the National Training Fund, total gross voted expenditure made available this year was €88.9 billion. This included substantial provision for the continuation of Covid-related supports, with almost €13.5 billion made available in 2021 for measures to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. This provision of additional exceptional funding has been critical in supporting citizens and businesses impacted by the pandemic and providing the necessary funding to allow our key public services to respond effectively to the crisis. For example, it has allowed for key income and employment support schemes such as the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, to be extended this year. In addition, grants and other supports for businesses and impacted sectors have been provided along with funding for key public services, including healthcare, education and public transport.

The second key purpose of the Bill is to provide a legal basis for spending to continue into next year in the period before the Dáil votes on the 2022 Estimates. As set out in the Central Fund (Permanent Provisions) Act 1965, the authority for spending in 2022 prior to the agreement of the 2022 Estimates by the Dáil is based on the amounts included in the Appropriation Bill 2021. It is for this reason it is so important the Bill is enacted before the end of 2021. If it were not, there would be no authority to spend any voted moneys from the start of January 2022 until the approval of the 2022 Estimates.

In October, I, along with Government colleagues, launched the revised national development plan, NDP, which set out capital allocations for the next decade as part of an overall €165 billion investment package. In recent years, capital investment has increased dramatically. We are now investing significantly more than the European average. The NDP provides a clear signal to industry of the State's investment profile for the next ten years. This will, in turn, encourage investment and job creation from the construction industry in particular. It is estimated the investment in the NDP will create more than 80,000 direct and indirect jobs in the construction industry alone. It is also estimated that just over €100 billion in direct spending in construction generates a further €60 billion in indirect output throughout the supply chain. When the wider economy outside the construction industry is taken into account, the economic benefits of sustained capital investment by the State are crystal clear and this investment is producing results. It is expected that 20 major projects will be finished this year alone, including the recently opened upgrade of the N4 to Sligo and the north runway project at Dublin Airport. In recent weeks, we saw the completion of the runway reconstruction at Cork Airport. Looking at the education sector alone, an average of 150 to 200 school building projects will be delivered every single year in the period from 2021 to 2025.

I acknowledge there have been challenges relating to spending public money when it has

been allocated in the context of capital investment. In recognition of the difficulty faced by Departments in planning for major capital projects, the rolling multi-annual capital envelopes introduced in 2004 allow for carryover of up to 10% of unspent voted capital expenditure from the current year into the following year. This provides a degree of flexibility in terms of capital expenditure planning.

The Bill sets out the capital amounts that are to be carried over to 2022 on a Vote basis. In aggregate, capital carryover from 2021 to next year amounts to €820.1 million, or approximately 7.8% of the overall Exchequer capital programme in 2021. This level of capital carryover into 2022 is broadly in line with the level that was expected at the time of the budget in October. As evident from the monthly expenditure figures throughout 2021, the spending plans were impacted by project interruptions due to the pandemic, largely due to the impact of construction closures on public health grounds in the earlier part of the year.

With just over €820 million in carryover to fund capital investments next year, this will bring the overall amount available to Departments for gross voted capital spending in 2022 to a record €12 billion. This represents a substantial investment as we look both to address the continued challenges posed by Covid-19 and Brexit next year and to support economic, social, environmental and cultural development across all parts of the country under the revised national development plan.

As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I would like to see capital allocations spent in the year they are allocated. Notwithstanding the challenges from Covid in the past two years, there are things we can do to improve capacity in both the public and private sectors so that the ambitious pipeline of projects can be delivered in the next ten years on time and on budget.

As I have previously announced, I will be bringing additional external expertise to the Project Ireland 2040 delivery board which will assist the State in implementing both Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. The report of the supporting excellence action team, published in October alongside the revised NDP, examined the capability of the public service to deliver a large-scale capital programme and sets out a number of significant recommendations to support the agenda of improved delivery capability. The range of measures outlined include the development of the commercial skills academy of the Office of Government Procurement to enhance procurement and introduce further legal and planning reforms.

Enhancing the capacity of the private sector is also required to ensure projects are delivered on time and on budget. Increasing the levels of innovation in the construction sector through digital ambition supports will ultimately see public projects delivered to a higher standard using digital efficiencies. Capacity, innovation and digital adoption within the construction sector is increasing through the Government's collaborative approach and continued regular engagement with industry representatives through the construction sector group. In early November, I announced that a consortium led by TU Dublin was the winner of a €2.5 million grant to deliver the build digital project. This project is one of seven priority action points arising from the building innovation report, which drew upon an extensive consultation and international benchmarking process and an economic analysis of the causes of productivity trends in the construction sector. This build digital funding will assist in the effective delivery of projects and, ultimately, in meeting our Project Ireland 2040 and national development plan ambitions.

Schedule 2 sets out the proposed capital carryover amounts. The Revised Estimates Volume for 2022, to be published this week, includes for each Vote availing of the capital carryover

facility a table listing by subhead the amounts to be deferred. As in previous years, the Bill provides for a repayable advance from the Central Fund to the Paymaster General's supply account to meet certain 2022 Exchequer liabilities due for payment in the first week of January. The need for this provision arises because, with the banking system closed on Monday, 3 January, funding will need to be in place in departmental bank accounts before the end of this year to meet those liabilities on a timely basis. There is also a need to pre-fund An Post to meet certain payments due between 1 and 5 January 2022 so that payments can be transferred from the Department of Social Protection to the network of post offices throughout the country. Section 3 provides for up to €292 million to be advanced from the Central Fund to meet these requirements, with this advance then being repaid to the Central Fund in January 2022.

The annual Appropriation Bill is an essential element of housekeeping undertaken by the Dáil each year. The passage of this Bill will authorise in law all of the expenditure that has taken place in 2021 on the basis of the Estimates voted on by the Dáil in the course of the year. Importantly, it will also ensure voted expenditure can continue into 2022 in the period before the Dáil approves the 2022 Estimates. This means keeping our public services, such as schools and hospitals, operating, as well as continuing payments funded from voted expenditure in 2021, such as the employment wage subsidy scheme and other social assistance scheme payments.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: As has been observed many times, we have a series of housekeeping Bills that must go through the Oireachtas and this is one of them. The Appropriation Bill has two primary purposes, the first of which is to give the legal authorisation for the expenditure that occurred in 2021 on the basis of Estimates voted by the Dáil over the course of the year, and the second of which is to provide the legal basis for spending to continue into next year in the period before the Dáil votes on the Estimates. The sums granted by the Central Fund (Permanent Provisions) Act 1965 enable the Central Fund to make good supply granted, and the aggregate sum the Minister mentioned was €73 billion. We are all aware there is a constitutional requirement for this Bill as it legislates for the financial resolution that includes all the Estimates agreed by the Dáil this year, and this explains why it has come so late in the year. In many ways this is a box that absolutely needs to be ticked to ensure much of the show continues to be on the road.

The key to the Appropriation Bill is the four fifths rule spoken of by the Minister as it means Departments can spend money come January 2022. If the Bill is not enacted, the Departments could not spend and, in its simplest form, the four fifths rule means Departments can spend up to four fifths of the previous year's voted expenditure before a vote is required to take place to authorise extra money. The Bill also allows for that capital carry-over as per the Finance Act whereby each Department can carry over that 10% capital allocation to the next year. I note this year the deferred surrender relating to capital supply services is totalling €820 million, the spending of which will be key to our recovery and tackling the big issues to come.

Such matters are still very much to come. Despite us thinking we may be progressing through Covid-19, we are certainly not at the end of it. Nobody has a total figure for what this country will be required to carry for the foreseeable future. The carry-over from 2020 to 2021 was €748 million, attributed by the Minister to the delay in capital projects throughout 2020 as a result of the pandemic. Delays and interruptions to capital projects as a consequence of the country dealing with Covid-19 were responsible for a significant increase in capital carry-over

compared with the previous year. Will the Minister clarify the level of anticipated capital carry-over into 2023 should the Covid-19 pandemic worsen or if there is a requirement to increase restrictions? We certainly acknowledge there is a valid reason for a period of catching up on capital projects, but this cannot continue indefinitely.

I take this opportunity to speak to some of those capital projects and the funding models currently in place. I will use a specific example. Currently, there are two proposed palliative care units in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 8, one in the Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore and the other in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. The former, despite being mooted for many years and a hospice room being provided in the hospital in Tullamore since the early 1990s, is still at the very initial stages of development. It is also caught at a level of legal quagmire to boot.

In March this year, through a reply to a parliamentary question, I learned the HSE agreed to provide funding from the capital budget to enable architectural plans to be drafted to support the development. The information was updated in April, noting that the Offaly Hospice Foundation had commissioned drawings to inform the development and, together with the Hooves 4 Hospice and the Tullamore Lions Club, hoped to raise €1.5 million for the build. Essentially, to date, the HSE has incurred little to no costs relating to that proposed 16-bed to 20-bed hospice. Its commitment to providing funds for the architectural plans was negated by the submission of drawings paid for by the Offaly Hospice Foundation.

At the other end of CHO 8 in County Louth, plans appear to be significantly further ahead by virtue of the presence of a philanthropic donor who has retained project managers and architects for the development of a hospice on site and adjacent to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. This was donated by a religious order. All of the costs associated with this are again expected to be borne by philanthropic donations, and the unit will be built by the charity and signed over to the HSE on a 9,999-year lease. As in the midlands, the HSE has again incurred little to no cost to date relating to the proposed 30-bed to 36-bed hospice in that location.

These may be classed as capital projects but they are not funded through that process. Every cent spent on the examples I have been given has been donated to a State service that gives dignity at the end of life. Nobody underestimates the importance and vital role hospices play at the end of a person's life and the impact dignity in death has on the grieving loved ones left after the person passes away.

While this is ongoing, in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath the voluntary South Westmeath Hospice committee has had to resort to legal action as a result of the disdain with which it was treated by the HSE. I remind Members that, without making generalisations or assumptions, usually when community members come together for a cause such as a local hospice service, it is because a need for such a service has been brought to their attention or they have experienced that lack of service personally or through family or a circle of friends.

A voluntary committee usually grows from an identified need or gap in the community and it takes it on itself to do its best to fill it. What the voluntary committee of South Westmeath Hospice managed to achieve just as the recession began to really sink its teeth into the country is extraordinary and it should be commended. In August 2010, its fundraising efforts in support of the people of south Westmeath and beyond led to a four-bed inpatient palliative care unit being opened on the grounds of what used to be St. Vincent's hospital and is now St. Vincent's care centre in Athlone. It is a two-storey unit of 8,500 sq. ft. Of the €1.9 million required for

its construction, the vast majority - a staggering €1.45 million - was financed again not through capital expenditure but through fundraising campaigns and voluntary donations.

Nobody can dispute that the people of south Westmeath own the blood, mortar, sweat and tears of almost every inch of that building. However, that is being dismissed by the “take it or leave it” attitude from the HSE, again when it has access to the capital funding. Instead, the committee is being told there will be a commemorative plaque but there will be no transferring or mirroring in a new premises. Where is the capital funding in this regard? What has been offered by the HSE is an insult to the committee and every single person - man, woman and child - who bought tickets, baked cakes, engaged in various fundraising activities, and worked so hard to provide that vital specialist service in the area.

More important, the impact of moves like those of the HSE in this case will have a knock-on effect when other projects are in need of community contributions. This is just one example and I can confidently say there is not a community throughout this country that at some point has not dug deep into their after-tax pay to contribute to a fund for some essential building or service. We might speak of capital funding here but we do it against the backdrop of a reality where communities with deeper pockets are better placed to see realised projects like a modern and fit-for-purpose hospice, an MRI machine, a school or a domestic violence refuge.

As I have said, this Bill is akin to housekeeping and we support it. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for her discretion in allowing me to speak this evening.

Deputy Martin Kenny: As has been said, we all understand this is a housekeeping Bill and it is required for Exchequer funds to be spent by Departments on various capital projects. I, in common with most Deputies, am concerned about capital funding across our constituencies and particularly Sligo, Leitrim, north Roscommon and south Donegal. We have issues with various capital projects we hoped to see progressed but very little has been happening.

One that immediately comes to mind is the Garda station in Sligo town. The Minister knows it is a headquarters for the area and yet it is a building that has been expanded or added to. One might go up a stairs to go across the building before going down and up some other stairs. It is like something from a Lego set. However, we were told by the Minister, as recently as last July, that there is no plan to build a new Garda station in Sligo. That is not just regrettable but simply unacceptable for the gardaí who have to work in that very dilapidated and poorly laid out building. It is also unacceptable for the people in the region. I hope this matter will be revisited because we can see the current state of the Garda station in Sligo in which people are expected to work. It should be acknowledged and the building should be replaced by a proper building accessible to everybody, especially people with disabilities. Currently, they have no access to the building.

There are projects throughout the country that we need to see put in place. They would create the opportunity for the Government to put money back into communities. It is not just about the possibilities from the work but about building confidence in particular in the regions if people see the Government is prepared to spend money to provide for them. That is greatly lacking in many areas. One of the big issues in my region relates to Sligo University Hospital and the issues there. It has been almost 25 years since we were promised a full-time cath lab would be established at Sligo hospital and still it is not in place. The cardiologist at the hospital is about to retire and he is telling everybody there will be nobody to replace him as a senior cardiologist at the hospital if it does not have a proper cath lab. It is a matter of joining the dots.

If the facilities are not in place, hospitals will not get the staff in place. There needs to be an acknowledgement of that within the Government and we need to ensure we put the facilities in place for people, particularly facilities relating to health, housing and education, which are key capital projects we need to deliver for people throughout the country.

Yesterday, 46 people were on trolleys in Sligo hospital because there were no beds for them on the wards. That is the case not just in Sligo hospital but throughout the Saolta University Healthcare Group in the west and the midlands, where there are significant problems. People end up on trolleys in hospital and cannot go anywhere else because the capacity simply is not there in our hospital system. That is not Covid related; this was an issue long before Covid. It is because of underinvestment in the past, which needs to change.

They are just two examples I wanted to raise in regard to capital funding having failed to deliver for people throughout my region, but there are many others. The main one that springs to mind for most people relates to housing and how, particularly in the case of social and affordable housing, in every constituency not enough houses are being built or delivered, despite continuous promises from the Government. While we understand the Bill is a housekeeping Bill and so on, the debate is an opportunity for us to raise this issue with the Government. It needs to put the money in place to ensure we deliver for people throughout the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That was within the scope of the debate. The rules state that, on Second Stage, Deputies may refer not only to what is in the Bill but what could relevantly be put into it. I suppose the Deputy's contribution came under that stipulation.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Precisely, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus déanfaidh mé iarracht cloí leis an méid atá sa Bhille agus tá an ceart ag na Teachtaí a tháinig romham. I ndeireadh thiar thall níl i gceist anseo ach glanadh suas ag deireadh na bliana, ag déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil na cuntais in ord agus go bhfuil an t-airgead ar a raibh vóta caite ina leith caite agus go bhfuil cuntasáíocht cheart déanta faoi.

Ar an gceist sin táim chun díriú isteach ar an méid a bhí sa doiciméad a d'fhoilsigh an Rialtas anuraidh, Budget 2021: Expenditure Report 2021. Tagann sé seo amach gach uile bhliain ach gach uile bhliain ardaím an cheist chéanna mar tá píosaí ann, nach ann dóibh. Nuair a lorgáítear eolas, ní thagaim ar an eolas sin. Nuair a chuirim ceist sa Dáil bíonn sí curtha as eagar.

This is an old chestnut of mine. Since 2011, Vote 15 has fallen under the remit of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Deputy Michael McGrath is the Minister in charge. The Expenditure Report 2022 refers to the "Head under which this Vote will be accounted for by the Office of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform", yet I cannot get any answer at all. It is not a huge sum, at €2 million, but it still has to be accounted for, like every cent and euro the State spends. I do not know whether the full sum was spent this year but I do know an Supplementary Estimate was not applied for, so we can assume it was not spent and that we might find out at some stage whether there is anything left over from that €2 million.

Vote 15, for those who are not aware, is the Vote for the secret service, which, I am told every year does not exist, yet there is no hint of that in this document. In chapter 16, the Minister's Department explains all its other Votes. Votes 11 to 14, inclusive, 17, 18, 39 and 43 are all described and there are little graphs and so on to help us make head or tail of them and to account for the spending. For Vote 15, however, that explanation disappears.

If we dig a little further and go to page 189 in the document, all of a sudden it appears: Vote 15 - Secret Service amounts to €2 million, under the title “Summary of Supply Services”. That is for capital and current expenditure. Two pages later, the summary of voted capital is stated as zero; it does not exist. On the next page, it states that expenditure on pay and pensions does not exist. In that case, what the hell is the service and who supplies it? It is not for pay or pensions and we know it is not for capital expenditure. We know it is not supplied by An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, Revenue, the Department of Social Protection, or even the OPW or the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, OGCIO, which most people might not be aware of. It might be appropriate under that heading but we do not know because we know nothing about it. Each of those bodies has its own budget line and Vote, so we know it has nothing to do with them.

Maybe, like many other public services, it is contracted out. Perhaps we have subcontractors out there and perhaps bogus self-employment exists in this case. Maybe, God forbid, it is a foreign company or foreign agency, with a foreign secret service carrying out a function about which the only gem of information I have, other than the magical number I mentioned and the fact it comes under the Minister’s Department, is information I got in 2009 from the then Government Chief Whip who stated the purpose of the secret service Vote was “to obtain information which is necessary for the security for the country”.

The Minister, therefore, is the M of the Irish secret service. I do not think he is the C - C the head of MI6 in the UK, who is Richard Moore, not Roger Moore - or at least I hope he is not. Maybe he is; it is all secret. I do not see why we cannot be honest and say what it is. I have not been able to have that confirmed by any Minister since 2009. All the questions I table are ruled out of order because the Minister has no responsibility to the Dáil on the matter, yet his own document, the expenditure report, states he is accountable to the Dáil on this matter. When we ask a question, all we get is a response stating the figure was €2 million last year. In fact, when I received that information, in 2009, the figure was €200,000. There has been a tenfold increase, therefore, since 2009. What the hell is this secret service for and what information are we paying for? What hush-hush, top-secret information have we got?

The Minister should end this merry dance we have every year and stick it into the Vote for the Departments of Justice, Foreign Affairs or Defence, or An Garda Síochána. I do not really care, but it should fit somewhere in order that some Minister can stand up and say he or she can genuinely account for the money having been properly spent on information that was useful, if that is what it is for, or on informants, data or whatever. If it is for data, it obviously did not work this year, given the cyberattack on the country. We did not have that information, although I hope this was one of the ways we got the information to rescue our computers.

This is the end of the year and we are supposed to account for money having been properly spent. It relates to last year’s budget and this year’s funding. It will be the same again next year unless this Vote is shifted. It was not always under the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Deputy Ged Nash: Deputy Ó Snodaigh has been asking these legitimate questions for a number of years and always attracts a bit of media attention when he poses them, although they have been posed in this House for much longer than Deputy Ó Snodaigh has been here. The Minister will recall that when we were debating the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (Amendment) Bill last week, I told him I used to work in these Houses for then Labour Party spokesperson on finance, Derek McDowell, in 1998 and 1999. He was asking those questions

at that time. As the Minister remembers, back in 1998 and 1999, there certainly was a good reason for having a strong secret service to protect the security of the State. Members opposite will be familiar with that reason. We can call the Minister “M” now, apparently, which is a new one on me. I am grateful for Deputy Ó Snodaigh’s contribution in that regard.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate on this important Bill. Its passage is constitutionally required to enable the State to expend the resources allocated to the Executive by the Dáil. This is a very onerous responsibility that is placed on us all but, surprisingly, it attracts little attention outside the House. There is a constitutional obligation on us to pass the legislation but, sadly, there is not a queue of speakers lining up outside the Chamber. If Deputies had known they could mention various projects in their constituencies, the debate might have seemed a different prospect. I was going to say I do not expect to use the entire 20 minutes allocated to me but, given the lack of speakers, which seems to have been a trend over the past three years, I might use most of the time. We will see how we proceed.

The Labour Party will support the Bill on the basis that it provides the resources and moneys that are required to run the public services on which we all depend. It is usually a fairly straightforward matter of business in the House. I note that the appropriation of sums voted for supply of services under section 1 of the Bill amounts to just over €73 billion, compared with a net amount voted by the Dáil last year of €69.7 billion. Gross expenditure this year will, of course, be well ahead of that €73 billion, coming in at just under €89 billion. Some of those moneys relate to the exceptional demands on services and the exceptional expenditures the House was asked to resource the Government to allocate arising from the impact of the pandemic. However, significant amounts are now in the base, especially in regard to the health services. These moneys are needed to fund better health services into the future. It took a pandemic for the scales to be knocked away from some people’s eyes and the extent to which many of our public services were in trouble to be revealed for all to see.

Before the Covid crisis, we had the lowest levels of general government expenditure in the EU. We are playing catch-up with our peers in terms of investment in housing, health, education, skills development and so on. We need to ramp that expenditure up and, crucially, it needs to be targeted and managed properly. I am grateful to Deputy Clarke for mentioning the hospice projects, which she was right to do. There are two separate but related projects in terms of hospice-related interventions, one in Tullamore and the other in my home town of Drogheda. The latter is proceeding slowly and has received resources, which were announced last Friday by the Department of Health. I know that when the time is right, the local hospice organisations will be very much involved in the delivery and planning of those services. I work with those organisations all the time to support their important work.

An issue that certainly is relevant to this legislation is the latest set of Exchequer returns published last week, which show an underspend of €2.6 billion at this point in the year. Spending is 3.4% behind target, with €1.5 billion of the underspend, according to the figures, on the capital side, with the remainder relating to current spending. The worst offenders are the Department of Health, incorporating the HSE, and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It takes some explaining as to why the expected outturn for the Department of Health at this stage in the year is €896 million below what was expected. Will the Minister explain why this is the case? Earlier this year, the HSE planned to recruit an additional 14,000 staff but the latest figures I have had sight of suggest the headcount has increased by only some 7,000. Members of the Government have said, rightly so, that they want to see the deployment of more vaccinators across the country to support the Covid-19 booster vaccination programme.

That campaign has been sluggish, including in my area, and people, unfortunately, are paying the price for that. It needs to be upgraded and expedited. I am told by HSE personnel in my region and nationally that one of the reasons we do not have a Covid-19 vaccination centre or testing facility in Drogheda, which is the largest town in the country, is that there are difficulties in finding nurses and pharmacists to administer the vaccines and operate the centres. That needs attention. The HSE is way behind its expected expenditure in the middle of a pandemic and there are clearly issues with recruiting and retaining staff. Does that explain the significant underspend at this point in the year by the executive and the Department of Health?

On the capital side, the recent figures show an underspend of €415 million by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. That is extremely frustrating, not just for me as a public representative dealing with people who are on housing lists, want to buy their own home or are at risk of homelessness but, more importantly, it is even more frustrating for those who are waiting to be allocated public housing, waiting for an affordable house or waiting and saving responsibly for a deposit on a home that is beyond their reach. Will the Minister confirm what he expects the underspend in the Department to be for 2021 and how many public and affordable homes it expects to be built by year's end?

There is a real divergence between the latest figures and those predicted by what I call the crystal ball gazers in the Department of Finance. Once again, they got their forecasts incredibly wrong. I acknowledge that forecasting the performance of the economy in the context of the disruptive effect of Covid-19 has been particularly difficult, but they were €5.4 billion wide of the mark. It is a good problem to have. I am long enough in these Houses to remember a period when that was the type of problem a Minister for Finance and a government would like to have. I am not claiming it is not a good problem to have. Corporation tax is running well ahead of forecasts, VAT receipts are €1 billion ahead and income tax receipts are €1 billion more than forecast. These are signs of an economy that is working really well. They show that the performance is improving and there are more people back at work. Nevertheless, how could the Department of Finance get it so badly wrong? It is a job for the finance committee and the budgetary oversight committee, of which I am a member, to interrogate this issue in order to understand better the kind of modelling the Department is using. If it continues to get it so badly wrong, it will affect the ability of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, his officials and his colleagues in the Department of Finance to manage the public finances properly and in an informed fashion. It will make it incredibly difficult to plan on a multi-annual basis. I hope the Minister will acknowledge that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: First, I wish the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the staff and everyone in Leinster House a happy and safe Christmas and new year. I may not have another opportunity to say that before the recess. I also want to convey my warm appreciation of all those working in the addiction sector over the past 12 months, many of whom will be working over the Christmas period trying to protect vulnerable people. The work they do every day, and have done throughout the Covid crisis, has saved countless lives. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I thank them for their efforts. However, for the 14th budget in a row, local and community groups, particularly task forces, have felt completely unheard. Their calls for additional funding and resources have fallen on deaf ears once again. Two months after the budget we are still none the wiser on how the community budget allocations will even be distributed. The drug and alcohol task forces need to be fully consulted. It is even more disappointing that we still do not have the details of some of the measures that were announced in the budget. Family support networks are still waiting on details of funding that was promised to them. In recent weeks with the publication

of the national drugs strategy mid-term review, we have seen a worrying move by the Department to weaken the voice of the community and voluntary sector at a national level.

I want to send a clear message to the Minister present, as well as to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and the Minister for Health that Sinn Féin will stand on the side of the community and voluntary addiction sector. We will not stand by and allow their powers to be stripped. Task forces and advocacy groups are the experts on the ground and policy needs to come from the people on the ground. A Sinn Féin government, as we proposed in budget 2020, would re-source the community and addiction sector to give them back their autonomy. We would ensure that task forces could identify localised issues and tackle them before they got out of control and went into crisis.

We would work with the family support groups and give them back their national voice. We would recognise that those working on the ground are the experts. A Sinn Féin government would listen to experts on the ground. The budget failed to provide enough resources and funding for local and voluntary groups and for the task forces. It was a missed opportunity. I plead that these groups be recognised for the valuable work they have done and be resourced properly.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Social Democrats are not opposing this Bill which is the annual housekeeping Bill. This year and last year were very exceptional years, obviously. Because it was so exceptional, it is very hard to do any comparisons or to talk about controls to any great extent. Nonetheless, some of the figures warrant some commentary.

There are some stand-out areas, particularly health and social protection. Obviously, last year the country found itself in an extreme emergency and decisions needed to be taken very quickly. In the main, the decisions that were taken in the early months of the pandemic were correct. Substantial spending was needed in the health area. The Government needed to step in regarding creating a single-tier health service. It needed to step in to provide income support for many people who lost their jobs and to provide support for businesses. That was all the right thing to do and we had no choice at the time. However, it happened at some cost to the public purse. In the health area, for example, we had the issue with very expensive ventilators that were never used and nobody knows exactly where they are. There was also an issue about a large quantity of personal protective equipment, PPE, which was delivered but found to be substandard and could not be used.

The Comptroller and Auditor General produced a report on the ventilators. Is the Minister proposing any kind of formal look-back into decisions on some of that enormous spending? It was done to a certain extent in the UK. Some of the findings relating to people who got business out of it were very damaging to the government there. There was considerable internal lobbying and insider dealing, as it were, relating to some of those contracts. Hopefully, at some point in the new year things will settle down. It would be good practice to do a look-back and see what lessons can be learned from those decisions. It is not all about laying blame for mistakes that were made; we need to understand the exceptional circumstances at the time. We need to learn lessons from that to ensure proper procedures are followed and good controls are in place. I ask the Minister to consider that.

In looking at some of the figures in Schedule 1, other points that come to mind are, for example, the Courts Service where appropriations-in-aid amount to in excess of 25% of the figure for the supply grants. Why is that the case? Was there a major problem with the original Estimates? Why is that figure so high? The same comment would apply to the Probation

Service where the appropriations-in-aid amount to in excess of 20%. Do these figures indicate particular problems in the Department of Justice? Is there an underestimation of the spending required? Why did that Department have substantial additional spending?

There is not a substantial additional spend in the Office of Government Procurement, which should ring some alarm bells. I drew attention to this in my comments on last year's Appropriation Bill. We all share a concern about weaknesses in our procurement system. That principally relates to the lack of strong expertise in that office even though a special office was set up for Government procurement. Where there have been particularly egregious overspends, there is a certain shrugging of shoulders with people saying that is the way it is and maybe we were not careful enough. The amounts of money involved in a weak procurement system have enormous repercussions for the public purse.

The stand-out ones are obviously the children's hospital and the broadband plan, for example. When it comes to public procurement, why can we not learn the lessons from the private sector, particularly in the case of the children's hospital? It has been known that the right way to do procurement is to have a very clear overall specification in the beginning before going to tender and to have all the detail nailed down. If the tender document is vague, inevitably there will be substantial changes as the project goes on and each change costs very dearly. We have not got that right in many areas of Government procurement.

