



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 25 Eanáir 2022

Tuesday, 25 January 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Minute's Silence to Commemorate 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday

An Ceann Comhairle: Before Leaders' Questions this week, we will commemorate the anniversary of the events in Derry on 30 January 1972 known as Bloody Sunday. Today I propose we hold a minute's silence in remembrance of the 14 people who lost their lives as a result of Bloody Sunday, a major tragedy in the history of our island.

Members rose.

An Ceann Comhairle: Ar dheis Dé go raibh siad.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This time two years ago, we were in the midst of a general election. The Taoiseach will recall the election was brought about by the crisis in health. It was an election in which workers and families, frustrated and fed up with repeated failures of successive Governments in housing and healthcare, voted for change in huge numbers. Now, two years on and in the cold light of day, people see that these crises in housing and health have only gotten worse. We have record rents, soaring house prices and 1 million people on treatment waiting lists, and if that was not enough, households struggle to keep up with the cost of living that is out of control.

People are under huge pressure as they are hammered by non-stop price hikes in every area. The living standard of workers and families is squeezed by the highest rate of inflation in 20 years and a lack of Government action. For far too many people, being ourselves again means the stress and struggle of trying to keep up with soaring costs while wages stay the same. The yearly cost of putting food on the table is to go up by nearly €800. The cost of running a car is to go up by an average of €500. Record rents are up by 8.1%. Families are paying the equiva-

lent of a second mortgage in childcare costs. The cost of lighting and heating a home is up a massive 53%. It is never ending. All of this adds up to a cost of living that is unbearable. The Government must urgently deliver a plan that gets these costs down, but this urgency is sorely absent.

People have been hit with 35 energy price hikes in the past year and the Government has been far too slow to react. The €100 credit for energy bills comes very late. The Government did not deal with this in the budget. It refused to sit on this matter in December and now the €100 credit will come into force only in March or April. Costs are now so far out of control that this will not be a game changer for families paying thousands just to light and heat their homes. It should be borne in mind that families pay these off-the-wall bills today and the benefit of the €100 will likely be cancelled out as costs increase further. Workers and families stretch themselves to make it to the end of the week and they deserve better than this slack response from Government. They want they need real action.

Tá an costas maireachtála imithe ó smacht. Tá daoine cráite mar gheall ar an ardú mór ar phraghsanna atá imithe ó smacht. Tá sé thar am ag an Rialtas gníomh a dhéanamh agus faoiseamh a thabhairt do dhaoine. Does the Taoiseach accept that we need great urgency in dealing with this cost-of-living crisis? Does the Taoiseach accept that there needs to be a step change in the Government's approach? Has he engaged with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities on this worsening crisis? Has he directed the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to get the heads of energy companies around the table to devise solutions for hard-pressed customers? Without Government action, things will get worse for families that are just keeping their heads above water. This is a vicious cycle. It is never-ending. It is no way for our people to live or build a future. The Taoiseach's lack of urgency cannot continue. It is now time for Government to do its job and protect workers and families from being fleeced.

The Taoiseach: In her opening remarks, the Deputy made reference to the situation with regard to housing and health before raising the issue of the cost of living. Without question, this Government has embarked on a step change in respect of housing through its Housing for All strategy. There will be investment of more than €4 billion per annum from the State alone in addition to private sector investment. The largest social housing programme ever to be concluded will be under way in 2022. There is affordable housing, the Land Development Agency legislation has been passed, and so on. This will make a difference. There have already been over 30,000 housing commencements to the end of 2021, with a higher outcomes expected for 2022. We are making progress on housing but I acknowledge that there is a long way to go and that there are significant challenges.

On health, the Deputy completely omitted any reference to the fact that our health service has stood up to a one in 100 years event, the Covid-19 pandemic. This posed a great challenge to our health service. We resourced our health service to an extraordinary degree to combat the challenges presented by Covid-19. With regard to mortality and levels of illness, we actually did better than most countries across Europe. The bottom line is that, without question, the pandemic had an impact on waiting lists.