It is often said that we have done better with public private partnerships, PPPs. While ostensibly we may have, the initial test of an estimate for the cost of a major public project is to benchmark against how it would be costed in a private sector model. When a PPP project gets the go-ahead, very often we need to subsequently increase the allocation. For example, substantial additional subvention had to be made to a company operating a motorway because an error was made in calculating the level of traffic and therefore the receipts from tolls.

7 o'clock

There is huge room for improvement in public procurement. I would have liked to have seen that office beefed up a lot more. When things settle down, maybe the Minister will pay more attention to that area so that there are much tighter controls of spending on major capital projects.

The OPW is being allocated €13 million in appropriations-in-aid. Under that heading, I wish to raise the chestnut I have been pursuing for the past few years, which is the error the OPW made in the rent payable for the Miesian Plaza, the headquarters for the Departments of Health and of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The OPW admitted it made a mistake in measuring the floor area of that facility to the extent that there is an underpayment of rent to the tune of approximately €10 million over the course of the lease. I have been asking about this issue for the past couple of years and there does not seem to have been any progress on it. We are spending approximately €344,000 extra per annum. That is an awful lot of money and there is a need to progress this matter. I raise this issue every six months or so and I am told that the Department hopes to meet the landlord to discuss it and negotiate, but no progress has been made. While the Minister of State has answered for this in the past, there does not seem to have been much progress. Resolving that should be a priority, as should ensuring the public purse is not taken to the cleaners to the extent that it would be if something is not done about drawing back that additional €10 million.

Under the heading of deferred surrender relating to capital services, there are a few stand-out issues. Obviously, the impact of Covid on construction and so on must be borne on mind, but almost €58 million is to be deferred by the office of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications. In the context of addressing the issue of climate change and the need for substantial spending on the area of retrofitting, that is a significant deferral of capital. The Department of Transport is deferring €161 million when there is demand for additional capacity in the area of transport. While there may have been some reason for delays in major construction works, there is a need for substantial numbers of additional buses. I am concerned about the amount being handed back and deferred to the coming year's budget.

On the approach to spending, we need to learn lessons from what happened in recent years when the weaknesses in our public services were very much exposed, particularly last year but also this year. In health service, there was substantial undercapacity in a general sense with regard to beds, staff, and high-dependency and ICU beds. That resulted in the need for a substantial additional spend due to bringing in private hospitals. In the area of housing, there were issues with high rents and homelessness, and a substantial additional sum was spent on those kinds of emergency services. This again exposed the fact that our services were inadequate in the first place. The State had to step in in childcare. There were so many areas where the State had to step in, which was an indication that the State's role had not been adequate in the provision of key public services. Lessons must be learned from that. There must be an approach that is about investing in key, high-quality public services that impact people's lives.

It is disappointing to hear the Minister for Finance making promises of tax cuts in the coming years. This, coincidentally, followed on from poor poll results for the two main Government parties. People are not fooled by promises of tax cuts. Several polls have shown that people do not want to be bribed. They want high-quality public services they can depend on and a strong social contract whereby they pay taxes according to their means and, in return, they get decent good-quality universal public services. That is the formula by which successful societies and economies operate. We need to learn those lessons. The other point of doing this is that not only does it ensure better quality of life for people and access to public services that are free at the point of use, but it also means wage demands are dampened. Due to housing being in crisis for many years, the cost of housing, be it buying or renting, is a major driver in wage demands as is, to a lesser extent, the cost of access to health services. Many people feel they have to fork out for expensive private health insurance. There are significant out-of-pocket expenses for seeing a GP or a consultant and diagnostic tests irrespective of whether they have insurance. This is a big contributor to a high-cost of living and fuels wage demands, as is the high cost of childcare, though I recognise the start and progress made in next year's budget. However, they are all the lessons we should learn from.

Going forward, spending should be guided by the principle of spending to save. In housing, there are many areas where that principle should be followed. The Government should spend money on social housing to save itself from the crazy expensive long-term leases that it enters into and to save itself from the high cost of the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme. The long-term leases are absolutely the worst such as the 25-year leases whereby the State pays the equivalent of a high mortgage for an apartment and after 25 years it has to refurbish it and hand it back. That makes no financial sense whatsoever. The approach has to be spend to save. The Government should invest in co-operative housing and social housing. The cost of housing can be driven down where the State owns public land, and there is plenty of public land for that purpose. That approach must be taken thereby not leaving it all to the market.

On health, investment in Sláintecare is about investing to save. It is about a lower cost model of care in which most healthcare is provided locally at community level, where it is most effective and the most cost-effective, and local services such as local primary care centres and so on are invested in. The heat is taken out of the cost of healthcare. Healthcare is provided at the least complex level locally in communities, thereby reducing the pressure on the expensive hospital sector.

They need to be accepted as guiding principles. There are lessons to be learned from the past two difficult years. Hopefully, next year will not be as hard, although it is an unknown quality at this stage. We have to learn lessons from the experience of the past two years.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: This is a very important Bill. It allows for the four-fifths rule, thereby allowing Departments to spend money next year. This rule means that Departments can spend up to four fifths of the previous year's voted expenditure before a vote must take place on the spending of extra money. If this Bill was not passed, there would have to be votes in January to allow Departments to spend. Since the Finance Act 2004, these Bills have also allowed for the capital carryover. Departments can carry 10% of their allocations over to the following year. The purpose of the Appropriation Bill is to give statutory authority for expenditure by the various Departments of the amounts voted for by the Dáil during the year.

Under Schedule 1 of the Bill, there are 45 headings under which spending will be approved. I would like to focus on Vote 38, which relates to spending by the Department of Health. Almost €22 billion is being spent on a health service that is still not fit for purpose. Ireland spends one fifth more *per capita* on our health service than the EU average and we are not getting value for money. Sláintecare is in limbo. The boat is going to crash and everyone is jumping overboard instead of trying to steady it. It needs urgent intervention to get it back on course. The Minister knows this. So do I and so does everyone else.

We need root-and-branch reform of our health service. We need to use the expertise we have to develop a world-class system that is based on medical need rather than on ability to pay and that is free at the point of delivery so that we can end the scandals of elderly patients waiting on trolleys and long waiting lists for those who cannot afford health insurance. Many people cannot. They are then caught. If they do not have a medical card or insurance, they fall into limbo. Sinn Féin in government will build an all-Ireland health service we can be proud of. I ask the Minister to look at this matter.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is a lot to discuss when talking about €88 billion in expenditure in a year but I will first raise things that I consider urgent for people who have endured a particularly difficult time, or who are likely to as we face into Christmas. Obviously, a considerable amount of the additional money spent on Covid income supports relates to the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and all of that. I was trying to get this point across to the Taoiseach and I will now try to get it across to the Minister for the sake of the thousands of mostly self-employed people who are musicians, entertainers, performers and taxi drivers and those who are normally employees in the night-time hospitality sector. I really want to get this message across to the Minister in the hope that he will pass it on in the coming days because whether the Government acts will determine whether people who have had a very hard time over the last two years are going to have a miserable Christmas, or no Christmas, or whether they are going to get a bit of support from the Government.

As we speak, people in those categories, including musicians, entertainers and performers, who are applying for the PUP are receiving letters telling them they will not get it. They are told they are not eligible and will not get the payment. Others are being told they must come in for an interview to determine whether they are entitled to it. Over recent days, I have been inundated with messages from people explaining this to me. Surely it is self-evident and absolutely blindingly obvious to the Department of Social Protection that, given the public health measures, musicians, entertainers and performers have nothing to prove. There will be no work for them for the next four or five weeks at a time when they would have expected to make most of their money for the year. Why on earth are we making these people jump through hoops? Why are they being asked stupid questions such as whether they had four weekly PRSI contributions in the week before the measures came in? Even if they had been working, they would not have these contributions because they pay their PRSI at the end of the year. This is stupid stuff.

People are being refused and are being made to jump through hoops. They face significant anxiety and worry in the run-in to Christmas. These are the people who have been hit repeatedly. Everybody has been affected by this pandemic but who are the people who were worst hit? It was these people. It is self-evident that those who are dependent on the night-time economy, tourism and people going out and about and socialising have been hit repeatedly and are now being hit again. They have been hit the worst and the longest. Frankly, the Department of Social Protection is just making work for itself, work which the people in the Department could probably do without, by making people jump through these hoops a week before Christmas. I appeal to the Minister to pass this upstairs.

The Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, MEAI, which represents musicians and entertainers and which also works with a cross-party committee on which every party is represented, wrote to Deputy Catherine Martin on 22 November to appeal for a meeting to discuss all of these issues. All of these issues have become even more problematic as we run into Christmas but there has still been no meeting. While some of the supports it is giving out are simple enough because they are being given to standing employers in the funded area of the arts sector or to venues that have set employees, the Government must get it into its head that the vast majority of musicians, entertainers and performers in this country are self-employed individuals. These people's work is gone. They do not have a standing relationship to a particular employer. We should do what was done at the outset with PUP. The default position should be that anybody, particularly people in those categories, who applies for PUP should be given it unless there is a very good reason for imagining a person is not entitled to it. How could they not be entitled to it? Seriously, it is ridiculous.

Another anomaly is that those who were on the scheme under which you could earn up to €960 while still remaining eligible for the PUP are now not able to get the full level of PUP that people who were not on that scheme get. If you were not on that scheme, after 7 December you could apply and get the €350. However, for those who were on the scheme and trying to do a bit of work - it must be remembered there was a bit of work before all of the public health measures hit - possibly to earn a bit on top of the payment, that work has now collapsed. It is not fair to discriminate against that cohort because things have changed. Musicians, entertainers and performers should be entitled to the full level of PUP.

There is another group of people who are continuing to try to work. Some taxi drivers do not want to go out and work because they are, for example, sick, old or vulnerable. I was talking to a woman today whose husband had got Covid. He will not be going out to work in the current climate because of Omicron and so on. There are others who are going out to get a bit

of work but there is very little work out there for them. Those people should be able to earn up to that €960 and get PUP. The Department needs to use a bit of commonsense on not holding back on giving people support, whether to people whose work has completely collapsed because of the impact of public health measures and what the public is doing to respond positively to the Government's public health advice, or whether they are people whose work has reduced significantly.

In case it needs to be explained to people, while you might walk out onto the street at the moment and see people milling around town and a few taxis picking people up, the Government has advised office workers not to go to work. This means that tens of thousands of office workers who would normally be in town and using taxis are not doing so. There are far fewer people going through Dublin Airport. The night-time economy has disappeared or been reduced very significantly. People should not be under the illusion that there is somehow loads of work out there for taxi drivers because there is not. There is some work but the level has reduced very substantially. For some, it is not worth it and others who are older or vulnerable are not willing to risk it. The Government should give them support and stop getting the Department of Social Protection to hold out on them. It is completely unfair so close to Christmas.

Some other groups need to be considered urgently as well. I do not know when the household benefits package was last increased. Elderly people, aged over 70, on this package need heating as we face winter. They are not entitled to the fuel allowance, but they have seen no increase in the household benefits package for several years. Those people need such an increase to help them with their bills in the months to come and, therefore, I ask the Government to please address this matter urgently.

Turning to student nurses and midwives, it is bad enough that it is more than a year since People Before Profit tabled a motion asking for them to be paid when they are on placement and working on the front line. The Government refused, and is still refusing, to pay them for their work on placement, which is deplorable. It is also so short-sighted when we are wondering why we cannot increase the capacity of our ICUs to the level recommended some ten years ago. The answer we are given is that it is not possible to get the staff and that it takes time to train them. It is difficult to train staff because 70% to 80% of student nurses leave this country after they qualify as a result of being treated so badly as student nurses and midwives. We will not, however, pay them while they are on placement to encourage them to stay. If that is not bad enough, the miserable €100 promised to student nurses and midwives was not paid. The miserable concession by the Government was not paid to many student nurses and midwives. For example, we have a major shortage of neurological nurse specialists. The Neurological Alliance of Ireland has been campaigning for an extra 100 posts in this area for some time. Having these neurological nurse specialists available would significantly impact the dire outpatient waiting lists. St. Vincent's University Hospital should have 22 of these nurses, but only has four. This is where the Government should allocate money.

We must also remember that we do not put the required investment into many areas of our health service nor do we facilitate the decent pay and conditions for the staff we desperately need to build up the required capacity in our health service. We end up paying more in this regard in the long term because we must outsource our needs to the private sector, which then makes money out of that. We pay for this, so we must invest now in the public system in those areas where we need new posts. The area I gave a shout out to is just one in need of extra posts, but the same is true in many areas across the health service.

I have mentioned the need for psychologists on many occasions. It is difficult for people to qualify for doctorates in psychology at a time we have lengthy waiting lists in this area. We need trained psychologists to address them. We are charging students in this area exceptionally large fees. As a result, it is extraordinarily difficult for people to qualify in this area. It is particularly the case for people from working-class and less well-off backgrounds who cannot afford the fees and to sustain themselves during their postgraduate degrees. The result is a shortage of the psychologists who are needed in many spheres of our health service and education system to address the waiting lists. Yet, the Government does not put the required investment in.

Turning to local government, people should know certain things about this area. The average proportion of national income spent by European local authorities is 28%. In Ireland, it is 8%. The money given to local authorities here to provide local services is a fraction of the funding in the rest of Europe. In addition, let us remind ourselves of the big lie about the local property tax. It is a regressive form of funding of local government that we were told at the time would significantly increase the resources available for local authorities to improve local services. Did any of that happen? Absolutely not. Not a cent has been seen. In fact, things are getting worse at local government level.

For example, in my area a fantastic literature festival that was organised by the local authority every year, the Mountains to Sea dlr Book Festival, has been cancelled next year because of a lack of money. There is also no new money for books for the public libraries. Less money is being provided for housing maintenance, despite extensive problems in that regard in the social housing stock. In addition, no new trees have been planted and the pruning service has been reduced, and the money available for street cleaning and local repairs to roads has also decreased. These are just a few of the examples of the situation in our area. People, therefore, end up paying a more regressive form of taxation than they would in the context of central government taxation, which is based on a more progressive income-related tax. Does the LPT produce more money for the local authorities and extra services? Not at all, and things are actually getting worse in that regard.

Another urgent issue concerns Accessible Community Transport Southside, ACTS, Limited in my area. It provides door-to-door transport services for people in wheelchairs or those who have significant and severe mobility issues. It is a fantastic service. Essentially, it is run by a voluntary group of people with disabilities or who are advocates for people with disabilities. By the way, the service is modelled on what the government of Canada does in providing door-to-door transport for people with significant mobility problems, such as those who are older or who have dementia, for instance, because the public transport system will not work for them. This service in my area provides for approximately 6,000 people with such mobility issues. This service is now facing a massive funding crisis because it essentially self-generates its revenue. Some government money is provided, but the group generates some of its own revenue by charging a small fare to the people using the services. The service should not have to do that. People with disabilities and who are in wheelchairs get free travel on public transport, and they should also be facilitated with free travel when using a service such as this. The users of this service do not get that free travel, but they are not even complaining about this aspect. The voluntary group is just saying that it does not now have that revenue stream and, as a result, its service is going to close for the lack, in the immediate term, of €50,000. There is also a need to replace the service's fleet of buses, but the group does not have the money to do that either.

Relatively small amounts are involved here and I have been asking about this issue because it would be a disaster if this service were to cease. We are talking about a group of volunteers

delivering a service which, frankly, this State should provide. The sums lacking to maintain this service are really buttons. For want of those funds, this service, which provides transport for these vulnerable people with disabilities and which is organised by their supporters and advocates, who are doing the State's job for it, could be gone unless the State intervenes and allocates a relatively small amount. Again, I appeal to the Minister regarding this issue.

Moving on to inflation and pay, generally, a sort of ideological left-right debate goes on in academic economic circles that suggests the reason we have inflation is workers were always asking for pay rises. Have we not had in recent years in this country, however, confirmation beyond question that this was a load of nonsense? I say that because workers have been held back and received only small pay increases. Indeed, they suffered pay cuts after the economic collapse in 2008, which was not their fault. Those small pay increases amounted to approximately 1%, or whatever, and yet inflation is now galloping past that rate. Inflation has now reached in excess of 5% and that does not even adequately consider the impact of the rising costs of accommodation. As we all know, those are off the Richter scale and are contributing to a major crisis for working people who simply cannot afford rents and the cost of housing, which have gone through the roof. In addition, we now have price hikes in the cost of energy. None of that is a result of workers asking for increased pay. Are they not now justified in actually demanding that pay? I would say they are. In effect, workers are suffering pay cuts now. If inflation is running at over 5% but people are held back to a 1% pay increase, with the cost of living going through the roof they are in effect seeing their pay cut.

Let us remember that this is all happening while corporate profits have gone through the roof in this country over the same period. Certain people in Irish society have done very well when we look at the Central Bank's household wealth figures. Those are absolutely through the roof as well. It is clearly not trickling down to the vast majority of workers. Somebody is getting very rich in this country and has done over the past ten years. Profits are up and the household wealth of the richest in our country has gone up. Yet the Government will not try to find the funds we need for the sort of things I have mentioned here by imposing a little bit of extra tax on those people to fund the expenditure to ensure workers' pay at least keeps pace with inflation and to ensure we can attract the qualified staff we need in areas like health, education and a whole number of sectors where there is a big shortage of skilled people.

There are not shortages because people are on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. I have heard this narrative coming out of the Government over the past while, that they are all living it up on the PUP. That is nonsense. We should give the PUP to the people who are unemployed as a result of public health measures, but if we want to address the shortage of labour in a whole number of areas such as health, education, construction and so on, we should pay people properly and bring down the cost of living and accommodation by investing in those things instead of lining the pockets of people who are profiting out of the shortages in housing and healthcare capacity.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett is bringing down the curtain. I call Deputy Ward.

Deputy Mark Ward: I did not think I was going to get in today. Deputy Boyd Barrett has covered everything on the spectrum, fair play to him. I would like to have a debate on one of the funding streams announced in budget 2022 in October, which was €10 million in one-off funding model for mental health. This was a once-off initiative which had to be realised by the end of 2021, meaning it was a three-month period to spend €10 million.

I have been putting pressure on the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler, to announce when this money will be spent and what on. Time-bound once-off funding can lead to panic spending with resources not necessarily going where they are needed. This is exactly what is after happening. On Monday, the Minister of State announced that €1.8 million of the €10 million for mental health will be spent on a fleet of green or hybrid vehicles for the HSE. Tackling the climate emergency is extremely important but so too is tackling the mental health emergency. Funds for green initiatives should come from operational budgets and not from mental health budgets. Funding for climate actions should not be at the deficit of other portfolios. The Minister needs to explain how this will improve the experience of people who are trying to access mental health supports from the HSE. Almost one fifth of this €10 million was used to buy a fleet of vehicles. I want to know the purpose of this fleet. How will it improve the outcomes of people suffering with mental health issues?

I will put this in a little bit of context. Yesterday during Questions on Promised Legislation the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, spoke about funding for eating disorders. She said she reinstated €3.9 million for eating disorders. In layman's terms reinstating means putting back money that was not spent for the past four years. It is not new money. There are only three adult eating disorder beds in the State. The new eating disorder facility in Mount Carmel that was meant to be open by the end of this year is now delayed and will not open until June 2022 at the earliest. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler went on to say she has provided €1.5 million to put in place three eating disorder teams next year. While this is welcome, I want to put it into the context of the €1.8 million spent on cars for the HSE. This money could have been spent a lot better. There is a complete lack of eating disorder services across the State, both inpatient and vital aftercare services. Eating disorder patients in my area are currently being admitted to generic psychiatric wards. They are there until their body mass index increases to a safe level. They are then released back into the community without specialist care and they end up back in the generic psychiatric ward again. It is a vicious circle. This was meant to be one-off funding for mental health. I ask the Minister to put the brakes on these cars if he can and make sure the money goes where it was originally intended for.

An Ceann Comhairle: I hope they have brakes on them if they are new.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Looking at the figures contained in the Appropriation Bill 2021 in isolation, it really does tell us what areas are prioritised in public spending. The biggest areas of spending are education at almost €12 billion, social protection at almost €18 billion and health at almost €22 billion. Fourth on the list is housing, which is being allocated just over €5 billion. The overall amount of money we are being asked to approve here is just €73 billion.

I understand the current challenges to public spending which have presented themselves over the past 21 months or so and I understand our public spending had to be increased for a variety of reasons. I am making more of an observation here than a major criticism. However, it is very hard to deny that our public spending is like a runaway train. The level of public spending we currently have is unsustainable and almost out of control. The key question is what we have to show for it.

The big capital investment projects in recent years have been shambolic. The children's hospital, when it is eventually completed, is on course to be twice or three times as expensive per bed as the next most expensive hospital ever built in the history of mankind. How many people have been held to account for this failure or removed from their positions? If a private company were to propose a project costing €650 million to be completed in 2022 that actually

cost €2 billion and counting and was completed two to three years later, heads would roll. We have contractors with the Minister's own admission trying to screw the taxpayer with over-inflated prices and extra bills. The Minister, Deputy McGrath, said himself a few weeks ago before the Oireachtas finance committee that the vast majority of contractors' claims had been deemed overinflated by the development board overseeing the project and that, where we believe as a State they are unwarranted and unjustified, then we are defending the State's position but this will take some time to work its way through the system and, might I add, a lot of money.

I see a problem here. It is related to points Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned in his speech on the sea fisheries report last week. The tendering process we use and the criteria which need to be met for a business to be eligible to tender for projects is skewed in favour of the big monopolies. Certain contractors responsible for the likes of roads, hospitals and other big infrastructure projects seem to know how to work the system. They know there are only a small number of operators with turnover large enough to qualify to do the job. They then put in a low enough bid to get the job. Once the point of no return is passed, they look for more money. Our system seems to be open to this problem occurring. I welcome the fact the Minister, Deputy McGrath has, acknowledged the problem, but the key thing is what will be done to prevent it.

That brings me on to the next area where the issue seems to be causing problems, the national broadband plan. It is a mess. I welcome the decision of the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, to review the plan. A review is badly needed. The taxpayer is certainly not getting value for money. The initial target was to have 115,000 homes and businesses able to connect by the end of January. It looks as though we will be lucky to reach even a quarter of that. How many people have been held to account for this failure? This plan has been so badly implemented that a termination of the contract on the grounds of non-performance should be an option on the table. Either way, at the rate the programme is being rolled out there is fear it will be obsolete by the time it is completed. We do not want an expensive white elephant nor can we afford it. We see MetroLink and DART+, both proposed initially about 15 years ago and likely not to be completed for another ten to 15 years. Put simply, if Ireland was looked at from a business case perspective, the outlook would not be too promising. The performance evaluation on major projects would not make for good reading.

While I was gathering my thoughts on this subject, I decided to have a look at previous Appropriation Bills to compare the level of spending for the past five years. The amounts for health in the previous Appropriation Bills were as follows: 2016, €13.6 billion; 2017, €14.3 billion; 2018, €15.5 billion; 2019, €17 billion; 2020, €20.4 billion; and 2021, €21.7 billion. At the rate of increase from 2016 to 2019, it looks as though health expenditure would have been very close to €20 billion this year without Covid. An increase from €13.6 million to €20 billion in the space of five years is astronomical. What do we have to show for it? In the health service, we have longer waiting lists and a crisis in the GP sector. Dentists are no longer taking new medical card holders. This is not because the health service is underfunded. It is more than adequately funded. It is a question of whether the funding is being used to achieve the best outcomes.

The front of today's *Wexford People* newspaper in County Wexford states, "ICU bed shortage issue is laid bare". Not one extra bed has been allocated in Wexford General Hospital since Covid began despite all the talk, but €85 million was spent by the HSE on ventilators, most of which never arrived. Of the 465 ventilators that did arrive, we gifted 365 to India because they could not be used here. We store the remaining 100 because no one has been trained to use them in our system. That is what I am told by medics. Who is being held accountable for this? Has

it been adequately addressed? How much of the €85 million was recouped beyond credit notes?

I remind the Government that funding 5 million extra home support hours when we have no carers to deliver the care is spin. This money must be redirected to address the problem that results in our inability to recruit carers, namely, poor terms and conditions and the poor pay on offer to them. There is no use in increasing health expenditure every year if it means we only increase the amount of waste we see.

It jumped out at me when examining figures for previous years that expenditure in the Department of the Taoiseach has increased markedly. In 2016, the expenditure was €29 million, while this year's Appropriation Bill has a figure of over €50 million. This is a 72% increase in expenditure over five years.

The other remarkable comparison is with the budget of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. In 2016 the allocation was €1.3 billion, and in 2021 the allocation is €5.2 billion, representing a 300% increase in the housing budget. We need to see this increased investment bearing fruit for the many thousands of people who are simply unable to afford a home. The deposit requirements, lending rules and lack of supply are all conspiring to keep people out of the housing market until they are well into their 30s and 40s. I am sure most of us in the House could estimate how many families in our local communities moved into their forever home in their early 20s by comparison with previous generations. It is simply unattainable for the vast majority in the current housing climate.

The solution to our housing crisis is building housing of all types, but it is also about ensuring the small building contractor can build a house without onerous regulations or costs imposed by the Government. We do not need the big monopoly or big government to do it all; the small builder should have a major role to play. There is a major need to make it easier to build houses rather than put up barriers at every opportunity. In the UK a new build is VAT free.

It is a matter of ensuring people can see a future in living and rearing a family in rural Ireland. Over the past decade or so, there has been a trend in officialdom to want everyone to live in a suburb or town dwelling. As an Independent Deputy from rural Ireland, I will push back against the trend and extol the virtues and benefits of rural Ireland. This can be achieved by addressing the way in which housing and planning policy are designed. At the most basic level, our planning policy needs a serious review. I hope the funding increase will go towards the continuing professional development of the directors of services of planning and planning officials in our county councils so they can be educated as to what is law and what are guidelines and be given the wisdom to know the difference, thereby preventing a slew of unnecessary court cases in the future.

We need to acknowledge the massive financial cost the Government has imposed on the people via the climate action plan, which is estimated to cost €20 billion per year, roughly the same as what we spend on the entire health service. I voted against the placing of this financial millstone around the necks of the people, and I will continue to campaign for sensible, feasible and affordable climate protection measures.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank the Minister for remaining in the House to listen to the debate on the Appropriation Bill. He has highlighted that the purpose of the Bill is to give statutory authority to the amounts voted by the Dáil during the year and provide for the definitive capital carry-over from 2021 to 2022. In aggregate, the Estimates amount to €73.1 billion.

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The comparable amount in the Appropriation Act 2020 was €69.7 billion. Therefore, we must appropriate this year €3.4 billion, or just under 5% of last year's net voted expenditure. As the Minister has outlined, this represents a substantial support to households, businesses and public services. Indeed, it continues to support many of these sectors.

The Minister has also outlined the exceptional and much-needed funding that has been provided in business supports to our key sector — the SME sector — and public services. I thank the Minister for the extension of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, supports, which are critical as restrictions continue.

The second purpose of the Bill is to provide funding, on a legal basis, for expenditure into 2022 prior to voting on the 2022 Estimates. This money is needed, in effect, to keep the lights on in Ireland and our public services financed, including in respect of the regulated payments of social protection.

In the Minister's speech he mentioned the revised national development plan, which sets out capital allocations for the next decade amounting to €165 billion. He also mentioned that this funding is predicted to generate, in the construction sector alone, more than 80,000 direct and indirect jobs, which would be most welcome. I am not sure whether the Minister was in the House earlier today to hear a speaker predict in excess of 40,000 job losses in the SME sector in the coming year due to indebtedness and falling business margins. I am not aligning myself with those comments but contend there is significant pressure on the SME sector in Ireland at present, as the Minister knows. We have spoken in the House many times about many of the problems that arise, but the Minister will have to consider extending some supports to key business sectors that are affected.

Referring to the shiny stars listed within the national development plan, the Minister mentioned the upgrade of the M4 to Sligo, the runway project for Dublin Airport and the completion, on time and on budget, of the Cork runway. These are significant investments in aviation and transport. Could I highlight to the Minister the withdrawal of €350,000 in annual support for Waterford Airport pending planning approval for a runway extension? This airport is excluded from a recent aviation package of €126 million to support regional airports. It is hard to understand this thinking, particularly in light of the carry-over in the budget. Waterford airport is the home of Rescue 117. That airport and the activity in the region around it are needed to support that service.