With regard to the cost of living, níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil an costas maireachtála ag dul in airde. Níl an tír seo freagrach as sin. Is rud é atá ag tarlú ar fud an domhain, mar is eol don Teachta. Tá dlúthbhaint idir sin agus an polasaí atá ag an Rúis ó thaobh praghsanna gáis agus dóthain gáis a chur ar fáil. Is é sin bun agus barr na faidhbe maidir leis an gcostas maireachtála atá ann ar fud an domhain faoi láthair. That is to say, inflation has picked up across the world.

In her analysis, the Deputy ignored the global impact. Almost all of these inflationary cycle issues have been occurring across the globe. As the Deputy will know, Europe receives the majority of its gas supply from Russia. Lower flows of gas from that country have been a major factor. The current geopolitical tensions with regard to Ukraine could exacerbate that and make things even worse if there was to be any military incursion, with all of the consequences that would flow from that.

In addition to that, there were supply chain issues relating to Covid. These global supply chain issues also had an impact in increasing inflation. The Government responded in the budget through the €5 increase in the fuel allowance and the good social protection initiatives we introduced. We also announced a tax package worth about €520 million to assist people with their disposable income. The welfare package was worth approximately €558 million. This year, 1.8 million working families will benefit from the tax package alone. I note Sinn Féin's alternative budget did not include indexation of income tax bands and credits, which would have meant an increase in tax for workers across the board.

With regard to another intervention we made, extending GP cover, the Vincentian model shows that this can often be very impactful for those on minimum incomes and for the disposable incomes of people more generally. We introduced some targeted measures with regard to the social protection approach which will help people on low incomes in particular.

The European Central Bank has said that this inflationary cycle is related to the pandemic. That remains to be seen. The Government took a decision today, however, in respect of the legislation that will be required to give everyone a €100-plus deduction from their electricity bills, which will help in addition to budgetary measures we took.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The truth is that no step change has been effected by the Taoiseach's Government.

The Taoiseach: There has.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What we have seen is more of the same. The proof of that is that house prices are up 14% and rents are up 8%. The truth is that the Government has continued with the same approach. Rather hearing an answer from the Taoiseach, he reached for excuses. I am well aware of the international context and of the inflationary pressures. By the way, the Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland has made it clear that this is not a momentary phenomenon. This is going to be with us for the next year. I want the Taoiseach to listen to people. I want him to listen to the experiences of families who are telling us and him that they are struggling to keep the lights on and to keep up with their bills and other costs. I want him to make clear what his Government proposes to do about that. They are introducing the €100 relief for energy costs, but that comes very late and, in truth, it will not be sufficient. I want to know what the Taoiseach will do in addition. I have suggested that he and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, should act to ensure that there are solutions for customers and families struggling today.

The Taoiseach: We do listen to people. Today, for example, the Government approved well over €100 million in expenditure on O'Devaney Gardens, where well over 1,000 houses will be provided.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: At what price?

The Taoiseach: Yes, the Deputy asks at what price, because it is always more of the same from Sinn Féin which is going to oppose it anyway.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We just want people to be able to afford houses.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The party has opposed more than 6,000 houses that families could have done with over the past number of years.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: At what price?

The Taoiseach: What struck me this morning was-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Broin, please.

The Taoiseach: -----regarding O'Devaney Gardens-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: At what price?

The Taoiseach: -----that the latest iteration of that project was in 2015. It actually goes all the way back to 2008 and successive city councils and an inability to vote for it-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: They are not affordable.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: -----and an inability to support the Oscar Traynor Road project.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: €400,000 for a family home.

The Taoiseach: There is a housing crisis there, and we need to get houses built.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: An affordable housing crisis, created by you.

The Taoiseach: The attitude of Deputy Ó Broin and his colleagues is to go on and on and to vote against that model and vote against the next model.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We are against unaffordability for working people.

The Taoiseach: Turning to the cost of living-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Energy costs.