There is no mention in the national development plan of the N25 or N24 road upgrades. They are not prioritised in the plan. The Dunkettle interchange is included, for sure, along with the proposed motorway development linking Cork and Limerick. There is nothing announced beyond an analysis of linking the south-east and mid-west transport corridors, which could do so much to activate economic activity across southern Ireland.

The Minister mentioned the carrying over of €800 million into next year. The campus of Waterford Institute of Technology has not seen a new building or capital investment in teaching space in more than 14 years. The present commitment to build a new engineering building under a public private partnership, PPP, arrangement looks unlikely to proceed until probably 2023 or 2024 at the earliest.

I have raised in the House a number of times the issue of how capital is appropriated and directed in this country. I am cognisant that no capital budget has been announced for the pro-

posed new technological university of the south east. It is the only third level sector driver in the south east and we are still waiting to hear of the breadth of Government ambition more than a year after the amalgamation process has begun.

I am also aware that a business case to fund 24 whole-time equivalents for the cardiology suite at University Hospital Waterford remains dormant and still has not been acted on, despite the Government's significant promises. I remind the Minister that University Hospital Waterford is one of nine model 4 hospitals in the country and has the lowest number of staff per bed in the country, over 700 fewer than its nearest peer, yet is about the third busiest hospital in the country.

The Government has not yet decided or indicated how it will support future wind development either. In recent days the Regional Group brought before the Dáil a maritime energy Bill, which the Government kindly accepted. In that debate, however, there was nothing to suggest when the Government will make a decision about funding of ports to enhance offshore opportunity, particularly at Rosslare Europort and the Port of Waterford, which lie on the east coast, where the next ten years of activity will happen. I question the ability of the system to treat regions equally and to try to develop individual regions on an equal and sustainable basis. The south east is in the programme for Government. Waterford is at the heart of driving the south-east region, yet we are still waiting for the capital commitments to show us that that endeavour is clear and accurate within the programme.

How will we challenge the climate crisis? We have certainly brought in and enhanced spending and initiated taxation, but where is the planning for sustainable and renewable energy? What we spend is important; how we spend it is even more important.

In the programme for Government the Government has highlighted that the housebuilding programme is a cornerstone of Government policy, yet I think the Minister is aware - if he is not, I am sure many of his Department officials are - of the increasing obstacles to construction in this country. I spoke recently to a large developer in Waterford who has stopped building houses for the coming year or 18 months simply because he cannot make any money out of it. We have to look at our regulation and taxes; otherwise, the housebuilding programme the Government envisages will not happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have to interrupt you there, Deputy Shanahan. I am sorry. Will you propose the adjournment of the debate? When we resume it, you will have the floor.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I will. I would welcome better procurement and better policy and I would love to see better oversight of appropriation.

Debate adjourned.

Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (Extension of Notice Periods) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

As the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will know, the number of adults and children living in emergency accommodation funded by his Department is rising. In October there were 6,317 adults and 2,513 children in such accommodation. As we all know, those figures do not

capture the full extent of homelessness. They do not include women and children in domestic violence refuges funded by Tusla, adults and children in hostels not funded by the State or former asylum seekers who, thankfully, have secured their leave to remain but who are trapped in direct provision, essentially using it as emergency accommodation. Whatever way you count it, homelessness is, unfortunately, getting worse. More and more people are being forced out of their homes and into emergency accommodation or, in many instances, relying on the generosity of family and friends for a couch to sleep on. At this rate we may be back to pre-Covid levels of homelessness within a matter of months. The Minister will remember that when he was on this side of the House, his predecessor, Eoghan Murphy, stood over homeless figures rising to beyond 10,000 for a number of months. With 8,830 adults and children sleeping in hostels and hotels in October we are, unfortunately, dangerously close to that number.

The Minister's decision some months ago to lift the Covid-19 ban on evictions is the main reason we see these numbers increase but it is only a small part of the story. Figures from the Residential Tenancies Board show that the number of notices to quit issued by landlords each month is rising, with sale of property accounting for more than half of all evictions. Since 2017, accidental and semi-professional landlords have left the market in droves. We have lost over 21,000 rental tenancies as of the end of last year and when the figures for this year are published I suspect the number will be worse again. Despite this haemorrhaging of rental supply, the Government has no plan to slow down this disorderly exit of such properties from the market. In fact, local authorities currently cannot even buy rental properties with HAP or RAS tenants in them where the landlord is selling up, even where the landlord is willing to sell to the local authority. We see a new trend of those tenants being displaced, the properties going on the market and medium-sized institutional investors buying them and then leasing them back to the local authority for 25 years for another social housing tenant. As supply continues to fall, rents, as we all know, continue to soar. I will not repeat the figures from the latest Daft.ie report or the RTB rent index, but a household would need a monthly take-home pay of between €4,500 and €6,000 to be able to afford average State-wide rents or Dublin city rents. The Government's over-reliance on the private rental sector to meet social housing need is coming back to bite it with a vengeance and, unfortunately, the slow supply of social housing is also having an impact. We know Covid is a significant factor in that but it is not the full picture. Only 35% of the targets in this year's social housing output were met by the end of quarter 3. Procurement tendering and public spending code issues are delaying larger projects and the Government has to admit that and we have to address it.

At a time when homelessness is increasing, it is incumbent on this House to speak with a unanimous voice and to say that homeless prevention has to be the key. We need to ensure that every single tool is made available to families at risk of homelessness. The local authorities and the non-governmental organisations assisting them to meet that need and, thankfully, the Simon Communities of Ireland have come up with a very simple and sensible Bill. If enacted, it would ensure that where a family or individual meets the notice to quit date and has not been able to find alternative accommodation, they would get a three-month stay for the local authority to work with them directly to ensure they do not fall into homelessness. The Bill has cross-party support. It was launched last week by five of the groups in opposition. I understand that the Minister supports the principle of the Bill and I welcome that. I urge the Minister to give in his remarks a very clear commitment that, just like with the USI Bill passed by the Opposition, he will come back and work with the Simon Communities of Ireland and the Opposition early in the new year and introduce an improved version of the very same principle, if possible, into Government legislation. That would be the quickest and most efficient way of ensuring that this

important protection for families and singles at risk of homelessness be enacted. If the Minister is willing to do that, we will work with him and be constructive, as we always have been. Let us make 2022 the year of preventing homelessness and reducing the number of families and children in emergency accommodation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I extend my thanks to my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, not just for this Private Members' business, which I know he has worked on with other Members of the Opposition, but also for his continued work in this area, which I think we can all agree is very valuable. The Minister and I know that this is sensible legislation. It is, I imagine, legislation that will be relatively easy for him not to oppose. I hope he will not do what the Government is so fond of doing, that is, not necessarily opposing something, but will actually support the Bill and take action to ensure that it is incorporated into legislation at the very next available opportunity.

We know that figures show that there has been an increase in the homeless numbers for the fifth consecutive month in a row. We know from the Simon Communities and the report they have published that there has been a 79% decrease in the availability of properties with housing assistance payment rates.

8 o'clock

This is a real problem. The best way to prevent people from turning up to my office and that of the Minister when they are in that desperate situation, just about to lose their home and having no option, is to pass this legislation and give them that time. The Minister will know from our constituency that it is an issue that we see almost on a daily basis. I do not know about him, but not a week that goes by in my office where we do not encounter people who are desperately in need of this legislation to be passed and for the Government to be as good as its word when it says that it will take action. The Government must take action and ensure the legislation is passed. I hope the Minister will clarify, in his remarks, not just his own position, but how he intends to ensure it will be given effect. It is not good enough for him to say that he does not oppose it; we, and the people who are facing homelessness, need to hear him say that he will support it and be proactive.

Deputy Réada Cronin: It is a very apt time for this Private Members' Bill on residential tenancies and the extension of the notice period because at Christmas our thoughts turn to home, family, children and the life we share in our homes. I am glad that the Opposition is united in its support for this piece of work with the Simon Community. I also welcome the fact that the Minister is going to accept the Bill. It is important that the legislation be implemented because we need a radical overhaul of our housing policy and system. While we wait for that change, this Bill makes a crucial difference for the almost 10,000 men, women and children facing homelessness by the end of the year. Emergency accommodation is not a solution to landlords getting away with issuing short notices to quit. The short notice that landlords are getting away with is the problem. Emergency accommodation, by its nature, is only shelter. Shelter is what is given to a stray animal that turns up at someone's door late at night. People need homes. People need to move from one home to another. To do that, they need some notice, like the minimum of three months proposed in this Bill. Above all, the Government needs to acknowledge the shock to the system that those going into emergency accommodation experience. It is the brutal realisation that it is a hostel, a hub or the street. The people I have spoken to in north Kildare are devastated when that happens to them. It goes to the core of their families. Politicians make light of it and say how lucky people are to get emergency accommodation at

all, knowing that they will never need it, and it is never going to be them, their families, their children or grandchildren who are facing emergency accommodation. The Government loves to talk about stability and tells us to “#bekind”, but much of it comes from political quarters that see runaway house prices and rents as a sign of a successful economy. They see homelessness as the norm and emergency accommodation as inevitable. There is nothing civil about the Government’s housing policy. There is nothing that we should accept about it either. We are proposing the structured mechanism of the minimum three-month notice period to give people some kind of protection.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I commend my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, on introducing the Bill, which is supported by the Opposition parties. It aims to provide increased protection for those at risk of homelessness following an eviction notice by providing a three-month extension to the notice-to-quit period triggered by a housing authority, which would prevent their entry into emergency accommodation. The primary drivers of homelessness in recent years have been legal evictions and rent increases. Homelessness has increased in each of the past four months since the Government lifted the ban on notices to quit. This is evident in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, where I have witnessed a large increase in the number of people contacting my offices who have been served with such notices. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage recently recorded 81 people in the north-east region, which includes counties Cavan, Monaghan and Louth, as homeless. The people receiving these notices are faced with little option in the private sector when trying to find alternative accommodation. For instance, according to *daft.ie*, there are nine houses for rent today in County Cavan and seven in County Monaghan. This, I fear, is only the tip of the iceberg, as I am aware of many people who could be described as the hidden homeless, sofa surfing between different houses or flats over long periods, and continuously having to move from one place to the next.

The lack of alternative accommodation and the increase in evictions has also forced people to remain in substandard accommodation because they are often afraid to raise serious issues with their landlord, fearing that they will be issued with a notice to quit and knowing that there is such a limited number of houses or flats to rent. For those in my constituency who find themselves in need of emergency accommodation, the nearest facility is in Dundalk, approximately 130 km away. It is too far away from family and there is no direct public transport route to Dundalk. We need to see more action taken to keep families in their homes and prevent them from entering homelessness in the first place. We need to ensure that local authorities have every power to prevent adults and children from losing their homes and entering emergency accommodation.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I commend my party colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, on bringing forward this Bill, and the Simon Community on the work it has done on it. It is vital that we start tackling homelessness. It is soul-destroying for the people who are stuck in homelessness, their families and in particular, the children, who do not know where they are going to spend Christmas and where they will be in the new year. I wish to take a moment, before the Christmas break, to thank all those who work with the homeless. I thank the organisations in Cork, such as the Simon Community, Depaul, the Peter McVerry Trust, Focus Ireland and many more. I thank, in particular, Caitríona Twomey of Cork Penny Dinners. The work they do is unbelievable. I thank the people who donate to the organisations silently and quietly to support them.

However, it should not be up to volunteers and charities to look after the homeless. This Bill will send a clear message if the Government goes the whole way and does not support it, but implements it. We need to recognise all the volunteers for the tireless work they will do at

Christmas. These people will deliver tents, sleeping bags, dinners and snacks to people at all hours of the day and night. They are not in it for the recognition or the thanks; they are in it because they believe that is the kind of country and State we should live in. They recognise that no one in this State should go to sleep on Christmas eve without with a roof over their head, but unfortunately, they will. We owe these groups and volunteers a huge debt. For many, a tough Christmas will be made slightly easier because of the work of these volunteers and groups. I hope the Minister and the Government will do the right thing.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I commend the work of Deputy Ó Broin and all involved on bringing this Bill to the floor of the Dáil. I commend the Simon Community on the work it is doing. The automatic extension of notice periods for residential tenants, where the tenant is certified as being at risk of homelessness, is a really important intervention. My constituency of Longford-Westmeath has not been immune from the rise of homelessness that we have seen. Westmeath County Council has implemented a devolved regime under the midlands homelessness action plan. On 30 November, there were 83 people in emergency accommodation, 35 of which were from County Westmeath alone. Each of those individuals represents a life turned upside down and devastated by the impact of homelessness. Taking action to keep families in their homes and prevent them from entering homelessness in the first place is vital. I want to describe to the Minister the impact that this legislation will have. Last week, a young woman in her early 20s, whom I will call Annie, came to my office. She had 48 hours to leave the room she had been renting. She was desperate. She had tried everything in her power to stay in that property and source another one. I am not exaggerating when I say that she was shaking like a leaf. There were no tears because she had none left. I was confronted with a young woman who was broken and racked with dry sobs. She has spent the past five days in a hotel and has been told that she needs to leave by Thursday. There are no beds available in emergency accommodation. There may be a tent and a sleeping bag available for Annie. Any property that is likely to become available will not be available until the new year. We face three weeks of trying to plug a gap over the Christmas period. To me and any person with an ounce of decency and or morals, that should not involve a tent or a sleeping bag.

I will vote in favour of this Bill. I will vote in favour of it for people like Annie, for the countless others like her and for those who have sold their belongings going into emergency accommodation. I will vote for it for those who are dreading the notice to quit coming in the door because they know it is on the way, for those who are sofa surfing, and for every child who, come Friday week, will ask how Santa will find them.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is a terrible indictment of the Government's housing policies in general that so many people are living a hair's breadth from being made homeless. People's lives are so finely balanced that it would not take much to tip them into homelessness. In the rental sector this has become even more prevalent with so many landlords leaving the market at present. Recent data from the Residential Tenancies Board shows that in 77% of tenancies terminated in the past three years the tenant was informed the landlords were selling the property or they or their families were moving into the property.

Figures show that 550 landlords left the market this autumn alone, which is approximately 46 a week. This year 2,080 landlords have left the market and 1,902 landlords left in 2020. This is clearly having a huge impact on tenants, their security of tenure and their well-being and mental health. Landlords selling their properties has been one of the main causes of homelessness over the past number of years. With property prices being so high at the moment it is no surprise that many landlords would choose to sell up rather than continue to rent out the

property. According to Focus Ireland, responses by successive governments have maximised the sense of grievance among landlords while doing little to improve security of tenure.

The Bill addresses in some way this imbalance by providing a person or family at risk of homelessness with a three-month extension to the notice period. This proposal also intends to give local authorities and the families concerned some breathing space in helping a family in danger of being made homeless to find alternative accommodation. I am glad to hear the Government and members of other parties are not opposing the Bill. Well done to the Simon Communities and Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward the Bill.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputies who put their names to the Bill. I particularly thank the Simon Communities of Ireland, who have put a huge amount of work into putting the legislation together. Earlier today, I spoke with Wayne Stanley and I commended him on the work he has done on the legislation and the tireless work the Simon Communities of Ireland do day in day out. In response to Deputy Gould, we will always need volunteers. Any government will need volunteers and people who care and who advocate and work for people in their area.

I visited some of the Simon Communities' sites. I was a guest speaker of Simon in the mid-west very recently. I regularly meet Dublin Simon, which is part of my homeless task force. I sincerely value its input. So we are very clear, I am very happy to allow the Bill to proceed. As I said to Wayne Stanley earlier today, the Bill as currently drafted will require significant amendment as it progresses through the Houses to allow it to be enacted. I will look at other vehicles to bring in part of it. I have done so with other legislation and it should not come as a surprise to some Deputies. Notwithstanding this point, the Bill should proceed tonight.

Homelessness is one of the greatest challenges all of us, the Government and the country face. It is a challenge that the Government and I as Minister continue to address in Housing for All, which was launched in September. It contains 18 separate and significant action points with regard to homelessness. Under Housing for All we are the first country in the European Union to incorporate in national policy the commitment I made in the Lisbon declaration to work towards ending and eradicating homelessness by 2030. It is an ambitious target but it is one we must set ourselves. We must set ourselves challenging goals. They are achievable but they are challenging. We cannot accept, and I do not accept, that homelessness should be a permanent feature of Irish life. I have never accepted this. The homeless crisis affects all families at different levels throughout the country. Many feel it. The increase in homelessness seen in recent months is a serious concern. While significant improvements have been made in the situation we faced two years ago when homelessness was at its highest, there is still a huge amount of work to be done. One measure alone will not resolve this.

In October, 8,830 individuals accessed emergency accommodation. Over the longer term this is a 16% decrease on the number in October two years ago. It is still too high. Thankfully and importantly, progress has been made on the challenging issue of family homelessness. We have seen the number of families decrease by just short of 700 or 39%. This has decreased from 1,778 to 1,082. The number of dependents has increased, unfortunately. In Dublin, our street outreach teams, who I know well, recently recorded a fall in numbers of rough sleepers over the past year. The number has decreased from 139 to 94, which is a 32% decrease. This is welcome but not enough. It is progress.

The level of homelessness is unacceptably high and there are challenges that we have to

address. However, progress has been made in a number of areas. The increase in homeless figures seen in recent months is of concern and is being addressed as an absolute priority. There is recognition that additional action is needed and was needed. In October, I convened a series of meetings with senior officials from local authorities where homelessness was most prevalent. This was in addition to the regular meetings I hold with the homeless task force I established a few short weeks after becoming Minister. These meetings discuss solutions and prioritising measures on homelessness prevention and exits. Additional local authority void units are being sought and being brought on stream with a focus on providing these homes to those experiencing homelessness. Each local authority was notified of a target of void units to return to productive use this year. It is also imperative to see social housing delivery being prioritised over the months ahead to address the time lost during the construction sector shutdowns. We have to be honest, and it has been acknowledged, that we have seen constrained supply over these two years because it has been affected by Covid. The projections into next year are a lot better and we will ramp up supply.

I have asked local authorities to further prioritise tenancy support services, homeless prevention and the use of other placefinder services for HAP tenancies and they are doing this. It is widely recognised, and all of us should know, that prevention is our first line of defence against homelessness and it is critical. The most recent figures indicate that in the third quarter of this year 1,308 preventions and exits from homelessness were achieved. This brings the total to more than 4,000 preventions and exits to date this year. A number of exits into permanent accommodation have been affected because of the constrained supply. This is, unfortunately, a fact but one on which we will make progress next year.

A range of strategies are already in place to mitigate the need for households to enter homeless services and to exit them as quickly as possible where this is unavoidable. The HAP placefinder service is playing a vital role in keeping families out of homelessness and in housing families who find themselves in emergency accommodation. Local authorities also oversee and fund a range of homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment initiatives.

The suggestion in the Bill of lengthening notice periods is something that is being reviewed anyway. I will take from the Bill to expedite the review. There are some measures we can take in the shorter term, particularly as supply is building up, to alleviate some of the pressure. It will not resolve it and these measures alone will not resolve it. In fairness, the Simon Communities recognise this. We need to get a supply of permanent homes for people to live in which are affordable and social and get our vacant stock back into use. I am quite happy not to oppose the Bill on Second Stage but to work with other Members and with the Simon Communities on the measures in the Bill that we could implement. We could potentially use a Government Bill or another vehicle to be able to implement these sooner.

A review of notice periods is due now. A previous review was done and current legislation means we would be going to the end of 2022 before potential changes on notice periods would be published. I intend to do it a lot sooner than this. For me there are matters in the Bill on which we can work, adding to the work that has already been done. I am acutely aware in particular of the difficulties faced by people in Ireland's private rental sector.

Deputy Ellis spoke about landlords. Let us remember that approximately 86% of all landlords have one or two properties and may be described as mom-and-pop landlords. These are the ones who are leaving the market and have been for a number of years.

Whether people like it or not, we need a private rental sector which needs to be functioning properly and to be secure. We are seeing a situation where more landlords are leaving the market. This needs to be addressed and we are working towards doing that. We need to see the requisite increase in public housing delivery and, in particular, in social housing. That is where the Housing for All plan comes in, with over €20 billion being spent between now and 2026 to deliver the biggest single housing programme that the State has ever seen on social and affordable housing and a new form of housing tenure: cost rental. That will be very significant. We are embarking on this very significant programme of social and affordable housing delivery. We have had two years of Covid-19. When it comes to housing supply, 2022 will be a year of delivery. The combined measures will contribute to reducing homelessness and, I hope sincerely and I have committed to, the eradication of homelessness by 2030. There is a way to go. If we are honest with each other, we all know that. The situation cannot be allowed to persist but progress has been made in the last 18 months. It will not be easy but we have set an achievable goal and a realistic timeframe.

I want to assure Deputies, both in government and in opposition, that there is no shortage of will and determination to deal with the issue of homelessness. It is among many priorities and pressing issues within housing. The number one priority for me is ensuring that people have a safe and secure roof over their head and it remains a top priority for me and this Government. Resources and funding are not an obstacle. We need to see increased supply. Where we can improve protections and where shorter-term measures can be brought in, such as some of those suggested by the Simon Community, I am happy to work with them and others on that. I hope to do that in an expeditious manner early in the new year.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I understand Deputy Paul Donnelly is sharing time with Deputies Martin Browne, Mythen and Ward.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am happy to hear that the Minister is supporting this motion and is certainly allowing it to go through. The purpose of this proposed amending legislation is to provide an increased level of protection for those at risk of homelessness following an eviction notice to prevent their entry into emergency accommodation. Just this evening, at 6 o'clock an email came through and the person said:

I was wondering if you could help me. I have been sofa-surfing on my friend's sofa with my one-year-old daughter. I sleep in my friend's house the odd time but they are both overcrowded and unfortunately I can no longer stay in either places. I tried getting on to the council but unfortunately they are unable to help me get into emergency accommodation. They keep telling me that they will contact me and still nothing. It is a week before Christmas and I am really worried that I am going to be on the streets for Christmas.

It is completely heartbreaking for a mother and her child to be going around the streets of Dublin fearing that they are going to be homeless for Christmas and relying on their friends and neighbours, and people that they know, to keep them in accommodation.

I also looked at accommodation for Dublin 15 just before I came here. There were 32 units available on Daft.ie. Not a single one of those housing units was available for any of the HAP limits that are in place at the moment. If a person is homeless or at risk of homelessness in Dublin 15 at the moment, he or she has absolutely nowhere to go except homeless accommodation and even at that, people are struggling to get through.

It is therefore no surprise that homelessness among adults and children has increased in each of the past four months. Overall, there are only 190 properties available under the standard or discretionary limit in at least one of the four categories that were available. This represents a decrease of 79% on the 906 properties that were available within at least one HAP category in the June study. That decrease is directly related to the dramatic rise in notices to quit since the Government lifted the ban on such notices.

As I have said, this Bill is a small but important change to the Residential Tenancies Act and is supported by the five Opposition groups. I would again like to commend the Simon Community, like everybody else has here today. I ask the Government to allow this to go through but to go further by enacting the measures required to help families and individuals and stem this homelessness crisis.

Deputy Martin Browne: I congratulate Deputy Ó Broin and the Simon Communities. I welcome the Government's decision not to block this Bill.

The Bill highlights and seeks to address the immediate crisis that people face when they are given notice by their landlord. To put this into context, in my constituency of Tipperary the number of people classed as homeless, in the Government's own monthly homeless figures, has increased from 33 to 45. That is a rise of over a third. Thousands of people on the housing list are waiting on the rental market but it is non-existent. I appreciate and get on great with the HAP scheme placefinders in Tipperary but they will tell you that their hands are tied and there are no properties out there. I was on Daft.ie earlier and there are 16 properties for rent in a county the size of Tipperary. We have over 400 people on waiting lists down there. We can have a review. This seems to be a buzzword for this Government. I would love to know how many reviews from all strands have been undertaken since it took power. With everything, when there is a problem, the Government will have a review.

Families are struggling as it is. As Deputy Paul Donnelly has said, they are in fear coming up to Christmas. They are under severe pressure. The Government must act on this. The extension would be triggered by the housing authority itself and it can get in earlier because that is where the worry is. People are having severe worries, not just at Christmas but all year round, that suddenly the tenancy is up and they have to get out.

It is an atrocious situation to see people in. These are the people who are hidden from the Government's figures on a monthly basis. I commend Deputy Ó Broin and the Simon Communities. I welcome the Government's stand on this and I hope it will give more support to it.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Simon Communities, which provide a vital service to people experiencing homelessness throughout Ireland and, in particular, in my own area of the south-east region since 2004. Their unwavering commitment to justice and equality and to protecting some of the most vulnerable people at risk in our communities cannot be underestimated. These pillars of equality and justice are evident in the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (Extension of Notice Periods) Bill 2021, which we are discussing tonight.

Homelessness challenges the nation's moral compass because we cannot ignore the fact that, in our modern era, one of the main causes of families being put out in the street is the enormous rise in rents which simply equates to greed and avarice by vulture funds and wealthy investors. In my own county of Wexford, there were 767 calls to the homeless service and support unit between January and November of this year. According to the Government's own fig-

ures, there were 23 individuals recorded as homeless in County Wexford as of the last week of October this year. However, we know that this figure is far greater because it does not include sofa-surfers or citizens living temporarily in relatives' or friends' houses.

This Bill will provide a buffer zone to protect people who are facing an immediate threat of becoming homeless. If passed, it will provide for the automatic extension of notice periods for residential tenancies where a tenant is certified as being at risk of homelessness and, crucially, will allow a local authority to directly engage for a three-month period with a person or family at risk of homelessness.

I know from my own experience on the ground that notices to quit are alarmingly on the rise and are responsible for creating a high percentage of homelessness or risk of homelessness. Until the Government gets to grips with the private rental market and the financial forces that run it, it will continue to fail in addressing this problem. The Bill proposes a change which would act as a barrier and protection factor for those who find themselves in dire straits and gives greater assistance to the local authorities' housing departments, whose hands are often tied behind their backs as they try to support families and children in desperation and facing homelessness almost at the eleventh hour. This must change.

I again commend the Simon Communities, my colleague Deputy Ó Broin and all of my colleagues in this House who have supported this Bill to this point. I welcome the Government's support but it must be followed up by immediate action.

Deputy Mark Ward: Sinn Féin is criticised by the Government for not providing solutions to the issues of the day. Week after week and day after day we come to this Chamber with viable solutions on housing, health, mental health, education and practically everything else. In fact, our spokesperson for housing and my constituency colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has provided that many solutions on housing that he has written a couple of books on this matter. I do not think I have ever bought a Fianna Fáil Deputy a Christmas present but I might just do that this year in respect of one of the books that Deputy Ó Broin has written. It is the season, after all.

This Bill proposes a small but important change to the Residential Tenancies Act.

It is supported by the five Opposition groups in the Dáil, as well as by the Simon Communities of Ireland. Homelessness among adults and children has increased in each of the past four months. Those increases are directly related to the dramatic rise in the number of notices to quit issued since the Government lifted the ban on such notices.

I was at a meeting of Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth earlier today. The committee heard about the impact poverty is having on children. One of the main contributions to children being in crisis is the housing crisis. The committee heard about the poverty of homelessness and the paucity of good quality or secure accommodation. At the meeting, a representative of the Rialto Youth Project spoke about how, for a child, this poverty is like being in a bubble. It touched me so much that I decided to bring those words into this Chamber. She spoke about a bubble:

The bubble? We're inside it. You see everything and everyone through the bubble. And everyone sees the bubble when they look at you. They make decisions about you. They tell you, you can't. They tell you, you won't. They tell you, you'll never. They measure you with invisible rulers. You will come to love the bubble and hate it. What does your bubble feel like ...? My bubble feels like a shell on my back. It's heavy. I hope yours is light and

floaty and beautiful. And I hope it's easy to get out of.

Out of the mouths of babes. These are the words of children. Enacting the Bill will help these children to get out of that bubble. We need more action to be taken to keep families in their homes and prevent them from entering homelessness in the first place.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is very welcome to the House to debate this sensible and straightforward Bill. I should have said “to discuss” because to say he is here to debate the Bill suggests there is a degree of disagreement in respect of its content and the principles that inform it. I am pleased that the senior Minister, with his Cabinet colleagues, have decided not to oppose the legislation before the House. That sends out an important message to those paying close attention to our words and our deeds this evening - those who may be in the teeth of the homelessness problem, at risk and worried about their futures and those of their families. All Members, including, I am sure, the Minister of State during his many years as a local authority representative and now as a Deputy and Minister of State, will have dealt with that phone call at 5 p.m. or 4.59 p.m. on a Friday evening from a constituent who finds himself or herself not just at risk of homelessness but at the door of the local authority, waiting for assistance in emergency circumstances from its homelessness service.

This is a short Bill but its impact if enacted can be far-reaching. It triggers an automatic extension to the notice period for those who are at risk of homelessness and, importantly, it brings people onto the radar of the local authority and gives the local authority and renters the space to obtain a solution to the very immediate and fundamental problem they face. Its beauty is in its simplicity. The Labour Party is delighted to support it and to have co-signed it. I commend the Simon Communities of Ireland for promoting the Bill. It is, as I stated, a sensible and straightforward Bill and it increases the level of protection for those who are at risk of homelessness, which is exactly what is needed. In my view, many of the protections that could be introduced do not necessarily need legislative interventions. They could be done by way of regulation or potentially by way of circular to local authorities, but it is important nonetheless to anchor some of these important measures in primary legislation.

I note that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in his earlier remarks referred to the fact that the lengthening of the notice period would be reviewed earlier than originally anticipated and that he is prepared to work with Opposition parties in good faith to ensure the kind of principles that underpin the Bill are reflected in the way in which local authorities operate and the way in which we, as a society, deal with the threat of homelessness which, as Members are aware, is all too real. I look forward to seeing what the Government will bring forward but we cannot wait for a long time. There needs to be a sense of urgency to adapt and subsequently adopt the kind of measures that are proposed in this Bill and make them real.

I note that the Minister has indicated it is Government policy that homelessness will be eradicated by 2030. That is an aspiration all Members wish to see delivered on. We would prefer to see homelessness eradicated much more quickly and that will depend on several factors, especially supply. The cost of living has risen enormously in the past 12 months. It is at its highest rate since 2008 and one of the major contributory factors forming and influencing the high cost of living and the rising rate of inflation is rental costs, which have risen by 8% this year. There has been a lot of talk in recent days about how we can work to support families who are at risk of entering fuel poverty and how they may be supported to pay their electricity bills. We need to be clear on what we need to do to prevent homelessness and ensure we keep people in the homes they have, given the supply problems we are encountering in society.

Even though it was rejected last week, I repeat the absolute urgency of reconsidering and introducing a rent freeze for the next three years to allow the kind of supply that the Minister of State and I and everybody else in this House has the ambition to develop so that we can ensure the provision of social and affordable homes and private homes, along with other measures that are required to resolve this most fundamental of social issues.

There are very few properties available anywhere in this country. I listen to Deputies all the time relaying the experiences in that regard in their constituencies. It is not just an urban problem at this point. It is a problem faced in every county, town and village in the country. The real figures in respect of homelessness are masked by the fact that they are not recorded in the way they could be recorded. All Members are aware of individuals whom we support and on whose behalf we work who are couch-surfing or staying with family members, often in very difficult circumstances, but are not recorded in the official figures.

In conclusion, the Labour Party is very proud to support this simple and straightforward but potentially very effective legislation. I would prefer if it was adopted unanimously this evening, moved to Committee Stage very quickly and then enacted at the earliest opportunity. There is an urgency about this, as the Minister of State will accept and understand, and it needs to be moved on very quickly indeed. Those who are at risk of homelessness cannot wait any longer for action from this House.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank the Simon Communities of Ireland for the work they did in drafting the Bill. I am very happy to have brought it forward, along with the other Opposition parties. It is positive that the Government is not opposing the Bill and that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has said he will look at trying to bring in parts of it as quickly as possible, possibly through Government legislation. He has told us there is no shortage of will when it comes to tackling homelessness. I have no reason to disbelieve his intent but there is a shortage of action on this issue.

I will point out a few areas in which concrete action could be taken by the Government now if it wants to show us it is deadly serious about tackling homelessness with the urgency required. It is welcome that the Government is supporting this Bill but it is in a better position to bring forward legislation and has been aware, for quite some time, of these kinds of measures. It should have brought forward these kinds of measures much more urgently.

I have one example that the Minister referenced. He said the Government had committed to the 2030 target of trying to eliminate homelessness, which is welcome. If it is to have any meaning at all, however, we must at the very least have yearly targets to get us to that elimination in 2030. So where are those yearly targets? It is all very well saying we hope to eliminate homelessness by 2030 but where are the year-by-year steps to get us to that target and give it meaning? Let the Government show us it means what it says in indicating there is no lack of will or resources. It should publish those targets that will get us to the elimination of homelessness by 2030. It is the very least that could be done and it would cost nothing to do it. It could be done straight away. Give us the roadmap to show that the Government means what it says when it speaks about eliminating homelessness by 2030.

The Government should immediately bring back the ban on evictions, especially considering our position in the Covid-19 pandemic. The single most effective measure to reduce homelessness in recent years has been the ban on evictions introduced at the start of the pandemic. It should return.

At a meeting of the Oireachtas joint committee on housing earlier today we discussed vacancy and dereliction. There are tens of thousands of vacant homes lying empty all over Ireland. There has been talk from the Government about a vacant homes tax but there is no commitment in Housing for All to introduce it or a timeline. Show us the Government is serious about tackling homelessness by introducing a vacant homes tax that we know will at least bring some of those vacant homes back to use to help address this matter. Show us the Government is serious about this.

The Government should show us it is serious about this by ensuring the derelict sites legislation is enforced so buildings can be brought back into use. We heard at the housing committee meeting earlier that the largest local authority in the country, Dublin City Council, does not actively try to get all derelict buildings on the derelict sites register. How about looking for a bit of enforcement to ensure we get more homes and buildings back into use?

If the Government is serious about helping homeless people, it should end the discrimination that takes place now against approximately half of homeless people in emergency accommodation that is privately run. We have an outrageous position in the country, where we introduced national quality standards for all homeless service providers but somehow in the past few years a load of private companies and individuals were allowed to set up private emergency accommodation operations, funded by the State and local authorities. However, national quality standards do not apply to them. Why is that? It is discrimination against anyone unfortunate enough to end up having to live in that privately run emergency accommodation. There is no explanation for it.

There have been complaints from some of those places of bloodstains on bed sheets and there has been a complaint from a privately run emergency accommodation operation in Dublin of a lack of duvets or bed sheets. We know that in many of them staff are not Garda-vetted or trained, there are no safeguarding policies or procedures in place and they are not checked for them. The Government should show us it is serious about homeless people by introducing independent inspections by HIQA. The Government should do it now and not dodge this any more. In doing that, the Government would show us it is serious about treating people with a minimal amount of dignity and respect. It could go one step further and end the privatisation of these homeless services by bringing them into the fold of not-for-profit organisations, which would at least have an interest in helping progress people out of homelessness.

One of the complaints made to me by people working in areas supporting people who have become homeless is that they frequently find people who had been living in privately run accommodation that do not have basics in place. They would not have an application in for a medical card, for example, that would allow them access to proper healthcare. They may not have made applications for social housing support to get on the housing waiting lists because they live in places without trained support workers. This is what is happening now in the country and none of this is in any way acceptable.

The local connection rule was highlighted last year and there have been some improvements, especially after the “RTÉ Investigates” programme, but it is still creating a barrier for some people moving from emergency accommodation. People have been refused emergency accommodation or asked to leave emergency accommodation because they cannot prove a local connection. To be clear, this might take in people who were originally from Dublin and moved for work reasons to Galway before losing their job there and moving back to Dublin seeking emergency accommodation. They might be refused that support because a computer system

records them as having a last address in Galway. It is barbaric and there should be no tolerance of it whatever.

Many people have told me there is effectively an unofficial policy in place when people present as homeless that the accommodation made available is of the worst possible standard in an attempt to try to keep people sleeping on floors or couches. It seems to be an attempt to make it as difficult as possible for such people to access emergency accommodation by ensuring the very worst accommodation is made available. The Government should show us it is serious about such matters by taking some of the steps I have outlined.

This Bill is very welcome. Although it is a modest proposal, it is practical legislation that will, if passed quickly, help prevent some people entering homelessness by allowing more time to ensure supports can be put in place. It is a sensible and modest measure in that regard and one we can, across the House, easily agree. We just need to show it can be implemented urgently and as quickly as possible.

We must do this. The number of homeless people who have died over the past year has increased, particularly in Dublin. At least 58 people experiencing homelessness have passed away so far this year, a considerable increase on last year and 2019. There is concern that reduced access to addiction and mental health supports, particularly during the pandemic, could be contributing to this, and the matter requires the immediate attention of the Government to arrest that increase.

It is welcome that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is very much concerned by the increases in homelessness over the past number of months and he has met representatives of different organisations about it. What we should be hearing from him are the exact concrete actions he and the Government will take to arrest that month-by-month increase. If that is not arrested, we will be back at the level of 10,000 people living in emergency accommodation that we saw with the former Minister, Mr. Eoghan Murphy. We also know that other people are sleeping rough or are not counted in homelessness figures. People may have fled domestic violence and others are sleeping on couches and on floors so are not counted in our Irish figures.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Simon Community for bringing forward the provisions of the Bill and I thank Deputy Ó Broin for co-ordinating the all-party effort to support the legislation. The Bill would give people three months leeway when faced with eviction into homelessness and it would give local authorities the right to trigger that three-month extension. The most important element of the Bill is the requirement that during those three months, local authorities would try to prevent the people in question from becoming homeless. That brings me to the key issue. Fianna Fáil and the Green Party were in government at the time and said they would end homelessness by 2010. That did not happen. The Fine Gael-Labour Party programme for Government of 2011 pledged to end homelessness by the end of its term. That did not happen. There was a promise to get everybody out of hotels by 2016. That did not happen either, and we could go on through the list of failed promises.

Does the Government want to stop people going into homelessness? If so, it can just do it. It is set down as a policy that nobody will be put into homelessness and that the local authority will ensure people are housed rather than go into emergency accommodation. It is very simple and it can be done within that three months, but there is no will to do it.

I am dealing with so many cases as we face into Christmas, and I will give them another shout-out. There are the family with six kids living in an hotel who have been in four different homelessness accommodation providers over four years and were recently threatened with eviction. Fair play to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, who intervened, although if he had not, I do not know what I would think of him. They were going to be evicted because they had briefly exceeded the income thresholds, which have not been reviewed yet even though the review started four years ago.

In the case of another family, a young woman who works in the public sector and lives with her daughter in homelessness accommodation has also been threatened with eviction from homelessness services because she does additional work with vulnerable children and her overtime and additional hours took her over the threshold and threatened her with being put out in the street.

A man who came into my office last week has worked all his life, has money to pay his rent and did not need help or support but had a catastrophic accident and now cannot work because of that. He has three children and has been trying to get medical priority, which he does not deny. He sat down in front of me and started bawling crying because he had been given a date two weeks later by which he would have to leave his HAP tenancy. I could go on through the list of people I am dealing with but I do not have time. Believe me, they are contacting me as Christmas approaches, asking whether I have any news from the Minister or the council.

It is entirely possible for the Government to say it will not allow that to happen anymore but it does not do that because, I do not know, a few landlords might be annoyed. I do not understand it. Why does this go on? Why do we continue to let this happen? The place finder service is a joke. Place finders are supposed to find places within limits, when they and everybody else knows you have only to look on *daft.ie* and see that nowhere is available within the maximum limits that have been set. It is a joke. By definition, people are homeless if they need a place to live, do not have a roof over their head or are threatened with eviction. Something could be done about that and the question is whether the Government is going to do it, or whether we are just going to faff around with a load of promises that were never kept previously and that I doubt will be kept to this time.

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has to submit a plan for social housing by the middle of December and has been told by the Government to deliver 1,994 social homes by 2026, but there are 7,000 families on the housing list. By definition, therefore, we will still be having this conversation at the end of the Government's plan to deal with the housing crisis. Can we get real?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Two and a half thousand children will be homeless this Christmas. They are children living in hotels and emergency accommodation and families with no kitchen to cook in or dinner table to gather around. For some of them, it will be the second Christmas in those conditions. They are tough memories that, we now know from multiple reports, will stick with them throughout their lives. There are others, some of whom I am dealing with, who have a home and a roof over their heads but who have an eviction notice facing them. They are unable to find anywhere they can afford before the eviction notice comes due at the start of next year, and they face homelessness unless the Government takes action.

All the Bill, which I very much welcome, seeks to do is to give these people a chance by giving them three months to find a home before being thrown out in the street. It is one small

step that could be taken. The Government says it does not lack in will and that it will do this or that about it but, as has been noted, it has been in power and could have done this at any point in the past. If it does it now, I will believe it when I see it.

We had before us an experiment regarding one simple way to reduce homelessness when we introduced an eviction ban. What happened was the number of homeless people dropped quite rapidly. It did not drop to nothing but it dropped quite rapidly. The eviction ban was then lifted at the behest of landlords and under the guise of the Constitution, and homelessness numbers began to rise a month later. We know what needs to be done, namely, to implement, for example, the People Before Profit Anti-Evictions Bill 2021 to give renters real security of tenure.

This Government of Scrooges does not care about renters. According to Dickens, it took three ghostly visits to get Ebenezer Scrooge to see the error of his ways. There is no sign of such a recognition by the Government. The only thing that will force it to recognise the problem and do something about it is a mass movement. We need a mass protest on housing in the spring.

Deputy Mick Barry: I want to talk about building communities. The average tenancy now lasts approximately two years. How are people expected to put down roots and how are we expected to build communities when people are moved on again and again by landlords, with short notices, in an attempt to maximise profit? A recent report by Deloitte showed that apartment development in Cork city is profitable only if rents are 21% above the market rate, that is, €2,800 for a two-bedroom apartment. The Government policy of build-to-rent is proving disastrous in Dublin, with 80% vacancy at Clancy Quay and 50% vacancy at Capital Dock. I fear we will see this now in Cork, including in my community of Blackpool.

There, developers want to build apartments to rent at Hewitt's Mill, on a site opposite the Revenue Commissioners offices, and at Popes Hill, combining 191 apartments with just 19 social houses. Cork City Council's development plan stipulates a minimum social housing provision of 14%, but this is just 10%. Furthermore, the planning application provides for zero provision of new childcare facilities on the spurious grounds they will not be needed for inhabitants of one- and two-bedroom apartments. In fact, this will add to a brewing childcare crisis in Blackpool and the northside of Cork city more generally, with 400 apartments planned within a ten-minute walk of the proposed sites and the Múin preschool facing closure to make way for another build-to-rent development. To add insult to injury, these apartments are to be fast-tracked through the undemocratic strategic housing development planning process, with power concentrated in the hands of An Bord Pleanála and little or no say for the local community.

We need a real community say over housing developments in Blackpool and communities throughout the country. That would be bad news for expensive apartments and profiteering developers. It would mean more notice for renters, more genuinely affordable housing, more social housing, more childcare facilities, protection of heritage and prioritisation, not destruction, of community. We need housing for people, not profit, and I am confident the community in Blackpool and communities throughout the country will stand up for what is right on these issues.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Many of us on this side of the Chamber expected the Green Party to play, to some extent, a sort of a watchdog role within the Government. We believed that, given its election manifesto and its long-held objectives in regard to housing and many other issues, the party would ensure it put pressure on both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to make them

do right by key issues such as housing.

9 o'clock

I spoke to a Deputy last week about how the Green Party seems to have completely retreated from these types of objectives in the areas of housing, healthcare and education. We had a conversation about whether this was the right thing for the party to do strategically. Perhaps it has decided that action on climate change and the environment is the only thing it can hope to achieve in this particular space and it is willing to concede, lock, stock and barrel, all the other elements of its election manifesto and platform on building economic justice and equality in this country. Perhaps that was the right decision for the Green Party. Perhaps it has no other option but to compartmentalise itself into one or two Departments and focus only on those areas. If that is the case, it may be strategically correct insofar as its objectives on climate change and the environment are concerned, but it means a whole section of Irish society is radically weakened as a result. I do not accept that it is necessary for the Green Party to retreat completely from those areas, put its hands up and say it will allow Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael free rein in that regard. There was some hope in the early days of the coalition, when a number of people in the party were kicking back, making the right sounds and adding a level of dissent, but their voices seem to have gone completely silent in recent times.

To give an example of what I mean by that, let us consider the situation whereby 180,000 homes are vacant in this State right now, according to the CSO. An Post says there are approximately 90,000 vacant homes, according to its figures. I put a question on this to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, who came back with the CSO figures, which are obviously way out of date at this stage. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael came up with the vacant site tax, which has brought in approximately €21,000 in total. That is probably less than it cost to draft the legislation in the first place. It might be the first time in history that a tax took in less in a given year than it cost to produce the legislation that introduced it. I asked the Minister for Finance whether he would double or triple the local property tax on vacant houses, to which he replied that it cannot be done because we do not know exactly why those houses are vacant. We need to find that out, he said, and the research will be done on it. In the budget the Government introduced a zoned land tax, which will not be implemented for two or three years and that will be charged at 3%, compared with a rate of 7% under the previous tax. The *Business Post* has released documents and evidence showing that a significant lobbying effort was addressed to the Government to go down a particular route on taxation in this area and that the Department is now reticent about, if not pushing back against, taxing vacant homes. This is just one clear example of where one would struggle to find what the Green Party influence has been - in this instance, in respect of getting vacant housing units back into use.

Another example is what has happened in the Airbnb sector. When Covid hit, we had a magical situation where all of these properties came up for rent in Dublin and the rest of the country. All of a sudden, rents started to fall and rental supply to increase. Of course, the reason that happened was that when the Covid crisis began, the Airbnb business model had to change. As short-term rentals were no longer viable, landlords started to switch to long-term renting. When the situation began to reverse recently, as tourism took off again in the summer, the opposite opened. Houses that were out for long-term rent were withdrawn and pushed into short-term rental, which led to a massive contraction of the supply of housing to the rental accommodation sector throughout the country but especially in Dublin, with a surge in rental prices. A Bill brought to the Dáil by Aontú to ensure people could not put second homes up for short-term rental in urban areas was a logical proposal that one might assume the Green Party

naturally would support or, at least, as a partner in government, that it would push for it. Again, however, there is no evidence that the party has made any push or had any influence in this area.

In the case of real estate investment trusts, REITs, one would again assume the Green Party would have liked to do something about the competitive advantage those trusts have in buying up housing stock, in competition with first-time buyers and families looking for homes. Aontú, the smallest party in the Dáil, produced a Bill to delete the competitive taxation advantages REITs have in regard to buying houses. This seems like a platform that would be attractive to the Green Party and one on which it would have influence in the Government. Again, we see no sign of its influence in that space. There is a whole series of areas in which levers could be pulled that would make housing more affordable and accessible to families and first-time buyers, reduce the competitive advantages currently held by large-scale international investors and create a level playing field in these markets. We are not seeing any evidence of the Green Party pushing or holding the Government to account in this regard.

Perhaps the party does not feel it is possible to do so. However, if we look at other Governments in the past, it has been done. I would be no fan of the Progressive Democrats, which, in many ways, had the opposite politics to those of my party and me. However, when the party was in government with Fianna Fáil, it was the tail that wagged the dog. In many ways, Fianna Fáil is without ideology and without an ideological compass. It is a party well suited to being pushed in a certain direction. There is no evidence of the Green Party doing any pushing in the areas I have outlined. I urge those members of the party who have a strong social conscience on real issues, such as housing, to start to flex their muscles while they can. The electorate will not thank the party for remaining silent on these issues, if it does so, for the remaining years of the coalition.

Another example is in regard to the capping of rents. Rental prices are surging around the country at the moment. There is no excuse at this time for such increases. I expect the Minister of State probably agrees with me that there is no logical business or social justification for increasing rents throughout society at this time. Even those landlords who were in negative equity in the past are receiving rents that cover mortgages that may have been taken out prior to 2009 or 2010. However, we have come back to the well three times in terms of legislation on capping rents. All of those Bills have been weak efforts. All the while, we have a society in which there is massive housing distress. I reckon there are 1 million people in housing distress in the State, including those who are still working their way through the courts following the mortgage distress arising from the banking crash, people who are locked out of housing because of the surging rents facing their generation and those who cannot afford to buy homes. In Dublin right now, people need a deposit of approximately €52,000 and an income of €100,000 to be able to buy one of the cheapest homes available. Hundreds of thousands of people are still on local authority housing waiting lists. Thousands of people are homeless and some of them are dying on the streets. Last year, I brought to the attention of the Dáil that 72 people had died in homelessness on the streets of Dublin, a figure that was far higher than that for the previous year. Those data - that human story - were not even being collected in any other county in the State.

I am amazed that Green Party Members were not jumping up and down on issues such as this. I hope they have not corralled themselves into one or two Departments. I urge the Minister of State to start using his influence on issues such as housing, which is a national emergency in this country at the moment.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The recent rental sector survey report for 2020 by the Residential Tenancies Board found that affordability is a significant issue for tenants. More than half of the surveyed tenants are spending more than 30% of their income on rent and 64% of those are in Dublin. Needless to say, I support anyone who is at risk of homelessness following an eviction notice. We need to try to prevent their entry into emergency accommodation.

Rights of tenants are not fully addressed in legislation. A tenant is left very vulnerable when there are issues in the property they are renting. They are afraid to draw the landlord onto them in case they decide to sell the property and they become homeless. The local authorities need to move faster to ensure works are carried out when there is a problem with a rental house. I recently came across an example where a tenant found 22 items wrong with the house they were in. The landlord said they did not have the money to deal with it and the tenant was left high and dry. The choice was to stay in the house or to get out. The landlord could either sell the house or know there were plenty of other people who wanted to rent the house no matter what condition it was in.

As much goodwill as the Minister might have to help people who are homeless, his Government has been the cause of increasing costs for people living in a house. At a time of Covid crisis and at a time of a national crisis for fuel, the Government has used a percentage model on fuel which means that every person in a house that does not have proper upgraded heating systems, such as air-to-water heat pumps, solar panels and underfloor heating, are left heating their houses with oil or solid fuel. The Government's answer to that was to increase the taxes on all those fuels. The Government has increased the taxes for a household with one car by €30 a week. For a household with two cars, the Government has increased it by €60. In a home heated by solid fuel, the Government has taken an extra €20 on the cost of coal, bales of briquettes or whatever they are using. For a house with oil heating, the Government has increased fuel costs by €30 per week.

Is it any wonder that people are going cold and people are homeless? They pay excessive rents for poor accommodation, which means they need to heat the houses. What does the Government do? It increases the taxes at a time the most vulnerable need its help. I have said this in this House on more than one occasion: we all have a green agenda and we all want to save the planet. However, in a time of crisis, it is up to the Government to protect the people who need our help. We did it after the arrival of Covid when things could be changed overnight and we helped to protect people. The Minister's outlook is completely wrong in helping people; they are in homeless accommodation.

I have been involved in construction all my life and I am still self-employed. The cost of materials to build houses or retrofit houses has increased by 47%.

I am not a landlord, but I know many tenants and I know many landlords. I know some very good landlords and some very good tenants. I also know many bad landlords and many bad tenants. We have that in all walks of life. I have seen people who have got into mortgage arrears. They may have been unsuccessful in getting funding to try to keep their house and have to sell the house. These people end up in the rental market usually with a local landlord who would look after them. However, there are also vulture funds and big business, which at every turn are increasing rents. If they can establish that someone else might pay more rent, they will try to push the tenant out. This is a very serious situation.

The Minister can help many people who are paying excessive rents in poor accommodation.

They can even be helped through fuel. At a time when Europe asked Ireland to reduce taxes, the Government increased them. As I said earlier today, the Government is taking €5.6 billion in extra taxes it is charging on fuel. That includes home heating oil, coal, briquettes and fuel that goes into every vehicle. Yesterday, I met farmers who were protesting at the gate over how difficult it was for their generation to survive. The Government is going to make them homeless with the way it is carrying on. It has lost all grip with reality. It does not understand what it is like for people who do not have infrastructure.

Whereas the Government might not be able to help people to get accommodation in certain areas, it can help people to hold onto the accommodation they have until something else becomes available to them by freezing the tax at a set price. It is like a tracker mortgage whereby the Government sets the tax it is going to take from different sections for 12 months. That means everyone knows exactly what they have in their hand when it comes to their being able to afford the rent. In the same way as people trying to pay their mortgages, they can then set down exactly how much money they have in their hand to try to keep their family safe so that they do not become homeless. That is what the Government can do for people who have to travel to work in a car because of no infrastructure due to the failure of this Government and previous governments to look after people who live where there is no infrastructure. Covid has highlighted the lack of infrastructure throughout the country.

The Minister could help by proposing that Government stop using the percentage model and lock in our taxes. I accept it needs to raise tax to pay for services; we understand that. However, this is a time of crisis. The quickest way for the Government to provide relief to people is to reduce the tax on fuel - the extra tax on fuel. The Government should go back to its 2020 model where it was taking 81 cent per litre; it is now taking €1. That is 19 cent multiplied by 2 million cars, 40,000 heavy goods vehicles, 338,000 light goods vehicles and 71,000 tractors. The Government can make a direct impact on people's purses and they can use it to keep them warm in a house that is in poor repair until they can get something better, but it refuses to do that.

There are many ways to try to help the homeless. There are many ways to try to stop people becoming homeless. That is one way the Government can have a direct impact. By giving people €100 towards an electricity bill, if they are relying on electricity to heat their home and the heat going out through the window, it is €170 million of their own money the Government is giving back to the taxpayer when it is taking in €5.6 billion in extra taxes since 2020. It is in the Minister's hands.

Deputy Joan Collins: As one of the five Deputies who introduced this Bill last week on behalf of the Simon Communities of Ireland, I support the Bill, as every and any action that can prevent people being evicted into homelessness is a progressive protective step for people facing increasing notices to quit, evictions and homelessness. My colleagues in my constituency office report that they have seen a steady increase in the number of families and individuals presenting at the office who face notices to quit. One such couple, who came in yesterday, have been privately renting the same house from a private landlord for the last 17 years. They have two children, one of whom has special needs and is strongly linked in with the community. For them, facing a notice to quit is a nightmare. It exposes the insecurity of private rented accommodation for families and the need for a ramping up of the cost-rental model of housing for people and families. Rent should not be based on the market rate but on affordability relative to income.

These families and individuals are reflected in a recent article written by Dr. Rory Hearne which noted that since July this year, there has been an 18% increase in the number of children in homeless accommodation, with a 25% increase in the south and south west. This is a shocking increase. The eviction ban of March 2020 meant the number of notices to quit fell dramatically, by 83%, in the second quarter of 2020. It fell again in the first quarter of this year due to the October 2020 moratorium. After the ban was removed in April, eviction notices doubled from 352 in the first quarter of the year to 841 in the second quarter, and reached 887 in the third quarter. Two thirds of these were issued to tenants outside Dublin.

Threshold has dealt with almost 4,000 eviction cases this year, which is about 1,000 more than the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, figure. This suggests a significant number of landlords are failing to register their eviction notices with the RTB, which is a legal requirement. This is coupled with an unprecedented shortage of available rental property. People have nowhere to go when they face these notices. The Simon Communities of Ireland found that in Cork city, Galway, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford city not one property was available to rent within the affordability range of someone on a low income who was eligible for a housing assistance payment, HAP.

The Bill is designed to reduce the number of people evicted into homelessness. It will allow local authorities to determine whether a person or family is at risk of homelessness. Such a determination would trigger an extension in the notice period of that person's or family's tenancy in order to avoid entry into emergency accommodation at the end of the four-week period. It proposes to change tenancy laws so that a person or family at risk of homelessness is provided with a three-month extension to their notice period. The three-month extension would be triggered by a housing authority or local authority certifying a person as being at risk of homelessness, within the meaning set out in the Housing Act, upon the termination of the existing notice period.

The Right 2 Change party's housing policy goes further that this in providing that legislation should be introduced to ban all economic evictions into homelessness. In saying that, I support the Bill as it is progressive and I commend the Simon communities and Mr. Wayne Stanley on advancing this legislation. I welcome the fact that the Minister contacted the Simon communities this morning and agreed to progress the substance of the Bill in the first quarter of next year. Deputies on this side of the House will ensure that happens. In tandem with this Bill going through Committee Stage in the first quarter of next year, it has been predicted that Omicron variant cases will double every two days in the coming period. On that basis, we should introduce an eviction ban immediately because people in very poor housing conditions will be infected and potentially end up in hospital.