The Taoiseach: -----this is a key issue. We acknowledge and know that. We have taken steps in the budget, with the tax package and with the legislation today that will facilitate some degree of reduction. We will do more as well, however.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: We will engage with the social partners on ways of trying to protect people-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We have the highest prices in the world.

The Taoiseach: -----to help people-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Fleecing people.

The Taoiseach: -----and trying to cushion them over the next 12 months with a view to weathering this significant increase in prices occasioned by a global situation, as the Deputy well knows, particularly by the behaviour and approach of Russia in restricting gas supplies to the West.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Taoiseach is not living in the real world.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Housing costs went up 12% under a Sinn Féin Minister in the North.

Deputy David Cullinane: Well done. Look after Donegal now.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is what happened under a Sinn Féin Minister in Northern Ireland.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies, can we behave? I call Deputy Kelly.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Now we are back.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alan Kelly: I honestly do not think that the Taoiseach is living in the real world. We all know international factors are at play, but that is not the whole story. It is the Taoiseach's job to deal with them international factors impacting families and workers in this country and with what is real. The €113.50 credit that has been announced is a joke. It is tokenistic and is actually insulting. Inflation is at a 20-year high of 5.5%. Let that figure settle in, and its impact, especially the impact it will have over the next four to five months.

The Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland yesterday described recent energy price increases as "spectacular". I do not think the word was chosen lightly. The December consumer price index, CPI, was published last week, and over the past 12 months electricity prices have gone up 22%, gas price by 30% and home heating oil by 50%. This will add €1,300, or more, to bills annually. How many families can honestly absorb that?

Those higher prices are now also coming through in food bills. The prices of bread, milk and butter have gone up by 10% to 30%. These are household staples. Even pasta has gone up 5% in the past two months. The day-to-day essentials that families rely on to feed themselves are also going up. *The Irish Times* estimated yesterday that if a weekly shop climbed by €15, it would cost households €780 more a year. Add on to that diesel prices and the cost of petrol. This time last year a litre of diesel was €1.20; now it is €1.60. Adding all of those together, we have a range of €3,000 to €4,000 extra for families. How many families can absorb that? This is the question the Taoiseach has to answer.

There is no point in coming back to me and saying it is all international factors. I accept that a percentage of it is down to international factors. The Taoiseach still has to deal with it,

even if it is. It is not an excuse we want; it is solutions. What the Taoiseach has proposed is not going to have an impact. The Government proposal on flexible working, which we do not believe is flexible enough, will ensure more people are commuting, spending on fuel and having to move into cities again. This will lead to an increase in rents and the Government refuses to bring in a rent freeze. It is not all about international factors. They are a component but ultimately the people of Ireland need solutions from the Government one way or the other. What are the Taoiseach's solutions? Will he look at a rent freeze? For some time we have pushed for a derogation on VAT. The Taoiseach should not tell me the Government cannot do it because I know it can.

The Taoiseach: On the VAT issue, if we reduced VAT temporarily for a couple of months, ultimately we would create higher electricity prices because Ireland would lose its special derogation from the European Union and the rate of VAT on energy products in the new year would rise from 13.5% at present to the standard rate of 23%. I have explained that to the House on a number of occasions but the Opposition keeps coming back suggesting things that cannot happen or that, if they did happen, would be damaging to the country.

Let us go back to the Deputy's broader point. I accept that he acknowledges the international factors. The budget did target low-income families in terms of a range of measures. There was not just the fuel allowance but also the increases in the qualified child payment, the living alone allowance and the income threshold for the working family payment. The total cost of those targeted interventions was approximately €146 million. Some €520 million was the cost of income tax changes and reductions, again to give families some degree of disposable income. Today's measure will help 2.1 million households in respect of a €100-plus reduction on electricity bills. As I said earlier, we have also taken measures on childcare and in respect of the extension of the GP visit card to children up to eight years of age. That will really help families in terms of disposable income.

I accept absolutely the Deputy's right to come in and seek further measures. However, we have to avoid a wages spiral that would just create a further inflationary spiral. We have to think intelligently as a country as to how we protect families and people in terms of the daily necessities of life-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government was not worrying about a wage spiral when it appointing a Secretary General in the Department of Health.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the wages spiral?

The Taoiseach: I am talking to Deputy Kelly. Deputy Carthy is not a leader yet. He should let me talk to Deputy Kelly. We have to engage with the social partners as well and work our way through this, and take further measures, if required, at the appropriate time to deal with what is happening and what is likely to happen for the remainder of 2022. However, we must do so in a way that does not just add fuel to the inflationary cycle, which is in no one's interest and would only result in putting people through more hardship.

Initially the ECB was of a view that this international increase in inflation was temporary. I always said we would have to keep that under review. It seems to me it could be a bit longer than we might have anticipated. We are going to have to adjust, as we have adjusted so far in terms of budgetary policy. But we need to think our way through this in an intelligent way and

not just reduce it to a sort of political sparring for the sake of it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Speaking with deep honesty, I do not think the Taoiseach gets it. He has to deal with what I have shown, namely, an increase of €3,000 to €4,000. That is not debatable, but what he is proposing is meagre and will not deal with it. People watching this debate will suffer.

Deputy Ged Nash: Hear, hear.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Government has to deal with rent. It can be done, so do not tell me it cannot. I did it. Rent freezes can be introduced. The Government also has to deal with VAT. The Taoiseach keeps repeating that the Government cannot apply for a derogation but it can apply for a one-off derogation. Of course it can.

The Taoiseach spoke about inflation. Workers have every right to look for pay increases to deal with inflation because the Government will not deal with it. He cannot sit there and say that they should not. They will, they can and they must because the Government will not deal with it. They will need those wages to pay for these cost increases. The Government does not have the will. It needs to rethink that because the people who are watching and who will be getting bills this week, next week and the weeks and months after are looking to the Government. If it does not come up with measures, they will suffer because this issue is not going away anytime soon. It will go on for a significant time.

The Taoiseach: I am not clear about what the Deputy did on rent because rent kept increasing after he left office. I think we are ultimately dealing with a supply issue in housing. Chasing after an inflationary cycle has never worked. It is not a sustainable way of doing it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Deal with it, so.

The Taoiseach: Yes, we do need to protect workers, but we have to do that working with the social partners in an intelligent way. The Government will be up for that in terms of how to do that, but it has to be done in a manner that protects disposable incomes and enables people to be in a position to access the necessities of life in terms of food, shelter, fuel and all the basics. That is why in the health area this year in the budget we increased eligibility for GP care from 6 years of age to 7. That means a lot to families. The drugs payment scheme, DPS, threshold is going from €114 down to €100. There is free contraception for particular cohorts. Children's hospital charges are being reduced. There are mechanisms by which we can help people in terms of their everyday expenses, but we also had a tax package in the last budget of about €520 million. We also did social protection measures that were targeted. We look at the Vincentian model, for example, as a mechanism. There are ideas there that could help us to target whatever resources we have in the right direction.

Deputy Paul Murphy: For the third year in a row, the Government has left its homework to the very last minute. We are only weeks away from the leaving certificate mocks, yet students still do not know what they are going to face this year. They might be less than six months away from what will be one of the most stressful exams of their lives but they do not know what the Government is planning for them.

Even in a normal year, more than half of students experience mental or physical health issues as a result of the leaving certificate, but this year's students have also had to deal with two years of disruption to their studies. It is stressful enough already without the added fear of hav-

ing to miss exams or lose out on a college place due to catching Covid in the middle of them. Students have not even been able to have a traditional education. They cannot be expected to sit a traditional leaving certificate. It is way past time to give clarity to this year's students.