I thank Sinn Féin for using its Private Members' time to put this Bill on the agenda.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I listened to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien's response to the Bill and his acceptance that it can contribute to early intervention, thus supporting families or individuals who are at risk of homelessness and, by extension, helping to prevent people from becoming homeless. The Minister also said that no single action or law, including this Bill, will deal with the crisis of homelessness. I fully agree with him, but nobody has suggested, certainly not in my hearing, that this Bill is any kind of magic potion. It could be described simply and straightforwardly as a practical proposal that does what it says on the tin.

Where a local authority determines a person or family who is under notice to quit or facing

eviction is at risk of homelessness, a three-month extension to their tenancy will be granted. People might ask what good that will do and say it is only postponing the inevitable. That is not the case. I will outline the experience of the Simon communities nationally and North West Simon Community. Many individuals will be given a notice to quit because a landlord is selling the property or for another reason. They spend the notice period searching locally, scouring different rental sites, checking with friends and family, asking around and doing everything they can to find another rental property. The weeks pass and, very often, nothing is available and they cannot afford whatever is available. Then panic sets in. They approach housing agencies like the Simon communities or local councillors and Deputies but there is no time. If, however, this Bill was in place, those at risk of becoming homeless could liaise with the local authority, housing agency or local representatives for the three-month period and avoid becoming homeless.

Families and people become homeless faster than most people think. It is an issue that is much closer than most people think for many renters. It happens quickly. People only need to speak to someone who is homeless or the agencies that deal with the homeless. The Bill gives a bit of extra space and breathing room. That is why early intervention is so important and the reason the Simon communities drafted this Bill is that its practical day-to-day experience tells it that this extra time matters. During that time, families and individuals are engaging with homeless services and their local authorities. I thank the Simon Communities of Ireland for giving me the opportunity to be one of the six Deputies who sponsored this Bill. I thank Sinn Féin for giving its Private Members' time so that we could debate it.

It is important to say that sometimes people think homelessness is largely an urban issue, but is also a rural issue. Nationally, the Simon Communities of Ireland published a study, *Locked Out*, which surveyed 16 areas, two of which were Sligo and Leitrim. Specifically in Leitrim, of the 13 properties that were available to rent at the time of the survey, not one property came within the housing assistance payment rate for singles, couples or families. According to *daft.ie*, rental prices in Leitrim increased by 16% in the year to quarter 2 of 2021. In Sligo town there was a similar picture. There were ten properties to rent but not one came within the HAP rate for singles, couples or families. In Sligo, the average increase in rents was 14.5%.

The Minister should look at what is happening in the north west. I thank the Simon Communities of Ireland for its good work. Of the 104 households it is currently supporting, only 20% are in reasonably secure accommodation; 28 are sofa-surfing; 13 are sharing overcrowded accommodation; 11 have received eviction notices; 11 are in emergency accommodation; four are in hospital; three are sleeping in tents; two were recently evicted; one is in a caravan; and one is in a car.

The only solution to homelessness is a home. Until there is greater supply, two measures will help, namely, the provision of a system of early intervention, as proposed in this Bill, and an increase in the rates payable under HAP.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): We will return to the Government and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I propose to share my time with Deputy Duffy.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, for sharing his time with me on this very important Bill. I also thank the Simon Communities of Ireland,

with which I engaged on this Bill, and Wayne Stanley in particular for unifying many parties on both sides of the House on this critical issue. It is a very reasonable proposal which I hope the Government will seriously consider progressing and supporting. As mentioned by my colleagues in the Opposition, the Bill very simply aims to identify people at risk of homelessness and to provide the support and services needed to prevent the household, whether it be a family with children or a single person, from entering homelessness by means of a 12-week extension.

According to a recent Threshold report, tenancy termination has become the number one issue for tenants in the private rental sector. A stark figure shows that almost half of terminations brought to Threshold in 2020 were ultimately found to be invalid for reasons including invalid notices of termination and evictions and threatened evictions being illegal. The solution here is tenancy security, strengthened enforcement and public awareness to ensure that tenants and landlords are fully aware of their rights and responsibilities.

I would like to correct the Dáil record in respect of Deputy Tóibín's comments. Green Party policies agreed in the programme for Government or by my team and I since last year include the introduction of cost-rental accommodation totalling 2,000 units a year, which is just the start; tenancies of indefinite duration; 100% public housing on public land; the abolishment of co-living and strategic housing developments; a referendum on a right to housing; a town centres first policy to revitalise our towns; the commencement of 30,000 units in the first ten months of this year and retrofitting social homes. I should add that the Green Party policy of heat conservation, implemented through Part L of the building regulations, has brought more people out of fuel poverty than any other policy in the history of the State. Despite what Opposition Members might critique, I am sure they agree that cost-rental accommodation and tenancies of indefinite duration will not only assist in dealing with the immediate crisis, but will also provide long-term security and affordability to tenants, both of which have been missing key elements in Irish housing policy.

However, the Bill could be strengthened. The Government could go further by ensuring that intervention is provided from the very start once a notice to quit is served. This would ensure households do not reach crisis point and would prevent heightened levels of anxiety and distress. It would also give local authorities and organisations plenty of time to provide services. I submitted this proposal as an amendment to the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2021 but, disappointingly, it did not get accepted, perhaps due to time constraints. I hope to revisit these proposals with my colleagues on the committee.

To conclude, I again extend my support for this Bill and commend the Simon Communities of Ireland not only on its legislative work, but also on its front-line services that have seen thousands of households saved from homelessness and on its constant willingness to provide advice to me and other legislators.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I again thank Sinn Féin, the other co-sponsors of the Bill, the Simon Communities of Ireland and Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward this Bill. It is great to have cross-party unity on this matter. I will quickly raise a number of issues that Members have brought up in their contributions.

With regard to private emergency accommodation, new standards are currently being rolled out in each facility. This will be completed early in the new year. The standards are based on the national quality standards framework. I mention this in connection with Deputy Cian

O’Callaghan’s comments. In terms of health, Housing for All provides that every homeless person is to have an individual healthcare plan. Funding was allocated in the budget to provide for these additional services. To respond to Deputy Tóibín’s contribution, apart from his bizarre comments with which he wasted his speaking time having a go at the Green Party, a review of the fiscal treatment of landlords is to be carried out by the third quarter of 2022. This is a commitment under Housing for All.

As the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, has already outlined, this Government’s commitment to preventing homelessness is strong and will continue to be unwavering. Policies are in place, backed by the necessary funding, to help people remain in their homes. We are preventing, and will continue to prevent, homelessness from occurring in the first instance. We all agree that preventing homelessness is a priority for Government to address. The Government will therefore not be opposing the Bill this evening. No party or Deputy has a monopoly on wisdom when it comes to addressing our toughest challenges. My Government colleagues and I welcome all proposals as to how we can improve our response in dealing with the particular needs of those facing the prospect of homelessness. That is why I welcome this Bill this evening.

In enacting legislation, we have to make sure that law is fit for purpose and will deliver the desired outcomes. The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2021 regulate the landlord-tenant relationship in the rented residential sector and set out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants. Any proposed measures that would impact on private property rights require detailed consideration and scrutiny having regard to the provisions of Article 43 of the Constitution and the associated legal complexities. In the context of recent and future changes to the Residential Tenancies Acts, it was and remains important for any rental reform to be justifiable and necessary as a matter of priority to avoid the risk of weakening the stability of, and confidence in, the rental sector. The Government relies on the private rental sector to provide much-needed housing generally as well as housing through which social housing needs can be met. Any actions that directly or inadvertently undermine the economic viability of rental accommodation provision could negatively impact on both existing and future supply of rental accommodation or on the wider economy and damage future capacity and attractiveness for both landlords and tenants.

As the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, outlined, he is required to commence a review of the operation periods of termination notices to be given to tenants before 4 June 2022. It is my understanding that he has committed to bringing this forward to earlier in 2022. In this context, the Simon Communities of Ireland’s proposal will be carefully considered.

I want to talk further about the actions the Government is undertaking to prevent homelessness. Next year’s housing budget of €4 billion will see the largest amount spent on housing in the history of the State. The available funding will deliver social and affordable homes. A major focus in this regard will be on investment in the delivery of new-build units, with an overall target for new homes. Housing for All commits to the delivery of more than 9,500 new-build social homes on average over the next five years. More than 90,000 new social homes will be delivered in the period from 2022 to 2030. Approximately 18,000 cost-rental homes will be delivered by local authorities, approved housing bodies and the Land Development Agency between now and 2030. Housing for All provides funding and commits to delivering 36,000 affordable homes for purchase, an average of 4,000 per annum.

Overall, it is estimated that Ireland will need 33,000 new homes to be provided each year

from 2021 to 2030. Housing for All plans to deliver these homes. These are ambitious targets and a testament to the ongoing work in the Department, local authorities, approved housing bodies and the private sector. Work is also under way with a housing delivery co-ordination office and the local authorities on the implementation of measures to deliver housing solutions for households on the social housing waiting list.

While it is undoubtedly the most crucial part of the jigsaw, the provision of housing will not, on its own, be sufficient to help all individuals exit homelessness or be prevented from entering it in the first place. For this reason, other programmes to address homelessness are predicated on the understanding that many households experiencing homelessness have additional support needs. Specific measures are required to address those needs. These include measures to help rough sleepers into sustainable accommodation, the continued expansion of Housing First with a focus on the construction and acquisition of one-bed homes and, importantly, ensuring that there are dedicated resources and funding to deliver the necessary health supports, including mental health supports, required to assist homeless people with complex needs. Housing First currently supports more than 600 former rough sleepers and long-term users of emergency accommodation with significant health, mental health and addiction issues to remain in their own homes. In line with the commitment in Housing for All, we are planning to expand the targets set out under the national implementation plan for the period from 2018 to 2021.

Housing for All commits to working to eradicate homelessness by 2030. It sets out a number of commitments that will build upon the comprehensive prevention mechanisms that are already in place and delivering results. If these prevention mechanisms need to be improved, we are open to considering new ideas. That is why we want to see this proposed legislation scrutinised further. Many of those with experience of homelessness say that agencies should be working together better. It is a cause of frustration when different agencies and services do not work together towards common goals. Eradicating homelessness by 2030 is an ambitious goal that will require the co-ordinated actions of a wide variety of agencies and stakeholders. A holistic approach with enhanced levels of cohesion is required. This is why the Minister is establishing a national homeless action committee. This committee will be cross-governmental and inter-agency in composition and will have the involvement of key stakeholders. It will ensure better coherence and co-ordination among homelessness-related services in delivering policy measures and actions. The Minister has identified all nominees that will be part of his group.

In conclusion, I thank the House again for providing an opportunity to discuss this legislation. It has given us a chance to talk about preventative measures to tackle homelessness as well as the actions needed to increase housing supply, the delivery of social housing supply and initiatives to address homelessness. The number of people experiencing homelessness still remains much too high. The commitments outlined in the Housing for All policy and continued interagency co-operation between different Departments, local authorities and partners in the voluntary and NGO sector will be of vital importance as we continue to address this issue. The Bill will go forward for pre-legislative scrutiny where its deficiencies can be addressed and its potential effectiveness assessed. In the meantime, progress has been and will continue to be made in this critical area. We have an ambitious programme of work that will be intensified and accelerated in the months and years to come to eradicate homelessness by 2030.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: There is a scenario which has become far too prevalent. Let us imagine a context where a landlord has issued a notice to quit. Anxiety would set in as the people concerned desperately search for somewhere to live. It may prove impossible, however, to find anywhere affordable. The housing assistance payment, HAP, may not be sufficient to

cover the rent of any of those places which are available. The clock will tick down for people in that situation and soon enough they will find themselves homeless. People in such a scenario would then present themselves to their local authority as being homeless and that is a devastating prospect for any family. We should think about that reality and how it feels for any individual or family to be in such a situation.

This has become an all-too-common reality for many of our people. Currently, some 61 families in Galway city have received notices to quit and have presented themselves to city hall as being in need of assistance. These families will experience incredible fear and anxiety during Christmas and great uncertainty about what will happen in the new year. This legislation would give them much relief. These 61 families are in addition to those currently in homeless accommodation. Some 27 families are in homeless hubs, while 53 families are in private emergency accommodation. Therefore, a total of 80 families are facing Christmas without a place to call home. As we know, many people in homeless accommodation are told to look for HAP accommodation. The reality, however, is that there are often no properties available within the limits of the HAP payments. This is an issue which keeps arising in Galway city and this precarious housing situation has been created by this Government and its forebears.

In Galway city, more money has again been allocated this year for homeless emergency services. While this year-on-year increase is needed, it does not address people's housing needs and the requirement to build more houses. I am pleased to see that the Government is not opposing our legislation. It is fantastic to see cross-party solidarity in bringing forward this legislation based on work done by the Simon Communities of Ireland. However, we need action in this regard. We cannot have a situation where homelessness is discussed in this Chamber each Christmas and people say how terrible it is, only for very little to be done about it and the subject is then discussed again the following year. I hope therefore that this Bill will be the start of a new collaboration between the Government and the Opposition to tackle homelessness.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Like everyone else, I thank the Simon Communities of Ireland for its work on this legislation. I welcome that the Government representatives have talked about delivering on the substance of the Bill early in the new year. We must ensure that happens. The people we are talking about are those facing notices to quit and the possibility of homelessness. What the Government has failed to do, like many governments, is to deliver early interventions to stop people falling into homelessness. This is the idea of a three-month extension with local authorities engaging whereby we can stop problems before they become much larger. This is not a silver bullet but it is a simple solution and it must happen.

We are all aware that next weekend the Simon communities will get great support for their fundraising efforts. Councillor Antóin Watters has invited me out to the Cooley Peninsula to a sleep-out being held to fundraise for the Peter McVerry Trust. People are very good in this regard but we must deal with the substantive issue. We have major issues with housing. We accept that this is a small step and that we must deal with the main issue of housing supply. That goes without saying. Everyone has recorded their contributions on that issue.

We do not, however, have sufficient homeless supports. I know of many instances where vulnerable people have been put into houses. The required supports have not been put in place around them and terrible things have happened. There have been issues of criminality and antisocial behaviour. There is a need for the State to help in this regard. The required services include the Garda and mental health services, and go beyond the local authorities. If we do not put in the requisite supports, however, then we will end up with issues such as those that oc-

curred in my town recently. Two houses there went on fire when vulnerable people were used and abused by criminals. What happens in situations like that is that we end up with a complete disaster. It is unacceptable that people have had to live with those situations.

We must also deal with the issue of the thresholds in respect of getting on the housing list. There are difficulties regarding how that is assessed. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and to the Minister of State with responsibility in this area, Deputy Peter Burke, about this issue. The solution must be expedited. The other major issue is that I know people who would stay in their parents' house, but they cannot because they are afraid of losing the time they already accrued on the housing waiting list. Therefore, they are taking from what is already a limited number of houses in the private sector. We have many solutions for this problem. Here is one. It needs to be done.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Wayne Stanley and the Simon Communities of Ireland for its work on this simple but important legislation. I also acknowledge all the members of the other political parties in opposition who co-signed this Bill, including those in the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, the Independent Group, People Before Profit-Solidarity, as well as my own colleagues.

Everybody has said that legislation like this will be useful and that it will not solve all the problems in this area but that it will give us another tool to try to help address some of the issues in this regard and to help some of the people affected. I am the kind of person who takes people at their word and therefore I accept what has been said by all the Government representatives who spoke on this issue. The issue here, however, is not whether all of us here mean what we say but whether we do the things that we say we will. In that regard, if we let this Bill meander through Committee Stage for months and months, then it will be of no value. I urge the Minister of State to discuss with his colleagues in the Department whether there may be a way for the Government to take the spirit of this provision and to work it into legislation that the Government itself is going to enact early next year. That would mean that the Minister of State's officials would be able to deal with all the deficiencies in the Bill that he and the Minister outlined. In addition, it would also mean that the provisions would become law. We did something similar with the Residential Tenancies (Student Rents and Other Protections) (Covid-19) Bill 2021, which was based on the work of the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, as well as back when Eoghan Murphy was the Minister with responsibility in this area.

Those of us who have been in this House a little bit longer than the current Minister of State have a terrible sense of *dejà vu* when we have these debates. We are told of the Government's commitment to addressing this issue and of the long list of actions and high levels of expenditure which will be mobilised to address the housing and homelessness crisis. Yet, month on month and year on year, the problems get worse. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, was absolutely right when he said there was a significant drop in family homelessness, especially, in the first year and half after the onset of Covid-19. There is a simple reason for that and it was not because of any of the policies of the Government or its predecessor, other than an emergency ban on evictions due to the impact of Covid-19. That was a public health measure, and similar to one that many of us had been arguing for as a social policy emergency measure for many years.

The result was that homelessness fell by 60% across the State. In some areas, family homelessness fell by as much as 80%. The difficulty now is that all those protections have been removed and month-on-month the figures are rising in exactly the same way as they did when

14 December 2021

Eoghan Murphy was the Minister. I will work constructively with anybody to try to tackle this crisis. We will all be judged by our actions, however, and not by our words. Let us therefore ensure that in the weeks ahead our actions match the words that we all used here tonight. As I said at the end of my opening remarks, let us make 2022 the year of preventing homelessness and of dramatically reducing homelessness.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Prices

27. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the actions he will take to reduce energy bills for households this winter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61986/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to ask the Minister the actions he will take to reduce energy bills for households this winter and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I am here on behalf the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who has a cold and cannot be here and sends his apologies. The Government is acutely aware of the impact the recent increases in energy prices are having on households. This is a global phenomenon and expert commentators, including the International Energy Agency, IEA, have attributed this to a range of demand and supply factors that have contributed to a tightening of the European gas market supplies and the upward trend in wholesale gas prices we have witnessed since mid-2020.

The best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency, renewable energy and to expand interconnection with our European and neighbouring markets and to deepen internal electricity market integration.

The Government's immediate response to address the increase in domestic energy prices has been to utilise the tax and social welfare system to counter rising costs of living. Budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the fuel allowance so that €914 will be paid to eligible households over the course of this winter. It increased the qualified child payment and the living alone allowance and an increase to the income threshold for the working family payment was also announced.

Consumers should continue to switch or engage with their energy supplier, and many households could still save on their bills if they did so. As recently as 9 December, switching supplier could save a customer consuming the average amount of electricity up to €313.

The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU, has in place a suite of protections

against disconnection that are set out in the supplier handbook. In brief, priority customers cannot be disconnected, while vulnerable customers are protected over winter months from 1 November to 31 March each year while a CRU moratorium on disconnections for all customers comes into effect over the Christmas period. Additionally, under the supplier-led voluntary energy engage code, suppliers will not disconnect a customer who is engaging with them at any time.

Further, due to the ongoing pressure on households, the Government agreed today to provide a one-off credit of €100 to every domestic electricity account holder through their electricity supplier in the first quarter of 2022.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is quite incredible a week out from Christmas that we are here with nothing more than an outline of a plan to do something on runaway electricity bills and nothing on home heating oil or fuel. Everyone could see the trend. As far back as 3 February Sinn Féin brought a Private Members' motion on the issue. The Government said its hands were tied. Wholesale gas prices increased by 400% and electricity by 200%. The Government said its hands were tied. Over the course of this Dáil term, every time we met in this forum on Priority Questions, I raised this issue and the Government said its hands were tied, pointing to international markets. It is two full months since the European Commission published its toolbox and said the Government's hands were not tied.

When is the measure agreed at Cabinet today to come into effect? Is it the case that the legislation will be in for January? Will the credit be applied to bills in March or April? Is there a way this can be done sooner? The Opposition will work with the Government to make this happen sooner. In our opinion it needs to happen before Christmas.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I welcome the Deputy's offer to co-operate with the Government to bring this in as soon as possible. That absolutely makes sense. I also welcome Deputy McDonald's comments today that she welcomes this initiative and that it will bring some relief. In terms of when this can be done, we cannot legislate before January but we will bring this in as soon as possible. With the co-operation of the Opposition I think we can bring it in very quickly. The target is to get it done in the first quarter.

Of course, there are two parts to this. There is what happens in the short term during this winter and how we avoid this type of situation occurring in the long term. That is what the toolbox discusses. The toolbox asks us to target people in energy poverty. It asks us to make sure we are broadly helping those who need it most and also finding long-term solutions in terms of switching to renewable energy and energy efficiency. That is why there is nearly €200 million of retrofitting funds being targeted specifically at low-income houses over the course of the next 12 months.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: To what degree has an assessment been made of alternative ways to introduce this legislation or regulation in the quickest way possible? What does quarter 1 of next year mean? Is it the case that we will be dealing with this legislation for the first three months of next year? When will people see this impact on their bills? That is the real question people have. They want to see it before Christmas. This has been on the agenda for months at this stage and the Government has failed to act on it. The toolbox from the European Commission has been there for two months at this stage telling the Government it can act.

In addition, as the Minister of State has said, this needs to be part of a broader suite of mea-

asures. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has indicated that targeted measures including the provision of a discretionary fund for utility debt should be considered and implemented. Is that something the Government will look at?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: As for the options that are considered for dealing with energy poverty, a lot of work went into this before the budget. These were the discussions and calculations that took place to try to find who in the population needs the payment most, the best way to target it and the most efficient way to get that money out there. There was a range of things that went beyond the traditional measures such as increasing the fuel allowance by a number of euro. There was also an attempt to target people through the living alone allowance. Older people who are living alone have much more difficulty heating their homes than those who have a number of people in their household. That type of targeting exercise and options had been considered right up to the budget.

On the toolbox, it is recommended. It is not mandatory. It provides a suite of options to reduce suffering and people living in energy poverty during the winter. We have taken the best of what we could do and brought it in as quickly as possible. With the co-operation of the Opposition, I think we can get it into people's homes within the first three months of next year.

Natural Gas Grid

28. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way the addition of 2GW of gas-fired power will affect Ireland's carbon emissions and reduction targets; if the policy is driven by the needs of energy intensive industry, such data centres as suggested by the CEO of EirGrid in recent comments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61539/21]

Deputy Bríd Smith: I wish to ask the Minister of State about the addition of the 2 GW of gas-fired power that will affect Ireland's carbon emissions and reduction targets, and if the policy is driven by the needs of energy-intensive industries such as data centres, as suggested by the CEO of EirGrid in recent comments and if the Minister of State will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government's policy statement on security of electricity supply sets out that the development of gas-fired generation is a national priority and should be permitted and supported in order to ensure security of electricity supply and support the growth of renewable electricity generation.

The policy statement supports the need to deliver about 2 GW of new gas-fired generation which is set out in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 and the Climate Action Plan 2021. The need for this level of new gas-fired generation capacity was identified by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, which has statutory responsibility for security of electricity supply, and EirGrid, the electricity transmission system operator.

As set out in EirGrid's Generation Capacity Statement 2021-2030, much of this new capacity is needed to replace older high-emitting power stations, such as those fuelled by oil and coal, which are due to close over the coming years. It is also needed to meet growing demand from large energy users, such as data centres, and the electrification of the transport sector and of heating in our homes and businesses. It is important to note that the development of flex-

ible gas-fired generation is to provide security of supply and support high levels of renewable electricity generation. The new capacity will only run when needed and therefore the level of associated emissions will be minimised.

A number of actions are being taken to manage the impact of data centre growth on our electricity system and emission reduction targets. The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities has published a direction to EirGrid and ESB Networks that requires each of the system operators to prioritise data centre connections based on location, the availability of on-site generation and flexibility in reducing demand when required. In addition, the Climate Action Plan 2021 commits the Government to reviewing its strategy on data centres to ensure the growth of such users can only happen in alignment with our sectoral emissions ceilings and renewable energy targets.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I would argue that when we strip away all the rhetoric, the Green Party in government is presiding over the expansion of fossil fuels and our reliance on them in the State. The Government is tying us into another 30 years at least of dependence on gas and facilitating arguments that will be made by proponents of liquefied natural gas by deepening our reliance on gas. Gas is not a bridge to anything. It is a fossil fuel and the expansion of its use and infrastructure is a betrayal of the climate movement the Green Party is supposed to represent and the pledges made by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, in Glasgow. There is really nothing short term about this. Building gas stations will tie us in for 30 years.

10 o'clock

It is very clear from recent statements by Mr. Mark Foley of EirGrid - the Minister of State should familiarise himself with the meeting he had with the data industry - that this is to facilitate the growth and proliferation of that industry. It makes a complete nonsense of the claim that we can somehow magically continue to have unlimited data centres, reduce our emissions and reach our targets.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. The use of fossil fuels in Ireland is being reduced. We are now moving towards a target of having 80% of our electricity generated through renewable sources by 2030. That necessarily means a reduction in our fossil fuel use. Although we have more gas plants being built - I am sure the Deputy understands this point - an extra 2 GW of gas plant capacity does not mean we are burning gas in the plants all the time. It means we have the capacity in an emergency to bring up enough gas to continue to supply electricity to those who need it around the country. There will be a capacity option shortly to allow for the 2 GW. That is for people to have the ability to receive electricity from gas over the next ten years; it is not to allow it to be burned all the time. It is for use when it is absolutely needed. I agree that gas is not a transition fuel. This is not a policy of the Government but it is a policy of the Government that liquefied natural gas, LNG, stations are not to be built pending the review of energy security.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The next question concerns why we have an energy-security problem and why we may have blackouts this winter. Already, many have been reported around the country. Part of the answer is related to the dependency on the data industry. At present, it accounts for 11% of our national grid. I am aware that the Minister of State and the Minister would argue that we must move rapidly towards renewables and offshore wind energy, but why do we not have these yet? We do not because those who sat on licences for more than 20 years and did not develop the offshore wind capacity that they could have developed did so because

of their profit margins, not because of the needs of the State, national grid or country. Therefore, the Minister of State is attempting to bulldoze in changes. It is absolutely shameful for the Green Party to sit in government and recommit to having gas infrastructure in the country. If we are to deliver wind energy at scale, the Minister of State's party should be advocating a national renewable energy company to do it for us, just as the ESB provided electricity in the past. Thus, we will not be reliant on the profit margins of the developers of renewable energy.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We have an energy challenge because there is a major transition in which we are moving away from fossil fuels towards a low-carbon economy and renewables. Obviously, that is difficult to do. I agree with Deputy Bríd Smith that we should have installed offshore wind infrastructure ten years ago. When I see the great offshore wind farms built by Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium, I think that we should have built them also. We have a windy area around our country. We cannot go back in time, however. We have been in government for a year and we are building offshore wind facilities as fast as we possibly can.

On the Deputy's question as to whether we should have a national body to develop renewable energy, there will be considerable involvement by the State. The ESB has for a long time been building renewable energy facilities. Bord na Móna, Coillte and all such large State bodies will be significantly involved, as will EirGrid.

Broadband Infrastructure

29. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address the issues raised recently in articles (details supplied) in relation to the national broadband plan, including National Broadband Ireland's corporate structure, financial arrangements, long-term viability and ability to deliver on the plan. [61987/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister of State address the issues raised recently in articles in the *Business Post* and *The Currency* on the national broadband plan, including National Broadband Ireland's corporate structure, financial arrangements, long-term viability and ability to deliver on the plan. The Government has had its review so we want the results. We also want to know how many premises will be passed, how many connections have been made and whether we will reach the target of 60,000 by the end of January.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The contract for the national broadband plan State-led intervention, which was signed with National Broadband Ireland in November 2019, is a comprehensive and detailed document. To protect the State investment and ensure that the national broadband plan milestones and deliverables are met, the contract has been designed to include extensive protections, quality checks, reporting and monitoring obligations.

I am aware of recent commentary in relation to the national broadband plan contract, in particular with regard to the ownership of National Broadband Ireland and the investment of shareholders' funds.

On the matter of ownership, Metallah Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of National Broadband Ireland, save for the special share of the Minister, which does not provide ownership rights. Granahan McCourt Dublin Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of Metallah Limited and is owned 50.9% by Granahan McCourt Fund Limited, a David McCourt controlled company, and 49.1% by Tel-IE Broadband Sari, an entity managed

and controlled by Oak Hill Advisors. The ownership structure remains as it was at the signing of the contract.

The investors are providing funding through the purchase of shares in National Broadband Ireland and the provision of shareholder loans. I am advised that utilising both instruments is a standard form of investment in infrastructure companies and that the reference to both as “equity investments” is common practice.