It is not just about that, though. It is time to scrap the Irish version of the squid games, namely, what we call the CAO points rat race. It is not necessary and is based on an artificial scarcity of third level places and dog-eat-dog market competition. It translates social inequality into education inequality, with those who can afford grinds and private education having a major head start. The result is that 99% of young people living in Dublin 6 go on to higher education while only 16% of those from Dublin 10 do so.

There is an alternative to this system. We need to remove the barriers to education, open access to third level to all, and ensure there is a college place for everyone who wants one. The Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, ASTI, has proposed open access to third level as the only fair and equitable alternative. We agree. What that means is a place in third level for everyone who wants one together with massively expanded apprenticeship schemes. The CAO offers roughly 55,000 places for 80,000 applicants, so it means making another 25,000 places in first year available. That can be done. The staff, for example, are already there. There are already 11,000 staff, primarily women, on short-term or part-time contracts who should immediately be offered full-time contracts. All of this requires an immediate increase in investment, a scrapping of the fees and the provision of living grants. We know that the wealth increase exists in this country to do it.

First, will the Taoiseach please give clarity to this year's students as to what will happen? Second, this time last year the Taoiseach himself said the leaving certificate was too inflexible and that we needed a new system. Does he still believe that and, if he does, will he act now to abolish the points rat race?

The Taoiseach: I accept it has been a very stressful time for the students who are due to sit the leaving certificate this year, during the Covid-19 pandemic. This Government has been in office for one year and a half, not three years. We had to deal with the leaving certificate last year. Already there are differences between what we did last year and what we are doing now, or could do now. For example, I remember that last year Deputy Murphy was robustly against historic profiling as a basis for standardisation of students' results. A total of 25% of this year's leaving certificate cohort did not do the junior certificate. As for the statisticians and those involved in this, we met the chief inspector yesterday evening. I also met with the Secretary General along with the Minister for Education. If Deputy Murphy wants to go for the accredited grades model, such a model this year would involve the use of historic profiling, and that is problematic.

The Minister is meeting with the advisory group. She has met with all the stakeholders collectively and is meeting with them bilaterally. Let us not pretend to everybody that this is simple. It has to be worked out for the benefit of students, ultimately, not just in the context of the leaving certificate but also in the context of progression to a variety of courses, be they apprenticeship, further education or third level. We have a qualifications framework, and one of the benefits of that is that it puts the learner, not the institution, first. There are opportunities this year and there will always be opportunities within the context of that qualifications framework for students to progress to FETAC, HETAC and right on to postgraduate education. That is the key thing to remember. The decisions the Minister has to arrive at, following consultation with the stakeholders, have to be about the overall best interests of the students, not just today but

right through this year and next year. There are challenges this year because 25% of this year's leaving certificate cohort do not have junior certificate results against which benchmarking can be done, and that needs to be put out there. That is just a fact.

In addition, we have one of the highest participation rates in third level education across Europe. It is one of the benefits that has happened in this country over the past 50 years. We have progressively increased second level completion rates, to our credit as a country, and we have very significantly increased third level participation rates. It never gets said in this House but it remains a fact. The idea that you just throw open the doors and say everybody can come in and we will provide high-quality, targeted higher education is illusory - deliberately so - not possible and not doable. It is certainly not doable next June, and we need a dose of reality in respect of those kinds of proposals. It is not fair to students to suggest that type of approach, which is just not possible. I accept, however, the need for clarity, and that needs to happen quickly. The Minister is very much possessed of that reality also and will bring this to a conclusion within the next week.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If there are any students watching, they will have got that the Taoiseach accepts the need for the clarity, but they will not have got any further clarity from him about what decision will be made or when it will be made. I stress that they need such clarity, and they need it as soon as possible.

I do not accept that the idea there should be open access to third level education is illusory. It is not. We currently have open access to second level education. Is that illusory? No, it is not. Everyone is able to go from first level education to second level education and we are able to provide it. Could we say that absolutely everyone who wants to go to third level education can do so? Could we do away with the huge mental health pressure on second level students of the leaving certificate? Could we make the investment in education? Could we unleash the potential of many of those who do not currently manage to get to third level education and the benefit to our society by doing so? Absolutely, it could be done. Would that benefit our society as a whole? Absolutely. Is it a choice by the Taoiseach's Government to ensure the billionaires who have 60% extra wealth get to increase their wealth year on year, instead of investing in the education of our young people? That is a choice the Taoiseach's Government chooses to make.