The initial drawdown of committed shareholder funds by National Broadband Ireland was €100 million in January 2020. This was drawn down before the release of any subsidy by the State. I am advised that no shareholder distributions have been made to date. I am also advised that a further drawdown of investor funds of €20 million will be made in the coming weeks and that the full amount of committed equity, €175 million, is covered by guarantees.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When the contract was signed, was it understood that the €175 million equity investment could be by way of debt? What exactly are we talking about in respect of the guarantee? There is information available on the fees paid in 2020 but, in his review, did the Minister come up with figures for 2021? What is the current interest bill? What is the position on the high-cost loans, in particular? At this point in time, we understand the figure is about 11.8%, but we want to know where we are. David McCourt spoke about seeking new investors. Have any names been put in front of the Department for approval? Has there been any interaction between the Department and these people? If so, could the Minister of State tell me who they are? Could he explain the early release of the performance bond? Did it need to be agreed by the Cabinet or was it just agreed by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I cannot answer all those questions in one minute but I welcome the scrutiny and questions and the requests from the media for further information. I am delighted to answer any question asked to me directly.

One of the stories that appeared last week had the headline, “How a hedge fund quietly took over the National Broadband Plan”. The next day, 8 December, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald said in the Dáil that the majority shareholder of the consortium, National Broadband Ireland, is Oak Hill Advisors. Neither of those statements is true. A hedge fund has not quietly taken over the national broadband plan, although I was worried when I read the headline. Naturally, I went to the corporate lawyers and corporate accountants and asked whether there was any truth to the story. As it turns out, the majority share ownership continues as it was on the date of the signing of the contract. The ownership has not changed. If the ownership had changed, it would have required the consent of the Minister. It is not that there is a mistake in the story or some kind of error; it is that the whole thrust of the story, the headline, and repeated elements throughout to the effect that there had been a secret takeover by a hedge fund is simply untrue.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept the Minister of State is not going to have all the answers but, on that basis, I believe we are going to have to have some sort of forum in which we can have a proper over-and-back discussion. We have all been very frightened about the ability of National Broadband Ireland to deliver on the national broadband plan.

I will ask a few more questions for the record but I would like the Minister of State to deal with the issue of delivery and state whether the target of passing 60,000 premises will be reached by the end of January. What exactly is the current position? We will look for some

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detail on the exact amount that Granahan McCourt owns in monetary and percentage terms. Is the minimum share capital €2 million? If so, will the rest be in debt? I am looking for figures because the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, disputed the duplication figure as regards Eir in the *Business Post* a number of weeks ago.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will be delighted to take part in any forum to share information about this. I absolutely believe in transparency.

I have asked my officials how much more of the contract we can publish. A huge amount of the contract has been published. Some parts have been redacted. As I understand it, that is in line with the mandatory provisions of section 36 of the Freedom of Information Act 2014. In so far as it is possible, I have asked my officials to ascertain what they can do to expedite the process.

The Deputy asked about the number of homes that have been passed. NBI has confirmed that, as of early December, almost 150,000 premises are under construction or constructed across all 26 counties. In line with the remedial plan to address Covid-19-related delays, which was agreed with the Department earlier this year, NBI was to have passed almost 60,000 homes available for immediate connection by the end of 2021. As would be expected with a large-scale infrastructure build, challenges have been encountered as a result of Covid-19 and other issues. NBI is actively working with its network and build partners to address these issues as they arise and recently confirmed to the Department that the number of premises passed by the end of December will be approximately 35,000, while between 50,000 and 60,000 premises will be able to order or to pre-order a service by the end of the year. For more than 121,000 premises, build is under way. This demonstrates that the project is reaching scale.

Climate Change Negotiations

30. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the detail of the discussions he has had with the just transition commissioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61989/21]

Deputy Denis Naughten: The just transition commissioner was appointed by the Government to facilitate dialogue and bring forward concerns from affected communities, residents, workers and businesses from right across the midlands. I am deeply disappointed that the Government does not support the continuation of the commissioner's advocacy role. Kieran Mulvey very honestly exposed the duplicity of some of the so-called support measures, ensuring that midlands families were the primary focus of all supports.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government is committed to a just transition in the midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat harvesting by Bord na Móna.

As part of this commitment, the just transition commissioner was appointed in November 2019 with the mandate to engage with those affected by the accelerated exit from peat for electricity generation and to recommend to the Government the essential elements of a just transition for those workers and communities. The commissioner has made an important contribution to the Government's overall just transition response in the region, helping to facilitate dialogue

and bringing forward concerns from affected communities, residents, workers and businesses.

The Government has responded to the commissioner's recommendations by publishing an implementation plan for the midlands region as part of the 2021 climate action plan. The key responsibilities, steps and timelines to deliver the actions under this implementation plan will shortly be published as part of the annexe of actions to the climate action plan.

I have had various engagements with the commissioner during 2021, most recently in July, in a meeting with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. We have discussed a range of matters, including the Department's proposed response to the commissioner's recommendations in his progress reports, progress on the delivery of funding into the region, and the commissioner's work for the remainder of 2021. The commissioner's work continues to be supported by my Department on an ongoing basis.

As I have noted previously, and given the significant progress that has already been achieved, the Government does not propose to continue the commissioner's term beyond the end of his current mandate, which concludes at the end of this year. I look forward to receiving the commissioner's final report and recommendations and being further briefed by him at that stage.

The midlands regional transition team, which is convened by the midlands local authorities, continues to provide an important forum for local authorities, State agencies and others to co-ordinate their ongoing work and to engage with the Government on a just transition in the region. My Department will continue to engage with and support the work of this group into the future as the midlands implementation plan is delivered.

Deputy Denis Naughten: It is deeply disappointing that Kieran Mulvey or his replacement will not be appointed from the beginning of next year, particularly when the EU just transition fund will not be in place until later in the year. Kieran Mulvey has exposed weaknesses in the existing just transition fund, pointing out that communities such as Ballyforan, County Roscommon, where €1 million in investment was secured through the just transition fund, should not be overburdened in providing co-financing. We are effectively asking communities that are being decimated through a loss of jobs to fundraise for replacement jobs. That is fundamentally wrong. Kieran Mulvey has highlighted this on numerous occasions to the Department. What is the Department doing about the issue of co-financing?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Although the term of the commissioner, Kieran Mulvey, is not continuing, a just transition is being set up under legislation for next year. Kieran Mulvey is universally respected and his area of expertise is industrial relations. As the just transition continues, there will be a change of focus as to what is required to be the expertise or the focus of the commission. It was absolutely right that it was industrial relations to begin with. We intend to progress and develop proposals on the mandate on the statutory just transition commission in 2022, in advance of drafting the legislation. A just transition working group will be established in 2022 alongside the just transition commission to co-ordinate the provision of strategic advice and research to the proposed just transition commission.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Kieran Mulvey, in his engagement with the ESB, pursued the company on the release of the Dalton building in Shannonbridge and the tomato shed in Lanesborough for community use. As the Minister of State will be aware, the commissioner has highlighted the fact that the tomato shed will not be released to the local community for now. The ESB is making its release dependent on it being taken off the EPA licence, and the ESB

is not prepared to seek an alteration of the licence to support the community and instead is determined to submit the licence for the full site before it will expedite that. The ESB has committed €500,000 to the local community in Lanesborough, which is now being informed that the money is dependent on the ESB having the licence lifted from the EPA and being granted planning permission for new energy services on the site. The latter is completely contrary to the original intention.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I note the Deputy's comments and his passion. I commit that I will take his comments to the Minister and that he may contact my office or the Minister's office and I will reply.

The ESB provided a €5 million contribution to the just transition fund in 2020 to support a just transition in the midlands. I understand that the ESB continues to explore the development of infrastructure in the midlands for use by local community groups. The just transition commissioner facilitated ongoing discussion with the ESB and key stakeholders such as the midlands regional transition team to develop, mobilise and deliver opportunities for the midlands for workers directly affected and the wider community. The ESB is currently developing planning applications for both station sites as renewable energy centres to facilitate growth in the green technology sector. This is in anticipation of future competitive tenders to be held by Eirgrid and the CRU. The proposed technology includes synchronous condensers and energy storage capabilities at both locations. I also understand that the ESB provided an update on its plans for both sites to the most recent meeting of the midlands regional transition team on 1 December. The ESB remains committed to the midlands through the development of these projects, its €5 million contribution to the just transition fund and its network operations, which employ more than 400 highly skilled engineers, technicians and office workers in the region.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Energy Prices

31. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department has had engagement with stakeholders, including other Departments and energy suppliers, on the cost of utility bills for consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61261/21]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This question will be taken by Deputy Griffin.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This question is about the rising cost of utility bills. I want to know what engagement the Minister of State and his Department have had with utility companies on the situation faced by consumers throughout the country. I refer to the rising costs and the massive difficulty they are placing on householders. What can we do about it?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government is acutely aware of the impact the recent increases in energy prices are having on households. This is a global phenomenon. Expert commentators, including the International Energy Agency, have attributed it to a range of demand and supply factors that have contributed to a tightening of the European gas market supplies and the

upward trend in wholesale gas prices we have witnessed since mid-2020. The best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy, to expand interconnection with our European and neighbouring markets and to deepen internal electricity market integration.

The Government's immediate response to address the increase in domestic energy prices has been to utilise the tax and social welfare system to counter rising costs of living. Budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the fuel allowance such that €914 will be paid to eligible households over the course of the winter. Increases to the qualified child payment, the living alone allowance and the income threshold for the working family payment were also announced.

Consumers should continue to switch or to engage with their energy supplier. Many households could still save on their bills if they did so. As recently as 9 December, switching supplier could save a customer consuming the average amount of electricity up to €313.

The CRU has in place a suite of protections against disconnection that are set out in the supplier handbook. In brief, priority customers cannot be disconnected, while vulnerable customers are protected over the winter months, from 1 November to 31 March each year, and a CRU moratorium on disconnections for all customers comes into effect over the Christmas period.

In addition, under the supplier-led voluntary energy engage code, a supplier will not at any time disconnect a customer who is engaging with them. Furthermore, due to the ongoing pressure on households, the Government agreed today to provide a once-off credit of €100 to every domestic electricity account holder through their electricity supplier in the first quarter of 2022.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I welcome all of the measures that have been introduced. Anything that helps, is a help. The social welfare adjustments and the announcement today in respect of the €100 credit for account holders are important. It is not a perfect scheme. It is quite crude, but the credit is for €100. Those who need the credit will welcome it. I wish there was a quicker and more targeted way of doing it. Perhaps that can be worked on in the long term. The measure is welcome, but I still feel that a lot more needs to be done. From my research in this area, I know that in the year up to November, petrol prices increased by 27.5%, diesel prices by 26% and gas, water and heating prices by 12%. All of these increases are having an impact on householders. We need to do more. It is really squeezing people and causing massive hardship for them. We need to do more. I ask that we also look at taking a more co-ordinated approach at European level, because it is something that is happening throughout Europe.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I accept that we need to do more. We need to do everything that we possibly can. The Deputy spoke about petrol and diesel prices. I note the recent protest by the truck drivers. The fundamental problem here is that the international price of commodities holds us to ransom, and has done for decades. When the international price of gas or oil goes up, we cannot make that go away. We can try to chase the prices and give subsidies and so on, but we can never really overcome that. The price of a barrel of oil increased, over a few years, from \$10 to \$140. It is a fundamental weakness in the system. People talk about renewable energy and say that it is variable and we do not know when we are going to get it, but there is huge variability and volatility in the price of fossil fuels. That puts us at risk. It is an ongoing strategic risk to our country that will be removed by the switch to green energy.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I agree with the principle of carbon taxation. I think it is something that we have to do, unfortunately. I do not like any taxes, but it is something that we have

to do for the sake of the planet. There are times when there are peaks in global oil prices like those we are seeing now. We are experiencing a really high peak at present. There has to be a flexible approach from the Government. We control things like excise. The State and the cof-fers do very well when there are high prices because a percentage of those high prices comes back to the State. There must be intervention from the State at peak times such as those we are experiencing right now. The Minister of State is not the Minister for Finance. I have raised the issue within my party. I am deeply upset about the lack of movement on the issue. There has to be flexibility on the part of the Government to avoid fuel poverty and the almost hyperinfla-tion resulting from extremely high prices that are being contributed to by the State's own excise duties. As I said, the carbon tax is getting a bad name. It only makes up a small percentage of the price. Action in respect of excise duties can make a big difference, and that needs to be examined. I urge the Minister of State to contact the Department of Finance on the issue.

Deputy Emer Higgins: On the topic of energy suppliers and the cost of utility bills, it is really important that we consider the number of people who, on the advice of the Government, are working from home. Working from home is having a huge impact on the cost of utility bills, as well as the general increases that we have been talking about today. Many people are spending a lot more time at home, which is contributing to increases in their bills. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have taken steps to retrofit their homes, and who are opting to go for the renewable forms of energy because they are concerned by the prospect of rising energy costs and spending more time at home. While the Government does whatever is in its power to tackle rising energy costs, this is also the perfect opportunity to encourage ho-meowners to make the switch to long-term, more affordable and sustainable sources of energy. The announcement earlier of the €100 credit will be welcomed by many families throughout the country. I thank the Minister of State and the Government for introducing it.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: In response to Deputy Griffin, I accept that we need flexibility. We are not taking a rigid ideological approach on this issue. It is important to think about our long-term future and what we will be doing in ten years' time, but we also need to think about what is happening next month and whether people can make their bills for that month. We must be open to that. I am willing to discuss the issue with the Deputy at any time. He is right that it is also a matter for the Minister for Finance. I will talk to him about it.

In response to both Deputies, I would say that the one thing everybody can do is either con-sider switching energy suppliers or contact their energy suppliers and say they are considering doing so. Customers can save hundreds of euro on their bills by doing that - much more than the €100 that we are going to give account holders in the first quarter of next year.

On the issue of working from home, a tax relief has been brought in for people's energy costs in working from home. I ask Deputy Higgins to ask her constituents to look at that. It should also be considered that there are reduced commuting costs when working from home. It is not easy. People need extra space to work from home, and not everybody can do it. I un-derstand that.

Electricity Generation

32. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Commu-nications the steps being taken by his Department to ensure security of electricity supply this winter and beyond; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61273/21]

Deputy David Stanton: I ask the Minister of State the steps that are being taken by his Department to ensure security of electricity supply this winter and beyond, given the fact that there was a danger of brownouts and blackouts earlier this year.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The CRU has statutory responsibility to ensure security of electricity supply. This includes the duty to monitor security of electricity supply and to take such measures as it considers necessary to protect security of supply. The CRU is assisted in its statutory role by EirGrid. The challenges to security of electricity supply are set out in EirGrid's All-Island Generation Capacity Statement 2021-2030 and Winter Outlook 2021-22, which were published in September and October, respectively.

In September, the CRU published an information note, setting out the programme of actions they are leading in order to address these challenges. These actions include increasing the availability of existing generators; developing new generation capacity, including temporary generation capacity in advance of winter 2022; extending the operational life of some existing generators; and actions to enhance demand-side response, including large consumers reducing demand when the system margin is low. Last month, the Government approved and published a new policy statement on electricity security of supply, which supports the CRU's programme of actions. My Department continues to work closely with the CRU and EirGrid to implement the programme of actions and ensure security of electricity supply.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for his response. On a calm winter's day like today, what is the typical electricity demand? On a day like today, when there is very little wind and it is cold, how much of that is produced by renewables, and how much is produced by the thermal suite of coal, oil and gas?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: On the question of the current demand for electricity on a day like today, I do not believe that the demand for electricity alters with the wind. The typical energy peak demand is something like 6 GW or 7 GW. On a day when there is no wind, we are faced with challenges, because a lot of our energy comes from wind. We could get as little as 0% on a day when there is no wind. We also get renewable energy from other sources. For example, we have hydropower and so on. We get as much as 75% of our energy from wind on a windy day. We are transitioning to a completely different energy system from what we had before, which was based on baseload and adding to that. We are moving away from that towards peaking power plants to balance dips in the power supply. It comes back to Deputy Bríd Smith's question about why we are adding 2 GW of additional wind power over the next ten years.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State for his response. If the demand is 6 GW per day, what is the supply? Is the supply matching that? What amount over and above that 6 GW is available? Does the Minister of State agree with me that the cutting-edge way to store wind energy is through the use of green hydrogen? How close are we to seeing the production and availability of green hydrogen become a reality?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Whitegate is one of the power plants that was shut down, which, as I understand it, contributed to some of the difficulties relating to the supply of electricity. Further delays in the return to operation have been reported in the past number of weeks. Has testing started at Whitegate? When might the plant be back up and running?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am really pleased to hear the Minister of State confirm that we have secure electricity supplies. It was not long ago that we heard the leader of the Opposition

predict that the Government would not be able to keep the lights on this winter. Scaremongering like that can have a profound impact, especially when it happens in this Chamber. I am pleased to hear the Minister of State confirm that there are no planned blackouts and we are not preparing for that.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: On the question of what we are using for power on a day when there is no wind, principally, we are using gas. We also have coal from Moneypoint when it is functioning. We also have cables connecting us to the UK which provide us with electricity. We are building what is called the Celtic interconnector, which will be a connection directly to France that will provide us with an additional 700 MW. These interconnectors are huge. Each one is equivalent to a large power station.

With regard to whether green hydrogen is something for the future, it is, and the second half of the decade is when it is likely to be commercially viable. I hope it will be a way of storing wind power. We will be allowed to inject it into the gas grid and reuse it in this way.

Deputy O'Rourke asked about Whitegate. Whitegate and Huntstown power stations produce approximately 400 MW. They help with our security of supply. Huntstown came back on stream, while Whitegate did not come back on stream as fast as was hoped. There were a number of tests. I do not know whether Whitegate is on stream right now. I have not heard that it is. I can get back to the Deputy on that.

Energy Policy

33. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he considers non-fracked liquefied natural gas to be a transition fuel to guarantee energy security during the transition to a decarbonised future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61549/21]

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This question follows on from the previous question. It is on the role that liquefied natural gas, LNG, can play in energy security for this country. Will the Minister of State outline the approach he intends to take on the role of LNG.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government's policy statement on the importation of fracked gas was published in May of this year, fulfilling a commitment set out in the programme for Government. As set out in the policy statement, the placing of a legal prohibition on the importation of fracked gas in national legislation was being considered. However, in the context of European Union treaties and the laws governing the internal energy market, it is considered that a legal ban on the importation of fracked gas could not be put in place at this time. The policy statement identifies the highest risk of fracked gas being imported into Ireland on a large scale would be via liquefied natural gas terminals, if any were to be constructed.

The policy statement provides that, pending the outcome of a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems, it would not be appropriate for the development of any liquefied natural gas terminals in Ireland to be permitted or proceeded with. I am aware of one application for a liquefied natural gas project that has been made. In relation to that project, I have written to An Bord Pleanála setting out Government policy on such projects, to which An Bord Pleanála is statutorily obliged to have regard.

The security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems, which is under way, is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to net zero emissions by 2050. The review will consider what role, if any, LNG should have in Ireland in future. I expect the review to complete in mid-2022 following which it will be submitted to the Government.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister of State. The review is very important and it is also important that it is completed on time. Time is of the essence with regard to the concerns and fears of householders and industry about energy security. We know that with what is quite a volatile geopolitical situation in eastern Europe we cannot just rely on Russia and pipelines for our natural gas. There is an alternative here. There is an option for us to avail of LNG. I emphasised in the question that it is non-fracked LNG and this is very important. If we accept the principle that a transitional phase up to 2030 and perhaps beyond will be required, we have to be realistic. If natural gas is acceptable, LNG should also be acceptable provided it is non-fracked gas. It is like saying we are in favour of steam but not water. We need to be more open-minded and realistic on this. I very much look forward to the findings of the review.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy for his comments. As he understands, the problem with fracked gas is the fugitive emissions. Scientists discovered that in the process of fracking gas a lot of methane escapes into the atmosphere. This has a strongly detrimental effect which is so bad that using fracked gas turned out to be as bad as burning coal. I understand that for a long time in north Kerry there was a promise that this much-needed infrastructural investment and jobs were coming to the area. It is very difficult to have this taken away or ended. I understand that creates considerable disappointment. What north Kerry needs is more investment in sustainable and long-term infrastructure that will withstand this type of international policy. It will not be Irish policy that will stop this from happening in the end. It will be European policy and what was agreed at COP26. Kerry is a beautiful county with an amazing tourism product. It can develop and produce far more jobs than would have ever come from the LNG terminal.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister of State. I emphasise again that we are not talking about fracked gas. The question clearly and specifically refers to non-fracked LNG. I emphasise that point. Sometimes we feel as though we are not being listened to. Fracking keeps coming into the discussion. We are speaking about non-fracked gas. We have to be realistic because 2030 is a long time from now. I have a vision for north Kerry. It has a massive future in hydrogen and many other renewable sources of energy. In the meantime, something has to keep the lights on. If the lights go off, no one should go blaming the people of north Kerry. We certainly do not want to end up saying we told you so.

There is a commitment with regard to non-fracked LNG. The Government needs to take this realistic proposal on board. It cannot continue to bury its head in the sand. None of us likes fossil fuels. During the transitional phase something will be needed to keep the country and industry running. We have to be realistic, which is why we have to look again at non-fracked LNG. That is a solution. While it is not a long-term solution, it is certainly an intermediate solution.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I point out to the Minister of State that in my original question on the extra gas being allowed to fuel the data centres I stated the Minister was opening the door for a proliferation of fossil fuel infrastructure in gas and LNG use, and here we have it. The Deputy from Kerry is advocating for the first application for an LNG terminal. This is exactly what I

was talking about. The Government's action of introducing the new gas infrastructure to facilitate data centres is exactly what is leading to the justification for the proliferation of LNG. That is not sustainable. The Government will tie us into a future where we cannot meet our targets. This is what its actions will do. It is exactly what I was getting at in my first question.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The plan is to reduce gas consumption. Between now and 2030, the quantity of gas being used will be reduced. We will have a reducing need for imports of gas rather than an increasing need. This is one of the reasons LNG is not a good answer. LNG is a large, very heavy, long-term investment. For this reason, the Government policy statement does not use the word "fracked". The policy statement notes that pending the outcome of a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems, it would not be appropriate for the development of any liquid natural gas terminals in Ireland to be permitted or proceeded with. It is a general prohibition. The Deputy is probably aware of this. It does not just refer to fracked gas. The gas power stations to be built will be contracted on a capacity basis for ten years. That is the term of the contract. I was asked what the term was. It is a ten-year term for capacity.

Energy Policy

34. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a national retrofitting plan will be accompanied by additional supports in order to assist households with the cost of retrofitting their homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61308/21]

36. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position on a national retrofitting plan for households, particularly older housing stock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61550/21]

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Minister and the Department consider providing additional supports to assist households with the cost of retrofitting their homes alongside the national retrofitting plan? I ask the Minister of State to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I propose to take Questions Nos. 34 and 36 together.

The national retrofit plan, published last month as part of the climate action plan, set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a building energy rating of B2 or carbon equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings by the end of 2030. These targets represent a significant increase in the volume and depth of retrofit activity in Ireland.

The national retrofit plan is designed to address barriers to retrofit across four key areas. These are: driving demand and activity; financing and funding; supply chain, skills and standards; and governance. The initiatives outlined in the plan will cover all housing types and consumer segments. This includes a commitment to develop a new guidance document on retrofitting older homes built before 1940.

SEAI grant schemes will continue to be a central element of the Government's strategy to encourage homeowners to retrofit their homes. A new national retrofit scheme will be launched early next year which will focus on the delivery of B2 retrofits with heat pumps as well as the development and expansion of the one-stop shop and retrofit market.

The plan provides an unprecedented €8 billion in Exchequer funding to support homeowners to upgrade their homes through SEAI retrofit schemes, including free energy upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will also provide additional funding for the local authority retrofit scheme. This is in line with the principles of fairness and universality which underpin the plan. My Department is also engaging with the Department of Finance and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland on the development of a residential retrofit loan guarantee scheme. This will enable credit institutions to offer loans with reduced interest rates to private homeowners and non-corporate landlords to make comprehensive home energy efficiency upgrades more affordable to consumers. The target for the introduction of the loan guarantee scheme is mid-2022.

Deputy Colm Burke: Only 18% of Irish homes secured a building energy rating, BER, of B3 or higher in 2019. A great deal of work needs to be done in this area. We also have an additional problem now in that the cost of all building materials has increased dramatically. Have we sufficient supports in place at this stage? I am aware the Minister of State is talking about further announcements later on in 2022 but we are talking about 500,000 houses being retrofitted by 2030? There are issues about the skill set, the number of people to do this work and I am not sure if we have done enough detailed planning in this area. Can the Minister of State outline what plans are to be put in place over the next number of months to deal with this issue?

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I agree with Deputy Burke. It is very important that we prioritise this area. All one has to do is to go on any property website, including *daft.ie*, to see the amount of stock there which are BER C, BER D, BER E, BER F or BER G. I refer to many of the houses I would have called to, although not many in the last two years but prior to that, particularly the older housing stock of older people who are living in very poorly insulated houses. This has to be a priority and we have to give people an option to avail of grants and loans so that when they are repaying the money, they are repaying money that they would otherwise be spending on fossil fuels and are now paying towards their insulation and warmer home, which ultimately they will be able to stop paying. This cannot come quickly enough.

We have to have a labour force to be able to do this but can the Minister of State speak to the level of research that has been done on the potential for wool to be used in insulation? We know that we have a very significant sheep industry here. I called for research to be done on this and there is potential there.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will start with Deputy Griffin. On wool insulation, I can say that I know absolutely nothing about that and I will get a proper answer for the Deputy. I will not attempt to answer that without knowing about it.

Turning to Deputy Burke, this is a very significant plan for 500,000 homes and it requires 25,000 staff. A very significant amount of planning went into this even before the programme for Government was drawn up last year by the Green Party, the Government and the former Minister, Deputy Bruton's Department, which had been investigating how to do this. There are some 25,000 people involved with a €28 billion investment, €8 billion of which was to come from the Exchequer. It is an enormous project and a great deal of work has been done with the Minister, Deputy Harris, to ensure we have a sufficient number of apprentices. This is very skilled work and is a completely new way of doing plumbing, in addition to the other work that is being done.

On the issue of inflation, I am working on that with the Office of Government Procurement.

Public procurement in general and the whole national development plan are affected by these changes in inflation. That will also affect the retrofit plans.

Deputy Colm Burke: My real concern is that I was speaking to someone in the past week who submitted their application to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, two years ago. It was only in the past week that the house was inspected. We have something to clear up in that particular area. What plans are being put in place to expedite inspections so that the work can start at an early date?

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I concur with Deputy Burke on the need for speed which is really crucial. This has been talked about for so long and the current mechanisms that are there are just not going far enough or doing enough for people.

With the indulgence of the Chair, I wish to flag a matter that has come to my attention to-night. In my constituency, John and Fidelus Foley are well-known pillars in the community in Inch, County Kerry. In a matter related to the Minister of State's portfolio, a monstrosity of a telecommunications mast has been built today right next to their house. I am asking the Minister of State to intervene with Eir to see if it can find a more suitable location. This is heartbreaking for the family and for the community. It is right next door to their house. It is an emergency situation and it has only arisen today and seems to have slipped through the planning process during Covid-19. It has left the family and community heartbroken. Could the Minister of State please investigate this matter and raise it with Eir as a matter of urgency as it is causing very significant hardship for people and, in particular, the family?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I want to use this opportunity to put a query to the Minister of State that I got through my constituency office from a couple-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The issue has been related to the question.

Deputy Emer Higgins: It is. This relates to a couple living in Lucan who wish to install a new solar panel system which is coming in at a cost of €9,000. They are hoping to apply for, and are likely to get, the grant for €3,000 towards that. That still leaves a shortfall of €6,000. Would couples like that be eligible for the no-interest loans that the Minister of State is speaking about or is there the opportunity to enhance the schemes of those grants to make these solar panels and renewable energy products more affordable to people?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will allow Deputy O'Rourke in but if I keep allowing Members in on a discretionary basis, those who are waiting for their questions will not get in. I ask the Deputies to use this facility sparingly. I know that the Deputy has not-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will literally be five seconds, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. If the Minister has not got them, can he provide us with the up-to-date figures on the amount of retrofitting that has been actually completed this year?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will start with Deputy Higgins's question on solar panels. It is envisaged that one portion of the funding is provided through a grant, and another portion, presumably the remainder, through a low-interest loan which is unsecured on the property. That is what the intention of that is and it is to be brought in in the middle of next year.

There was also question on the roll-out and the rate of the delivery of these works. The funding for this increases every year because the money for it comes from the increases in the

property tax. There is a constant ratchet effect where more and more homes can be upgraded every year. That allows us to build the capacity of the people who are trained to carry out the retrofits. We are expecting that 22,000 energy upgrades will be carried out over the course of the next year with the money that is available. It is in three slices. There is €85 million for upgrading council houses, €109 million for people who are homeowners but on low-incomes and another €100 million for people who are outside of that, which may presumably address Deputy Higgins's question.

I will take Deputy Griffin's question outside of the Chamber, which I think is the right approach because he has contacted me directly.

Deputy O'Rourke's question was on the number of homes and I have given that answer.

Climate Change Policy

35. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the recently published Teagasc report on farm sustainability which found that greenhouse gas emissions from dairy farming rose in 2020 largely due to an increase in the average herd size; the way he plans to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61542/21]

Deputy Bríd Smith: Recently we saw more protests to highlight the ongoing concerns that ordinary farmers have that they are going to have to pick up the tab for the failures of big agrifood corporations. What are the views of the Minister of State on the recently published Teagasc report on farm sustainability which found that greenhouse gas emissions from dairy farming rose in 2020 largely due to an increase in the average herd size? How does the Minister of State plan to address that and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. The Climate Action Plan 2021 commits to reducing emissions from the agriculture sector to 16-18 MtCO₂eq by 2030, a 22% to 30% reduction from 2018 levels. This will be achieved by committing to a set of core measures which will deliver a minimum level of carbon emission reductions and also by a set of other measures which will aim to go even further. My Department has engaged proactively with the public, stakeholders, and other Departments to deliver an ambitious, fair, and achievable climate action plan.

The core measures outlined in Climate Action Plan 2021 include efficiencies across the agriculture sector and also diversification measures, including increasing organic production and the production of biomethane. Further measures will be required to meet the targets set for this sector and include the introduction of a model for carbon farming, exploring feed-related methane reduction solutions and conducting a diversification review which will include an assessment on the wider production of biomethane. Combined, these measures will ensure that the agriculture sector meets its targets for 2030 while also setting pathways towards climate neutrality by 2050.

The key metrics for the delivery of our climate ambition will be greenhouse gas emissions, farmers incomes and other key environmental indicators. The measures set out in the climate action plan will offer farmers ways to reduce carbon emissions at farm level by becoming more efficient and will also offer opportunities for diversification. These are opportunities which will

protect farmers income and at the same time Ireland's reputation for producing high quality and sustainable produce.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I do not know if the Minister of State noticed that there was an article in *The Journal* reporting from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a non-profit organisation. The article showed that the quite shocking increase in greenhouse gas emissions from the beef and dairy sector expansion was accounted for by two Irish companies, namely, Larry Goodman's ABP Meats, and Dawn Meats, to the tune of 7.5% of all European Union emissions. I contend that the increase in the dairy herd is not sustainable. I ask the Minister of State to address that point. It is an intensity model that was adopted by the previous coalition his party entered into with Fianna Fáil in the Pathways for Growth initiative and it amounted to what has become a message to smaller farmers to get big or get out. That is why the smaller farmers are continually protesting their plight. Funding to the tune of €70 million was recently given to the meat industry. Where is the money for the smaller farmers? Where is their just transition? Why does the State keep pampering Larry Goodman and the meat industry?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The goal of our agricultural emissions reduction policy and our agricultural climate policy is not to reduce, increase or stabilise the herd. The goal is to cut emissions and, at the same time, to increase farm incomes. Those are the two things we are trying to do at the same time. How we get there is another question. We do not have to state that farmers must do it in a particular way. Methane is extremely damaging to the environment. The IFA is beginning to understand that this is a significant opportunity, that cuts to methane emissions will be very beneficial to the climate and that farmers have an opportunity in the context of methane not being released. The Teagasc report discussed many ways in which methane can be reduced but, whatever ways are chosen, farmers will be a significant part of the solution. Farming and agriculture are a different kind of sector from other sectors because they have the opportunity to sequester carbon. That opportunity does not exist in the transport or energy sectors, for example. Farmers have the possibility to have negative emissions.

Deputy Bríd Smith: There is a shocking level of emissions from the agricultural sector. I think the Government has just talked itself into saying it cannot do this. It says it must not do it, but it does not know how we are going to reduce emissions. We can do it in many ways but the Government will not reduce the herd. That is absolute nonsense. There has been a policy in this State to increase the herd steadily since 2011 and to create export markets abroad where they never existed previously. The entire policy is based on a food strategy that is unsustainable. At some point, this Government is going to have to answer for that. Even the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has shown that the agricultural sector accounted for 37% of greenhouse gas emissions last year in this country. There is no way around that. The Government is going to have to do something about the size of the national herd and the demands from the meat processing industry in particular. It is not smaller family farms that are responsible for this; it is being driven by a food policy that is all about exports from the meat industry.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The goal is to cut emissions and increase farm incomes. Farmers may choose to reduce their herd if that is the best way for them to get there. The Deputy referred to the Teagasc report. It states that total farm greenhouse gas emissions in dairy increased in 2020, largely due to an increase in the average herd size. However, greenhouse gas emissions per hectare on dairy farms remained relatively stable because the average dairy farm area increased. The greenhouse gas emissions intensity of milk production or, in other words, the CO₂ per kilo of milk, improved. Effectively, this means that the average kilo of milk was produced with a lower carbon footprint. However, this improvement in greenhouse gas emis-

sions intensity was offset by a higher volume of milk produced on the back of a larger average herd size. As such, farm-level greenhouse gas emissions increased on dairy farms in 2020. On non-dairy farms, however, farm-level greenhouse gas emissions on sheep and tillage farms remained stable in 2020, while farm-level emissions on cattle farms declined slightly in terms of per hectare emissions. Agricultural emissions are incredibly complex and a very simple solution to reducing them will never be found. It is much more complex than the other sectors. There are emissions and then there are removals going into soil, plants and animals.

Question No. 36 replied to with Question No. 34.

Energy Conservation

37. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if consideration has been given to converting oil heating systems to eco-friendly hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, biofuel instead of kerosene and other fossil fuels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61338/21]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Has consideration been given to converting oil heating systems to run on eco-friendly HVO biofuel instead of kerosene and other fuels?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: At the request of my Department, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, is currently developing a comprehensive national heat study for Ireland. The study aims to examine options to decarbonise the heating and cooling sectors in Ireland to 2050 and includes the examination of a range of options and pathways. These options include the potential use of sustainable bioenergy such as bioliquids in place of fossil fuels in heating systems. The national heat study is almost complete and I expect that the SEAI will publish the outcome of the study early in the new year.

My Department recently carried out a consultation on the potential introduction of a renewable energy obligation in the heat sector. If introduced, such an obligation would require the suppliers of fossil fuels for use in the heat sector to also supply renewable energy. The level of renewable energy that would have to be supplied would be based on a proportion of the fossil fuels supplied. The obligation could potentially be met through the supply of renewable gas, biomass or renewable fuels such as hydrotreated vegetable oil.

I expect the national heat study and the outcome of the consultation on the introduction of a renewable energy obligation to inform future policy and provide clarity on the potential role of alternative fuels in the heating sector.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: That is an encouraging response. As the Minister of State is probably well aware, there are 700,000 oil-burning boilers at present in the country and nearly 700,000 gas boilers, not to mention 100,000 liquefied natural gas boilers. It is important for that fact to be recognised. There is a gain to be made in the short term here. We can reduce CO2 emissions by between 80% and 90% by converting many of those gas and oil boilers and availing of HVO. It goes without saying that up in the North technology is being trialled by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is retrofitting many of its stock of houses with this technology. Other countries in Europe are rolling it out. Finland is a world leader on it. It is only a matter of time before Ireland unlocks this potential. It is very encouraging that is under consideration.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: To give the Deputy more information on the SEAI national heat study to which I referred, it will focus on achieving net-zero emissions in the heat sector by 2050 but it also aims to provide a detailed evidence base, including technology and policy pathways, data and insights for the Government, industry and other stakeholders, and enhanced energy sector modelling capacity developed by SEAI. The completion of the heat study is expected in mid-January 2022. The publication will come out in a number of different sections, including: low-carbon heating and cooling technologies; district heating and cooling; electricity infrastructure; green hydrogen as a potential fuel for heat; sustainable bioenergy for heat; carbon capture use and storage; net-zero emissions by 2050; exploration of the decarbonisation pathways for heating and cooling in Ireland; spatial analysis; and energy efficiency potential. I look forward to seeing that report in January 2022.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: As I stated, it is welcome, but I wish to put on the record that these boilers can be converted for as little as €200 and will reduce emissions drastically. Carbon tax is not a very popular topic in these Houses but, of the €9.5 billion over the life of the national development plan, approximately €5 billion will be reinvested into retrofitting programmes such as those we are discussing. I ask the Minister of State to provide clarity regarding the SEAI and the grant system it currently runs. Am I right in saying that anyone who has previously availed of an SEAI grant is unable to log a second request or application? Is that likely to be reviewed or changed? That is my understanding at present. As regards the full retrofit programme, many of the heat pumps that it is proposed to install in properties have a life expectancy of seven to ten years. We need to be cognisant of that in terms of affordability into the future and providing loans or other measures to people.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy asked earlier about examining the experience of other jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland. Of course, we will do that very carefully and we will see what experience they had with their renewable heat obligations and incentives.

He also asked about the SEAI and whether a person who previously received a grant can apply for another grant. He indicated such people are excluded. I will have to check out the rules of its scheme in that regard.

As to whether we can convert boilers to alternative fuel sources, part of my remit is the circular economy and trying to fix and remediate things rather than building new. Therefore, if at all possible, I will consider that. Of course, the Deputy can contact me if he has specific recommendations in that regard.

11 o'clock

National Broadband Plan

38. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address the issues raised in articles (details supplied) relating to the national broadband plan, including National Broadband Ireland’s corporate structure, financial arrangements, long-term viability and ability to deliver on the national broadband plan. [61546/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will not repeat myself completely but I ask the question again about the €175 million equity investment and whether it could be achieved by way of debt. Was

that understood from the very beginning? Will the Minister of State go into some detail on what seems to be the early release of the performance bond? On the question of premises passed, the Minister of State has indicated the figure will be 35,000 by the end of December but are we talking about 50,000 or 60,000 by the end of January? Will he give an exact timeline on that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The first question is about the equity investment, how much money went in, what form it was in and so on. The investors are providing equity funding in NBI Infrastructure and NBI Deployment through the purchase of shares and the provision of shareholder loans. Using both of these instruments is a standard form of investment infrastructure and this is in compliance with the project agreement. The interest earned on shareholder loans forms a large part of the overall commercial returns for the investors and this is aligned with the tender submission, which met the minimum requirements regarding financial standing and funding.

Clause 40 of the project agreement requires that payment of shareholder contributions on or before the effective date be in accordance with schedule 3.12 and for the agreed funding to be in place. The funding takes the form of a subscription guarantee agreement between Metallah and NBI Infrastructure and NBI Deployment plus a guarantee in favour of NBI Infrastructure and NBI Deployment from Granahan McCourt Limited. Subscription agreements between Metallah and NBI Infrastructure provide for a subscription for 1 million shares of €1 each, or €1 million, in each of NBI Infrastructure and NBI Deployment. We know this funding requirement is contained in the clause dealing with equity investment. There is also the issue of up to €178 million of 12% unsecured loan notes to NBI Infrastructure and up to €43 million in 12% unsecured loan notes to NBI Deployment, to be drawn down in tranches, with €4 million of this being a standby shareholder loan. We know these funding requirements are contained in clauses 2.2 and 2.3 of each agreement, entitled shareholder loan and rescue loan, respectively.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, the Minister of State has already agreed we need another forum and there was discussion on this earlier. We are possibly talking about a Topical Issues matter. I request publication of the results of the review to whatever degree it can be done. At least we can have the information in front of us before we have the wider discussion. I will go back to get the detail correct in my head.

The 35,000 premises are to be passed by the end of the year. When will the 50,000 or 60,000 premises be passed? We need that information. Could we have some information on the early payout of the performance bond? On the wider information, we will need some publication of all the detail.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I am absolutely happy to discuss with the Deputy the best way to get him the most information as quickly as possible. The whole purpose of this relates to the number of premises passed. We have a fixed-price contract for a fixed term and we must deliver 540,000 homes in seven years connected to fibre. That is the overall point of the exercise. It is to be done for a fixed price of €2.1 billion. We have a larger budget than that but that is what the contract states.

We have been informed that by the end of December, the number of homes passed will be in the order of 35,000, while between 50,000 and 60,000 premises will be able to order or preorder a service by the end of the year. For more than 121,000 premises, build is under way, demonstrating the project's reach and scale. In parallel, the Department is working with NBI to recalibrate the targets for 2022 and beyond to take account of the knock-on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus is to continue to build momentum in the build, catch up on the delays

experienced due to Covid-19 and plan for acceleration. Final targets for 2022 are expected to be agreed early in the new year.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The figure I am going to need is what we think is going to be passed by the end of January. We had it in our heads that it would be 60,000 and the big worry is we are also meant to get in that year that there would be catch-up on Covid-19 delays. We are expecting a plan for that around March, although we accept it will not kick in until 2023 and beyond. We also expected the seven-year programme to be accelerated into a five-year programme, with all this laid out contractually in and around March. The fact we will not make a reduced target is incredibly worrying, especially in combination with the reports from the *Business Post* and others, which have put into the public domain the serious questions that remain about the financial and corporate arrangements. I will be sending the questions I have put on record directly to the Minister.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I have given the Deputy figures for the end of December and they are projections. I do not have figures for the end of January but I will come back to the Deputy with those tomorrow. I am happy to do that.

ComReg's quarterly report details what is going on in the broadband market and it is completely independent of the Government. It reports that 120,000 Irish households were connected to fibre in the past 12 months, which is a 50% increase on where we were a year ago, which itself was a 50% increase on where we were two years ago. We are in the position where Virgin has announced that 900,000 of its customers are being upgraded over three years to fibre and Eir has announced it is substantially upgrading all its customers to fibre. SIRO has passed 400,000 homes and is planning to pass another 350,000 homes. We are probably looking at €5 billion in fibre investment and there is a major desire and demand from the Irish public to be connected to fibre. We are seventh in Europe for broadband connections and we are doing incredibly well. We are a technological centre of Europe and the numbers of our broadband and fibre connections are accelerating because of that desire. I will do everything I can to ensure the Government subsidies provides that fibre connection to people in rural Ireland on the dates they are supposed to be.

Waste Management

39. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will expedite legislation to amend the Litter Pollution Act 1997 and the Waste Management Act 1996 to provide a lawful basis for local authorities to use closed-circuit television, CCTV, to detect and prosecute illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61339/21]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister of State about plans to expedite legislation to amend the Litter Pollution Act 1997 and Waste Management Act 1996 to provide a lawful basis for local authorities to use CCTV to detect and prosecute illegal dumping.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. It is a question close to my heart. I spent several years in local government and came across this matter. My Department published the general scheme of the circular economy Bill 2021 on 15 June 2021. It is my intention under the Bill to facilitate not only the use of CCTV but also the use of a broad range of audiovisual recording equipment in order to assist local authorities in their efforts to combat litter and il-

legal dumping. Drafting of the Bill is well advanced, as is, I understand, the pre-legislative scrutiny process before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. The Bill will be published and enacted as soon as possible after pre-legislative scrutiny has been completed and I have considered the report of the committee. I look forward to receiving the committee's recommendations and will respond constructively to them.

A combination of legislation and guidance will help to ensure the processing of personal data obtained through the use of CCTV and audiovisual equipment may be carried out by local authorities tasked with enforcing both litter and waste legislation, thus providing an important deterrent in order to protect our environment from the scourge of illegal dumping while at the same time respecting the privacy of our citizens.

The Deputy knows this type of crime is often furtive and it is a shameful act. People do it when they think nobody's looking. We cannot cover the country with CCTV but in certain locations, such as at council recycling facilities where people might just rock up and throw stuff on the ground, it would really help with the problem. The use of audio equipment also helps and I have seen cases where local authorities call out people who are dumping through a loudspeaker. They record the details of a car, such as the registration number, and send them a fine afterwards.

Penalties are not the only element but there is a persistent recidivist section of the population - a small minority - that causes much of the waste being thrown around. I do not want to drive through rural Ireland and see sofas, cars and things thrown into fields. I would be very happy for us to improve enforcement and catch people doing this.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. As he said, none of us wants to drive through rural Ireland or even the outskirts of Cork city in my case, where we can see sofas, washing machines, dishwashers; you name it and it is there, unfortunately, in many of the ditches and dykes, especially on the county boundaries with the city.

The Minister of State mentions the response of the local authorities and all the local authorities I deal with are excellent in cleaning up initiatives and anti-littering units. They are well resourced and very good at their job. Unfortunately, much of the interaction I have with local authorities in Cork indicates their wariness at being saddled with becoming a data controller. They say they are not resourced to do that and that is their big concern. If any changes are coming down the track, they need to be followed up with the appropriate resources and money. Naming and shaming is a contentious issue but, insofar as possible and practicable in regard to the general data protection regulation, GDPR, it needs to be considered.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Privacy concerns are the issue here and a number of local authorities have gotten into hot water where they have been found, by whatever State agency, to be breaching privacy concerns. With that in mind and in light of the precepts of the GDPR legislation, one of the rules concerns whether it is lawful to do something that is permitted under primary legislation. That is why, when I bring in the circular economy Bill in the spring with, I hope, the Deputy's help, we will provide in primary legislation a statutory underpinning for when CCTV can be used to enforce the law and to provide evidence for the prosecution of people who dump litter.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It goes without saying the Minister of State will have overwhelming support for that Bill when it comes before the House.

Does the Department have details on the numbers of offences and prosecutions that have been taken by Cork city and county councils over recent years? That would be illuminating. I recall sitting on Cork County Council with Deputy Cairns, when the numbers of prosecutions initiated or cases that came before the courts were minute. That is a cause of concern for me and others. This is about providing a deterrent to people in regard to their activity. As the Minister of State noted, it is a small minority who are destroying our beautiful countryside but we need to tackle them head on. I would welcome any information he might be able to provide on prosecutions and offences.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I echo Deputy O’Sullivan’s comments and very much welcome the Minister of State’s commitment to legislating for this. Waterford City and County Council was one of seven local authorities that were reprimanded by the Data Protection Commissioner on the basis the Litter Pollution Act 1997 and the Waste Management Act 1996 did not provide legal grounds for its actions. It is a case of legislation having to catch up with technology and with the GDPR to ensure councils will be covered in this regard because this issue is a significant draw on resources, in terms of both policing it in the first instance and the subsequent clean-up for those instances that are missed. As was noted, it is a significant kind of recidivist cohort of the population who engage in this, and we should use the full rigours of the law to stamp it out wherever we can. I am glad to hear the Minister of State’s commitment to legislating in order that Waterford City and County Council will not again find itself in this position in future.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The statistics are really important because they show whether the law is functioning. I fully commit to providing county-by-county details on successful waste prosecutions and I will be happy to revert to the Deputies on that. Most people go to a lot of trouble to dispose of their waste correctly and wonder whether an item should go into the green or black bin or whatever the case may be. They are conscientious and they represent the vast majority of the population. They can be contrasted with somebody who, as was highlighted, might throw a washing machine into a field in a suburban area, well aware of what he or she is doing. That kind of person cannot be converted by a public information campaign. We cannot appeal to their better nature. The only thing they understand is prosecution, a fine and shaming, so that is the approach we are going to take.

I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh for his comments. I understand his local authority suffered under the privacy laws. The changes to the privacy legislation within the circular economy Bill will not be unlimited. They will be available to be used in certain circumstances only.

Waste Management

40. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if local authorities will receive support in 2021 and 2022 to help fund anti-dumping initiatives. [61307/21]

Deputy Emer Higgins: My question is related to the previous one in that it concerns illegal dumping. Will additional money be made available next year to fund anti-dumping initiatives?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I was very happy to manage to secure additional funding in the budget for next year for anti-dumping initiatives, for exactly the reasons I was talking about in response to the previous question. Public information works for most people but not for that

small cohort of society who are recidivist, shameful, furtive dumpers.

The annual anti-dumping initiative, ADI, was introduced in 2017 to encourage a collaborative approach between local authorities, communities and other State agencies in tackling the problem of illegal dumping. Delivery of the ADI is co-ordinated by three waste enforcement regional lead authorities and supported projects are selected based on their impact on four key criteria, namely, prevention, abatement, enforcement and awareness. Since its introduction, funding of more than €9 million has been provided by my Department under the initiative, which has supported the delivery of more than 1,000 projects in all 31 local authorities. Full details of funding, broken down by local authority and individual project, for each of the years 2017 to 2020 are available on *gov.ie*.

A further €3 million has been allocated to local authorities under the 2021 anti-dumping initiative. Payments are being processed and details will be made available on *gov.ie* when the process is complete. Allocations under the initiative for 2022 have yet to be finalised, but it is likely a similar sum will be made available to local authorities under the initiative.

The Department also continues to invest significantly in the local authority waste enforcement network under the local authority waste enforcement measures grant scheme. More than €7.7 million has been provided to local authorities under the scheme in 2021 to support the recruitment and retention of more than 150 local authority waste enforcement staff throughout the country.

Deputy Emer Higgins: That update was really great to hear. Unfortunately, littering and fly-tipping have become bigger and bigger issues recently. I commend the work of Tidy Towns throughout the country and particularly in my areas of Clondalkin, Rathcoole, Saggart, Brittas, Newcastle and Lucan. They do tremendous work using some of the grant funding the Minister of State mentioned and working with local authorities to make a big difference on the ground.

Fly-tipping is a particularly big issue in the rural areas I represent, such as Saggart, Rathcoole, Newcastle and Brittas. Unfortunately, items such as old mattresses and furniture are dumped in areas including Mount Seskin, Mahon's Lane and Baldonnel. Is there a role for CCTV, the audio equipment the Minister of State mentioned earlier or perhaps even drones to help stamp that out? Councillors Shirley O'Hara and Baby Pereppadan have done a great deal of work with the local authority on this. I would appreciate hearing the Minister of State's views on it.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Yes, there may be a way to use CCTV in places that are repeatedly used for fly-tipping. That is the way it happens. There may be a certain place or laneway that is very quiet, people will begin to use it all the time and the entire field will start to fill up. I will certainly examine the legislation to see whether CCTV can be used in those circumstances.

In my initial reply to the question, when I spoke about where money is being spent to reduce littering and improve waste enforcement, I mentioned that 150 local authority waste staff are being financed, which is really important. It is all well and good to give some money to local authorities to use but they cannot use it if they do not have the capacity or the staff. The funding was provided to ensure they would have that. They have that combination of capital and current funding. As a result, I would like the Deputy and any other Deputy with concerns to ask their local authority how it is doing with that. They should ask what the local authority's policies on this issue are, talk to their local councillors - I am sure the Deputy knows many of them - ask

them to speak to their executive and to put this on the agenda of their council meetings, remind them they have the money, the staff and the capital and ask them what progress they are making.

Deputy Emer Higgins: That is really good advice and I will certainly pass it on to the county councillors in my area. Councillors Shirley O'Hara, Kenneth Egan, Vicki Casserly, Baby Pereppadan and others are doing a great deal of work to respond to littering in particular.

Turning to on-street recycling, I acknowledge we have invested substantially throughout the pandemic in new bins for parks, villages, towns and cities. With so much of our waste now capable of being recycled, is there a greater opportunity to consider on-street recycling? South Dublin County Council recently held a bulky waste recycling event in the run-up to Hallowe'en, where it charged a nominal fee for the recycling of bulky waste and took the hassle out of it all for people such that they would not have to travel to Ballymount or another recycling centre. It was a great success and we definitely saw the impact of that at Hallowe'en from the perspective of there being less bulky material available for illegal bonfires. What are the Minister of State's views on that extending that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I have spoken to the Lord Mayor of Dublin, who brought in a scheme whereby there are yellow bins, which are not to everybody's visual liking, in the city centre that can be used for recyclable items, and I welcome that kind of initiative. The idea for bulky waste the Deputy mentioned is good. I had not heard of it but it could be something we would promote through other local authorities.

The Tidy Towns groups really came to the fore during the lockdown. There was little else to do and it is was hard to meet up with people other than by carrying out outdoor activities. Picking up rubbish was a safe enough thing to do. Much of the stuff people were picking up consisted of plastic drink bottles and cans. In the coming months, I will be bringing in a deposit return scheme. Anyone who picks up cans or bottles can take them to any supermarket or any place that sells such drinks and get a refund. The amount we will target is probably 20 cent per item. That will cut down significantly on litter. This particular type of litter has been very visible over the past year or two as a result of the outdoor drinking and parties that were happening when pubs and restaurants were shut. However, the overall volume of litter went down last year. We managed to reduce waste but the litter that was there was much more visible.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Tax Clearance Certificates

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for taking this matter. I want to discuss the use of cash for the purchase of property, including small parcels of land and sites. It is important that such financial transactions be evaluated, controlled and monitored, with particular attention needing to be paid to high-value cash transactions. I pay tribute to the agencies of the State tasked with the control of illegal money and money laundering. The Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, the money laundering investigation unit of An Garda

Síochána and the Revenue Commissioners are leading the way on this but more needs to be done. At present, there are some safeguards in place under the regulations of the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) Act 2010 to flag cash transactions such as property service provider declarations and business risk assessment forms. However, land is being sold for cash with no genuine account taken of where the money is coming from.

Over the past two years, I am aware of at least five separate sites being purchased in suspicious circumstances in my constituency. In most of these cases, the vendors were completely unaware of to whom they were selling. It has subsequently come to my attention that these sites are now being used for miscellaneous activities and outside the normal planning regulations. Auctioneers have sold four sites near Blarney and two near Grenagh to individuals with no connection to the area. The sites have no outline planning permission and, after sale, a change of use has occurred in each case without planning permission. The same endless saga of planning and forceful proceedings is instigated, which inevitably leads to little or no action. This is happening right across the Cork North-Central constituency.

This irregular activity must be questioned. In many cases, the source of the money used to buy the land is not accounted for because cash is used. It behoves me to ask why a person would buy a site with no outline planning permission and where there is no intention to build on it. Where is the money coming from for these transactions? The proceeds of crime have never been so great and the use of cash remains the primary means of transaction for criminals and organised crime gangs. At a time when the rest of society is moving towards cashless transactions, this leaves legitimate people and businesses vulnerable. Genuine vendors are unaware of who the buyer is, genuine buyers are being priced out of the market and the proceeds of crime are being washed with impunity.

I ask the Minister of State to undertake a review of the implementation of sections 38 and 39 of the 2010 Act and to promote greater awareness between stakeholders of the requirement to carry out risk assessments and keep the vendor fully informed. Will he provide an update on how many convictions for money laundering have been secured over the past two years? I also ask that regulations be examined to prohibit the purchase of property in this jurisdiction with a value greater than €5,000 without a tax clearance certificate. In addition, it is worth considering whether, in the absence of outline planning permission, a declaration of use by the vendor should be provided before a sale is concluded. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where a large number of criminals in Cork are purchasing land, which is currently the subject of an investigation by CAB. A number of sites have been reported to the bureau and investigations are ongoing. People from far afield, in the United States and elsewhere, are listed as the registered owners of land, as per the Land Registry affiliation folio, but those people clearly do not exist. As I said, these matters are subject to examination by CAB.

There is a lot going on in this area and it cuts across a number of Departments, including the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Finance and Justice. We need to have an open discussion on the issues and come to some sort of conclusion in terms of how we keep records of these people and these potentially illicit activities.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): On behalf of the Minister for Justice, I thank Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan for raising this matter. I am happy to clarify the Department's responsibilities in regard to land and property legislation. The Deputy mentioned a number of organisations, including CAB, the money laundering unit in An Garda Síochána and the Revenue Commissioners, as well as local authorities. As he rightly

points out, this is also an issue that can impact across various Departments. The Department of Justice works to make Ireland a safe, fair and inclusive place to live and work. As such, our responsibilities include overseeing services for the buying and selling of property, namely, conveying and probate legislation.

The Property Services Regulatory Authority, PSRA, is the independent statutory regulatory body tasked with responsibility for licensing and regulating property services providers, including auctioneers, estate agents, letting agents and property management agents, some of whom the Deputy referred to in his comments. Under the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011, any business or individual that provides a property service, other than those who are subject to a similar licence or authentication scheme in another EU member state, must hold a valid licence from the PSRA. The requirement to obtain a licence applies to the sale, by whatever means, of land, including houses, apartments and other buildings, the auction of property other than land, including animals, art and antiques, the letting of land and accommodation, and property management services. It is an offence to provide a property service without a licence. The licensing of property services providers is intended to protect the interests of members of the public in their interaction with property services providers by ensuring high standards are maintained and delivered. For example, licensees must possess specified minimum qualifications, have available to them professional indemnity insurance and pay an annual contribution to the compensation fund.