The Taoiseach: The billionaires will always get access to third level education.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Exactly.

The Taoiseach: The harder task is to make sure we create from the early years on the opportunities for people to progress in early education to primary and second level education so they have the capacity to progress to third level. That is where I would put the extra investment - into early childhood education and childcare, where the full development of the child can be realised much earlier and the potential of the child can be developed much earlier, irrespective of background or circumstances. It is not all about going to college for the sake of it. Looking at the first year results in some courses in some areas of third level, there is a high attrition rate. It is not in anyone's interest for people to enter into a programme with high attrition rates. We need to be sensible about this.

One of the best things that has been happening in the past two years is the dramatic increase in apprenticeships. You do not have to go to third level to do good quality apprenticeships. They are happening. Our role is to ensure there is as wide an availability of options for students

as possible. We should increase those options at second level. That was one of my criticisms of second level. The Minister for Education is committed to reforming the leaving certificate, not in some knee-jerk reactionary way as occasioned by Covid but rather in a more sensible and informed way in terms of the need for continuing assessment into the future and so on, and having more varied leaving certificate options for students.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: Home is supposed to be a safe place of protection and security for people. However, for thousands of men, women and children, their homes, especially during lockdown and restrictions, have been places of daily terror. In recent days, the Department of Justice has furnished Aontú with statistics on domestic violence. There has been a dramatic increase in the level of domestic violence in every county in this State. In my own county of Meath, for example, in 2021, 1,518 reports of domestic violence were made. That is in stark contrast with 2019, which was pre-pandemic, when 1,217 such reports were made. There was a 20% increase in those two years. Each call to a helpline is a crisis in a person's life.

The trend is replicated throughout the country. According to Safe Ireland, there were 57,277 calls to its helplines in 2020. There were 23,785 incidents reported to the Garda, of which 7,600 involved charges. There were 4,000 breaches of protective orders in the same year. Shockingly, 19 new women and three new children contacted the local services every day. Those are incredible figures. For every single woman who contacted the Garda, there were those who felt, for whatever reason, unable to pick up the phone.

Domestic violence is getting worse in this State. The Covid restrictions have played a significant part in that. I have been told that with each new lockdown, there were significant spikes in the number of people who contacted those services. According to the Council of Europe, Ireland has only one third of the refuge support accommodation that is necessary. We currently have 144 such places in this State. We should have 450. There are nine counties in this State with no domestic violence accommodation whatsoever. In counties such as Cavan and Monaghan, it is left to activists such as Councillor Sarah O'Reilly to fight for that accommodation. Because of the lack of spaces, it is estimated that 1,351 women did not get access to accommodation between March and August 2020. It is a scandal. It is happening at a time when people are rightly shocked at the level of violence there is against women in the State. I have been told we need a €9 million investment right now for increased service provision. We need €112 million right now for increased capital investment to build units where families can take refuge. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that this year this funding will be made available?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very serious issue for us as a society. The level and scale of domestic violence is shocking and unacceptable. The funding will be provided to deal with it. Tusla will soon publish its review of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence. This will assist in developing a plan to address the shortfall of adequate refuge provision and the building of centres. The Minister for Justice, as we said last week, is bringing to a conclusion a national strategy to combat domestic violence, sexual violence and gender-based violence. That should be ready by early March. It will focus on prevention, protection, prosecution and co-ordinated policies. The Minister will lead the policy and the development of services.

We want to streamline the provision of centres in particular in terms of capital and current provision. Zero tolerance for domestic violence is the object of the strategy. This involves the provision, which I acknowledge is not there in some counties. Under the Cabinet committee that I will chair we will follow through on meeting the objectives that have been set and that will

emerge from the Tusla review, and in terms of making sure we can do it in a more streamlined, faster and more effective manner. Resources will not be the issue in getting this developed.