As part of its independent statutory remit, the authority has powers to investigate complaints of improper conduct made against licensed property services providers and to commence, of its own volition, an investigation into suspected improper conduct. It also has the power to prosecute unlicensed property services providers. There are, therefore, key provisions in legislation in regard to complaints in this area. The Act does not provide that purchasers of property be tax compliant and-or that they be required to submit a tax clearance certificate as part of the purchase transaction. This is the essence of the point the Deputy raised. To reiterate, it is not a requirement to provide a tax compliance certificate to complete the purchase transaction. Typically, purchasers provide a booking deposit to an estate agent worth approximately 1% to 1.5% of the property sale price. The purchase of a house for €350,000, for instance, will require an approximate booking deposit of €5,000, which is held by the estate agent until the sale contract is signed. There is, however, no legal requirement for potential purchasers to forward a booking deposit to the agent. Instead, they may forward it to the vendor's solicitor.

The issue the Deputy raised relates to private third-party transactions involving the engagement of the services of a solicitor, matters for which the Minister for Justice has no responsibility. Tax clearance certificates and stamp duty, payable when property is bought, gifted or exchanged, are a matter for Revenue. Questions in respect of registered property and planning permission come under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and its agencies, namely, the Property Registration Authority, PRA, in respect of registered property, and An Bord Pleanála in respect of planning matters. As the Deputy stated, the matter encompasses a number of Departments. I confirm that a tax clearance certificate is not required to complete a purchase.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I recognise that this is a difficult issue and I must be careful in what I say. I expected the type of response he has given. As stated, the issues fall between a number of Departments. The crux of the matter is that individuals are able to pay large sums of money, whether €70,000 or €80,000 for a site or much more for a house, and can, in effect, go to their solicitor or whatever representative is act-

ing on their behalf and make a financial transaction far in excess of their means. In this State, it is very difficult for us to track or trace where people are acquiring sites, land or buildings when they clearly do not have the means to do so in a legal way. It is worth examining this either through the Department of Justice or elsewhere.

The Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, only has the resources to deal with so much, but it is quite clear what certain criminals are doing. They are purchasing land and hiding money - effectively money laundering. Any of these are subject to investigation. They are doing their best to hide the resources they have in the hope that when their investigation with CAB concludes they can go back on their merry way and carry on with their illicit activity or whatever the case may be. This has come to our attention on a number of occasions in Cork. Deputy Gould and I have met people who are affected by this. I hope that in the coming months when CAB does its investigation, these people will be held to account. The matter merits further scrutiny by government.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I again acknowledge the remarks made by Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan in highlighting issues of major concern to many people throughout the country. In my opening remarks I was speaking specifically about tax clearance certificates, but this is very important. A PPS number is required for a deed to be stamped before the transaction can be completed. There are various ways that can happen. If somebody has a legitimate PPS number, that PPS number goes on the stamped deed to the Revenue Commissioners and the Revenue Commissioners have the authority to follow that regarding where the funds for the transaction came from. The Revenue Commissioners have the authority to follow up and every stamped deed in the State has a PPS number.

Any of these PPS numbers can be obtained properly and appropriately through the solicitor who is involved in the transaction, assuming every solicitor does the job correctly. They can get a client ID service a few weeks after the completion of the transaction if the purchaser does not have a PPS number in the first place. This can happen in two cases. For example, property may have been left by a long-lost uncle to a person who does not have a PPS number in the State. That person might be from Britain, the United States or somewhere else and have no connection with the State. He or she may be abroad, may be inheriting the property from parents but may not have a PPS number. Such persons can apply for a PPS number here in Ireland once they produce photographic ID, a birth certificate, passport details, etc.

If a business is buying a property from abroad and is not incorporated in the State, it must get a certificate of incorporation which can be done through a solicitor. The directors will need to apply for a PPS number in respect of that transaction.

In every one of these cases, there is a PPS number that Revenue can follow if it has grounds for believing there is something to follow up. It does not require a tax clearance certificate in advance. I have outlined cases of people from abroad who might not have had any engagement with the Revenue Commissioners but the Revenue will have a PPS number in all these cases.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I am raising an issue I first raised with the Tánaiste two weeks ago, namely, water, in particular wastewater around the Copper Coast area of Waterford and specifically in or around the village of Bunmahon. As the name indicates, Bunmahon is at

the mouth of the River Mahon. That river is only 25 km long but it manages to achieve a considerable amount along its course. It rises at the top of the Comeragh Mountains and falls as a waterfall into one of the glacial coums that give the Comeragh Mountains their name.

I know the Minister of State has cycled the greenway and when he crossed the magnificent viaduct in Kilmacthomas he crossed the River Mahon. If he looked down from that viaduct, he would have seen Flavahan's mill, which has been powered by the River Mahon for many years. If he had his porridge this morning, he will have been in some sense powered by the River Mahon today. It runs into the sea at Bunmahon, a surfing village in the middle of our Copper Coast. That in itself is a UNESCO global geopark and it deserves better than to be treated as an open sewer.

The existing wastewater system is 50 years old and has not been subject to any significant upgrade in that time. It was originally designed to cater for a population of approximately 120 people. It is the most basic of primary treatments. It has a holding tank where the wastewater sits for 24 hours, which allows certain things to settle. The liquid, which is still not very pleasant, is then syphoned off the top. The tanks are desludged annually. However, the permanent population is now double that and is 500 or more during the summer. Therefore, the wastewater system is operating at four times over capacity.

Last Friday, I went to Bunmahon to meet local residents and groups and see the situation on the ground. I stood over the pipe and looked at what was coming out. It was not a pretty sight. The primary treatment is not doing the job it needs to do in separating out the solids. I would not base anything on anecdote having popped out there for one day. Waterford City and County Council conducted a microbiological survey and found exceptionally high levels of E. coli in the water in front of the caravan park and below the bridge. A sample taken in August suggests figures as high as 7,000 or more colony-forming units per 100 ml. The locals know not to leave their kids play there but the holidaymakers might not know that.

Despite all this, Bunmahon was not included in the latest capital investment plan to 2024. The residents were told they would be reconsidered for inclusion in the next plan. I do not want to be parochial, but my constituents have every right to be represented by me on the floor of the Dáil. I could similarly point to Tramore Pier where the RNLI have to put to sea through water that is not fit for such a purpose. Wastewater from Arthurstown, Duncannon and Ballyhack empties into Waterford Harbour with implications for people who are involved in aquaculture further downstream. The Minister of State could name the areas around Carlow and Kilkenny. Zooming out to a European level, we are likely to face fines. I would much prefer to invest in infrastructure than pay fines.

In case I have created a certain image in the Minister of State's mind of Bunmahon, let me set him straight; Bunmahon is gorgeous. When we were there inspecting the water, we saw kingfisher hunting with that flash of electric blue. From where we were, we could see all the way back up to the Mahon Falls where the river rises. I ask the Minister of State to help me provide a solution that will look after the community and the amazing natural resource it has.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I had my Flavahan's porridge this morning which was oatily delicious. I have it every morning. I am certainly familiar with Bunmahon, a beautiful part of the country.

The primary responsibility for the monitoring, management protection and improvement of water quality is assigned to local authorities under the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts and related legislation. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services, planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local level, including investment in wastewater treatment plants and returning wastewater safely to the environment in an efficient and sustainable manner. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, is the key statutory body for investigating complaints of pollution and the enforcement, both directly and through oversight of Irish Water and local authorities, of environmental legislation in Ireland, including compliance relating to licensed urban wastewater discharges.

As a country, we have much more work to do to bring our water services infrastructure up to standard. In this regard, as part of budget 2022, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, secured funding of €1.57 billion to support water services. This includes €1.459 billion - €629 million in current funding and €830 million in capital funding - in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water. The overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies throughout Ireland, including in rural areas, and support a range of programmes delivering improved quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area. It is key to addressing Ireland's shortcomings in water and wastewater infrastructure, including compliance with the urban wastewater treatment directive.

Regarding the issues along Waterford's Copper Coast, I understand that Irish Water has met members of the local community to discuss their concerns with the existing wastewater infrastructure in Bunmahon, with Irish Water committing to review the operation of the current treatment system and to outline its plans for the Bunmahon agglomeration. In playing a key role in the delivery of water and wastewater infrastructure to meet housing and development needs, addressing legacy infrastructure deficiencies and working to improve compliance with environmental standards for schemes across the country, I welcome Irish Water's engagement with the local community on this issue. However, we all know it will not be possible to fix all our infrastructural deficits overnight and this work will require significant and sustained capital investment. The Deputy painted a picture of a very challenging situation, particularly in summertime when the population increases fourfold due to visitors. Any treatment system has to reflect the population equivalent in terms of the level of treatment. The fact that it is not included in the capital investment plan, as the Deputy said, needs to be reviewed by Irish Water. It certainly sounds to me to be an issue of urgent priority which needs to be addressed. I will take it back to the Minister and make representations to Irish Water on the Deputy's behalf as well.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the Minister of State; that is very much appreciated. When I raised this with the Tánaiste, the question I asked was whether we needed to invest more money in wastewater systems. I was amazed when he answered that this year there was an underspend of €100 million. I will give the Minister of State an invitation. If he had €100 million to spend in any county in Ireland, he is more than welcome to come to Waterford to spend it, where it would be well spent throughout the county. There are solutions available. The short-term solution in Bunmahon would be to seal the pipes and to pump out more often so that it is desludged annually.

As the Minister of State will know, only two valleys beyond Bunmahon is the Anne Valley where there is an integrated wetland solution. Wastewater has been dealt with there and there was been an enormous biodiversity co-benefit. Following that, there has been a significant amenity co-benefit because the entirety of the Anne Valley can now be walked. On top of that, there has been an economic benefit because people are walking on what is essentially a septic

tank, enjoying it and having a cup of coffee on the way. I invite the Minister of State to walk that area with me and look at it as a possible solution for the Bunmahon area where it would suit just as well. The topography is there. The landowners would be more likely to buy in because they would see the positive example just one village over. It would give the community the signal it needs, because even if it were to be announced in the next capital plan, they could probably live with that if a short-term solution was put in place. Let them do the preparation work which would mean that they could hit the ground running in 2025 and make sure they could provide for their wastewater needs into the future as the village grows.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The proposals the Deputy has made are reasonable and should be given consideration. I refer to the point he raised about the underspend. Obviously, there are capacity issues and issues still to be resolved with Irish Water's structure and its ongoing engagement with local authorities on service level agreements and the work ongoing with the Workplace Relations Commission. That work is progressing well. It will result in Irish Water becoming a fully-fledged public service utility that delivers on the infrastructure and the capital investment, which is unprecedented in the history of the State and which is needed, this Government has committed to. Sustained investment is required in the next decade and beyond to meet the growing population needs and our obligations under river basin management plans and so on. This is an area that is very beautiful but also very pressurised from other sources such as agricultural intensification about which we are currently in public consultation through the river basin management plans. We urge the public to continue to be involved in that process.

I am very familiar with the constructed wetland systems. They offer a solution to which we should give due consideration. For small catchment areas and communities, and even in larger communities, they have proven to work very well. They involve relatively low-cost technology as opposed to large pieces of mechanised infrastructure and, as the Deputy said, they have the added biodiversity benefit. When looking at nature-based solutions for water management, we should consider those types of facilities as well. I would be happy to visit the area in the new year.

Regeneration Projects

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We would love if the senior Minister was here, but it is apt that the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is here to discuss Noonan Road. He accepted the offer of the previous Deputy to visit a particular location. He might also come and look at Noonan Road where I am sure he would be welcome.

Noonan Road is the main thoroughfare, but there are three or four little side streets off it, including Fort Street, Dean Street and Finbarr's Road. We can talk about Noonan Road in general. The flats were built in the 1960s and 1970s to replace the lanes and tenements that were previously there. Since that time, it has never had any serious renovation. This is a fairly small area. It is a tight-knit and very proud community, but it is in desperate need of regeneration at this stage. Some of the blocks of flats are in a deplorable condition. Of the housing maintenance requests that come from the south-central ward in Cork city, they are dominated by issues from Noonan Road and the surrounding streets.

The regeneration of the area has been discussed for about 15 years at council level, and probably longer by the people of the community. It has not been a pipe-dream but a priority for Cork City Council. It has submitted numerous proposals to the Department yet, for some

reason, it keeps turning it down. It never qualified under the apartment deep retrofit programme of 2017 to 2020. This is a community that is being neglected. Will the Minister of State explain to the people of Noonan Road why they are consistently neglected and how we will get funding from the Department for requests that are coming from the city council to do the regeneration that is so badly needed?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Every time I meet with Cork City Council officials, I always tell them that if there is anything they need me to raise or support in the Dáil, I will do so. Noonan Road is one such issue. The apartments on Noonan Road and houses in surrounding areas are in significant need of regeneration and retrofitting. There was a Department announcement two years ago that this was going to happen and tenants and residents were delighted. We are now going into 2022 and there is no retrofitting taking place.

Some of these apartments are in dire condition. A report published in 2019 stated that one of the homes had not had hot water for 38 years - not days, weeks, or months - such were the bad conditions in this properly. There are issues with mould, damp and leaks. There are obsolete electrical fittings. There are serious issues with housing and maintenance. People are contacting me about the conditions of their bathrooms and bedrooms. Yet, Cork City Council cannot access funding. The council states that it is trying to get funding but the Government will not provide it because it wants to retrofit and regenerate the area. That is not good enough.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire and I have to go back to Cork to meet these people who live in these conditions. What answer will we give them from the Minister of State? The Government is quick to state the amount of money and support it gives to local authorities, but here we have an area that has been crying out for years. This is a community that desperately needs to be supported. This scheme would make sense. We know the cost to people trying to heat their homes is phenomenal. The situation is that older people are without heating and trying to stay warm because they cannot afford the costs.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I was trying to familiarise myself with Noonan Road earlier, although I am fairly familiar with Cork city. Our Department launched the energy efficiency retrofitting programme in 2013 with the aim of funding the retrofit of social homes requiring insulation and energy upgrade works. Since the programme commenced in 2013, more than 73,500 units of social housing stock have been retrofitted with a total Exchequer spend of €161 million under the scheme. This Government revised the energy efficiency programme in 2021 and increased the budget for it to €65 million. The programme focuses on ensuring that the fabric of the home is upgraded and that an energy efficient heating system is provided. This revised ten-year programme will see a significant upscaling of deeper retrofit on what has been completed by local authorities in previous years. Budget 2022 will see an increased allocation of €85 million being made available, which will see approximately 2,400 homes upgraded to a building energy rating of B2 or the cost-optimal equivalent under the programme.

From 2013 to 2020, Cork City Council received funding in the amount of €21 million in respect of retrofitting works for more than 7,000 units. Cork City Council received additional funding under my Department's voids programme from 2014 to 2019 in the amount of €3.3 million. In November 2019, my Department approved funding in the amount of €90,534 to install energy and environmental monitoring equipment at eight apartments at Noonan Road. A claim received on foot of this approval has been fully paid by the Department. In July of this year, my Department received a submission from Cork City Council under the energy efficiency programme seeking funding of over €4 million for 68 apartments at Noonan Road. My

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Department sought clarifications on various aspects of the submission and is currently awaiting a response from Cork City Council. A decision on the funding request cannot progress until Cork City Council reverts with the information required by my Department. To date, Cork City Council has received funding approval for €9.8 million for the retrofit of 210 apartments under the energy efficiency programme. To date, 156 apartments have been completed and funding of €7.2 million recouped by Cork City Council.

My Department welcomes the efforts made by all local authorities to improve the energy efficiency of housing stock under their control. Since 2013 local authorities have drawn down in excess of €160 million under the energy efficiency programmes. Under the 2021 energy efficiency programme, Cork City Council was allocated funding in the amount of €3.3 million for 123 units. Unfortunately, none of these units will be delivered this year but we look forward to their early completion in 2022.

My Department has provided support to all local authorities this year in achieving targets agreed under the 2021 energy efficiency retrofit programme. In addition to direct grant funding, significant project management resourcing was provided to each individual local authority so that it could put in place dedicated administrative and technical supports to help it drive the energy efficiency programme. This is the responsibility of local authorities and within their competencies. My Department acknowledges the difficult environment within which local authorities have had to work in 2021 with a construction shutdown and supply chain problems impacting on delivery. We look forward to significantly improved output under this programme in 2022 and to the advancement of the retrofit works at Noonan Road.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State was trying to figure out where Noonan's Road is in Cork. To be helpful, it just behind the Bandon Road and Barrack Street area. The area is very much associated with the late Toddy O'Sullivan. I take this opportunity to put on record my condolences to his family. I am reading the Minister of State's response and it does not acknowledge the many applications made between 2009 and 2019 which did not succeed. With regard to the November 2019 funding, I am not saying it was not welcome but that was about gauges and energy monitoring systems going into flats. That is fine. There is no harm in these things but they do not make the flat warmer, drier or more comfortable. While welcome, that was a bit of a disappointment because the residents were expecting a lot more. They were expecting regeneration. This is the first time I have heard this piece regarding a decision on funding. Obviously, I will check that out but it is my understanding that the city council has put this out to e-tender and is hearing that there is no programme ready for next year.

The Minister of State should put together a programme and announce it as soon as possible. This community needs generation as much as, or perhaps more than, any community and should be considered for a pilot programme if there is not going to be an overall programme.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am looking at the Minister of State's script. In the last paragraph on the first page it is stated that between 2013 and 2020, Cork City Council received €21 million in respect of retrofitting works for 7,000 units. Did the council change light bulbs or what? A figure of €21 million to retrofit 7,000 units does not add up at all. I ask that be clarified. Cork City Council has 10,500 social housing units and the Minister of State indicated that 7,000 of these were retrofitted over a seven-year period. That means 1,000 were done a year. That does not make sense at all. That needs to be clarified. The Minister of State is right that €7 million was spent on 156 apartments. The properties of residents in areas like Wolfe Tone Street and Allen Square were done, but the residents had to campaign and blockade roads because of the

condition of their houses. The works were a tremendous success. I will bring the Minister of State down to Allen Square and the residents will tell him how the works changed their lives and reduced their bills by half but all the communities around them in Baker's Road, Churchfield and Mary Aikenhead Place are living in the cold.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: With regard to the Noonan Road project, there is no further action my Department can take in respect of the submission for funding until Cork City Council provides the clarifications we are seeking. Our Department supports local authorities in improving their social housing stock through a range of programmes, including energy retrofitting, regeneration and refurbishment works on vacant properties, in order to return properties to productive use as quickly as possible. It is to be led by the local authority. As well as receiving funding support under the voids and energy efficiency programmes, Cork City Council has also been a significant beneficiary under our Department's national regeneration programme, which provided funding in excess of €280 million nationally between 2016 and 2020 across the regeneration areas. The very impressive Harbour View Road project in Knocknaheeny in the north inner city of Cork is an example of the type of energy-efficiency projects funded by our Department under the regeneration programme.

Deputy Thomas Gould: My father lives there. It was a success.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: This is in addition to the normal large-scale regeneration and rebuild programme of works which continues to be funded by my Department in the Knocknaheeny area of Cork city.

With regard to the point Deputy Gould raised about the €21 million spent between 2013 and 2020, there were different standards of works. The funding required for 7,000 units to meet the 2013 standards is significantly different from that required to meet the current B2 standards and requirements. We are seeking clarification from Cork City Council in respect of this specific project. I ask that both Deputies help us expedite that as soon as is practicable.

Foireann Seirbhíse Sláinte

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Táim fíorbhuíoch as ucht an seans chun an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a phlé sa Dáil anocht. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo chomh déanach anocht. Ocht lá ó shin, bogadh bean 90 bliain d'aois ó Ospidéal Pobail Chorca Dhuibhne i nDaingean Uí Chúis go saoráid chónaithe i gCill Airne. Tá Cill Airne os cionn 70 ciliméadar óna baile féin i mBaile na nGall agus beagnach trí uair a chloig de thuras fillte dá clann. Is é Máire Bean Uí Bheaglaíoch an t-ainm atá uirthi. Tá sé dochreidte go bhfuil sé seo ag tarlú in 2021 ach is é seo an cás. Is é an cúis leis an mbogadh seo ná an easpa altraí agus an easpa leapacha san ospidéal a ghabhann leis. Tá níos mó altraí ag teastáil uainn go práinneach in Ospidéal Pobail Chorca Dhuibhne chun na leapacha atá ann anois a choimeád ar oscailt agus na leapacha folmha atá ann a oscailt arís do mhuintir Chorca Dhuibhne agus dár seandhaoine leithéidí Máire ach go háirithe. Níl sé ceart ar chor ar bith go bhfuil Máire i gCill Aire, chomh fada sin óna baile, anocht cé go bhfuil 14 leaba folamh ina ceantar dúchais i gCiarraí thiar. Chaith Máire sé mhí i leaba gearrchónaithe in Ospidéal Pobail Chorca Dhuibhne sular bogadh í go Cill Airne. Bhí sí socraithe agus sásta go maith agus bhí aithne aici ar gach duine. Bhí sí ann a máthairtheanga a úsáid go laethúil le foireann an ospidéil agus le hothair eile. Níl sí in ann é sin a dhéanamh anois agus tá a clann buartha go mór go bhfuil sí imithe síos mórán le seachtain. Níl sí in ann na haltraí i gCill Airne a thuiscint agus níl siad in ann í a thuiscint. Níl sé ceart go raibh Máire ar

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an liosta feithimh fadtéarmach tar éis sé mhí a chaitheamh san ospidéal. Is cinnte go gcaithfear eisceachtaí a dhéanamh i gcásanna leis na tosca sin go léir.

0 o'clock

Tá mé ag glaoch arís anocht chun Máire a thabhairt ar ais chuig a ceantar dúchais i gCiarraí Thiar ar chúiseanna daonnúla.

Chomh maith leis sin, tá an HSE ag rá ar feadh blianta anois go bhfuil siad ag déanamh a ndícheall chun altraí a earcú ag ospidéal pobal Chorca Dhuibhne ach níl na haltraí ag teacht. Tá an HSE ag rá go bhfuil ceithre altra nua ag teastáil uathu chun na hocht leaba ghearrthéarmach agus na hocht leaba fhadtéarmach a oscailt ach tá altraí ag an ospidéal ag rá go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó altraí ná an líon seo ag teastáil, go háirithe mar go mbeidh beirt altraí eile ag éirí as go luath.

Tá an HSE ag déanamh an rud céanna maidir leis an ospidéal ar feadh blianta ag súil le torthaí difriúla a fháil. Caithfidh siad plean a chur in áit chun foireann iomlán a chur ar bun chun na leapacha go léir a oscailt do mhuintir Chorca Dhuibhne agus todhchaí an ospidéil a shábháil.

We need nurses, we need more beds and we need to get Máire Bean Uí Bheaglaíoch back home and we need to make sure that this never happens to any person from west Kerry again. I cannot adequately state the stress this has caused, not just Máire herself, but to her entire family and community. I thank the Minister of State for engaging with me over the past week or so, especially on this case. However, we need the HSE to look at the exceptional circumstances of this case, address it and move Máire Bean Uí Bheaglaíoch back to Dingle, but also urgently address the need for more staff and more beds at west Kerry community hospital.

Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler): Tá an freagra seo as Béarla. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. The west Kerry community hospital provides important and valued services for the people in the west Kerry area. As the hospital is one of just two units providing long-term care on the Dingle Peninsula, I understand the significant role it plays in the community and the depth of feeling associated with the hospital. As well as providing long-stay residential care, the community hospital also provides short-stay beds. These beds are used for respite and rehabilitation and the people using them generally stay for a number of days or weeks.

There are currently 34 long-stay residents in west Kerry community hospital and four people availing of short-stay beds for respite, rehabilitation, palliative care or other supports. The current bed capacity at the hospital is 46 and the HSE's plan is to increase this capacity, once more staff can be recruited. I am sure Deputy Griffin will understand my reluctance to speak in any great detail about the specifics of any individual case in the House, given the personal nature and complex circumstances involved.

We have spoken many times on the issue. I know the Deputy is passionate about it and I will continue to work with him on this case. Unfortunately, there is a waiting list for long-stay places in west Kerry community hospital, which I sincerely regret. A total of ten people are currently waiting to access long-term care beds in west Kerry community hospital. In line with legislation and to ensure equity and fairness for all applicants, waiting lists have to be abided by throughout our community hospitals.

There is a process for allocating these limited spaces when they become available, which is based on the date on which a person chooses the centre as their place of choice for long-stay care. Due to the current waiting list, it is an unfortunate fact that people may have to take up residence in an alternative centre for a period of time and await a placement for a long-stay bed in the west Kerry facility. This is what has happened in this case.

Staff recruitment to west Kerry community hospital and many other community hospitals in rural locations can be extremely challenging. The HSE has made extensive and prolonged efforts to recruit staff in order to increase the number of beds in west Kerry. Recruitment is ongoing and interviews are held frequently. There are currently four and a half whole-time equivalent vacant nursing posts and a number of healthcare assistants are also required to open the remaining beds.

The HSE will continue intensive recruitment efforts in order that the services available can be expanded in west Kerry and these efforts will include international recruitment. Unfortunately, the HSE cannot open any more beds until more staff have been recruited. With the current staffing levels in west Kerry community hospital, the maximum number of people that can be safely accommodated right now are being accommodated.

All efforts are being made to increase the staff complement, which would add another eight long-term residential spaces and another eight short-stay beds to the hospital. This would bring the total capacity to 54 beds and would go a long way to providing the services required to all individuals who are in need of these services. Officials from my Department will continue to monitor the situation and I have requested the HSE to keep me updated on any progress.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Aire Stáit for coming in tonight and the energy which she has brought to her role. She really puts her heart into her job. It is refreshing to see and I am grateful for that. I will emphasise my concerns about the crude system the HSE seems to have for long-stay beds. It seems to be based purely on chronological factors alone. Yet, in this case I have highlighted, which is just one case, age is a particular issue. Máire Bean Uí Bheaglaíoch is 96 years of age.

We have an teanga, which is a very important matter, not only in terms of well-being, but the basic day-to-day communications. Nurses in Killarney cannot understand her mother tongue. Her native language is Irish and she has difficulty understanding the nurses. That is both dangerous and very unsettling. In this case, there was also the length of time spent in the facility already and the element of having settled in. There are numerous other factors as well, such as the distance her family would have to travel. One would go from Cork to Dublin in the time it would take to get from Baile na nGall to Killarney and back home again. On humanitarian grounds, I ask that this case be revisited.

On the broader issue, we need to take a different approach. The HSE has to accept it has failed in its approach to date. It cannot continue the approach. It has to do something exceptionally different. The nurses simply are not coming. It needs to look at more flexible working arrangements and providing better incentives for people. I call on the Minister of State to engage for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Minister for Rural and Community Development on a cross-departmental approach, as was advocated by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, last week, to see whether we can try to help the situation through a number of Departments combining their efforts.

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We need to acknowledge the peripherality of Dingle, in that nurses are located very far away. They will need extra incentives to come there or more flexible arrangements need to be given to qualified nurses in the locality who cannot take up employment. Other ideas are also welcome.

Deputy Mary Butler: I sincerely regret the situation that Máire Bean Uí Bheaglaíoch finds herself in. The waiting list for the long-stay places in west-Kerry community hospital is of ten people. As the Deputy knows, community nursing units and hospitals are an essential part of our social care infrastructure and will, at a certain point, be a necessary option for some older people in order to meet their healthcare needs. They play a vital role in an overall continuum of care for older people over the coming years, as our older population increases in line with demographic trends. I have visited many of them over the past few months and see the care and support people get in the community hospitals.

Community hospitals, such as west Kerry community hospital, form an integral part of the local community. The ability to hire, support and retain experienced, dedicated staff is essential to the delivery of the essential services that facilities such as west Kerry provide. The HSE has advised it is committed to ensuring, as quickly as possible, that staffing capacity is built in west Kerry and a sustainable workforce is soon in place in order that the residents of west Kerry community hospital can have access to the services they require as soon as they require them.

I will continue to engage with the Deputy and officials from my Department will continue to monitor the situation. I have requested the HSE to keep me updated on any progress.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.09 a.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 15 December 2021.