There will also be a strong legislative arm to this. The Minister is creating a new criminal offence of stalking, which Senator Lisa Chambers has been progressing with others in the Seanad. The Minister and Senator Chambers are working together on this and on non-fatal strangulation. A new hate crime Bill will be published by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in the summer. This will introduce new specific aggravated offences with enhanced penalties for crimes motivated by prejudice against certain characteristics, including gender. The Minister will also publish a new sexual offences Bill involving many important changes. The Minister will shortly sign an order to bring into operation the Criminal Procedure Act 2021, allowing for pretrial hearings that will reduce delays in the trial process that might re-traumatise victims. I reassure the Deputy this is getting top priority from the Government and will continue to do so.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the strategy that will be published in March but all the strategies in the world will not make a difference to the level of accommodation provided unless funding is also provided. We can stack strategies to the ceiling of the Dáil. Will the Taoiseach commit to making sure that, on the day of the strategy being published, he will also publish the funding that will accompany the strategy?

It is not just domestic violence that has received a spike. Yesterday, I received information that there was an increase in the number of babies born with alcohol and drug addiction in the State. Just before Christmas, I received information that 70,000 children were referred to Tusla last year. This is more children than do the leaving certificate in a given year. There has been a major spike with regard to the mental health of children. The development of children with special needs has reversed over recent years. Hospital waiting lists have ballooned. Cancer diagnosis screening and treatment have collapsed. On Friday, the Taoiseach mentioned the Government would conduct an investigation into the measures taken over the past two years with regard to restrictions. Will the Taoiseach give us a date as to when that review or investigation will take place so we can learn from what happened over the past two years and make sure the damage that was done is not replicated?

The Taoiseach: That is a separate question entirely in terms of Covid-19 which I will deal with-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The figures are pointing to-----

The Taoiseach: I know but let us be honest that this is a wider issue. First of all, significant additional funding has been provided this year through the Department of Justice and Tusla and funding to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in respect of all of the strands of the issue around domestic violence and addressing it. Additional funding was provided this year but the strategy will outline and indicate the necessity for further funding, particularly in respect of the centres. The resources will be provided to fulfil the targets and the commitments within the strategy itself. I have always said that there has to be a full evaluation of how the country performed in respect of Covid-19. We need to do further research, certainly, on the domestic violence implications that arose from Covid-19 and the lockdowns, in particular, and get a further evaluation.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The price of oil was raised on Leaders' Questions. The AA has now done a survey to say that we are one of the highest countries in the world for petrol and diesel prices. We had over 32 increases last year. The miserly €100 that is promised for later on in the year, perhaps March or April, will not go anywhere near helping people. The cost of everything, including groceries, is affected by the fuel that is needed for trucks, factories and everything else. How will we recover our economy with this spiralling crisis? I am asking for a debate here on the madness in the prices and the increases in energy costs.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy McGrath and call Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I know that with a puff from the magic dragon the restrictions were lifted at 6 o'clock last Friday. It would be churlish of me not to recognise the sense of relief and excitement felt by many people. Equally, many people have wondered what the context of this is, with a decision made outside of the Dáil, with no discussion and with a clár oibre anseo gan Covid-19 luaite beag ná mór. I am asking for a full debate on the context of Covid-19 and on the lifting of restrictions. We are all getting phone calls from nursing homes, for example, where people still cannot go in to visit their loved ones and where day centres are not operating. None of this has been put in perspective in respect of when the indemnity with the pharmaceutical companies comes to an end, or in respect of the compensation scheme. I do not expect the Taoiseach to answer now on all of these issues but I am asking for a full and frank discussion on an informed basis on the floor of the Dáil this week or next week, or as soon as possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Do any other Members wish to speak? No. I call the Taoiseach now.

The Taoiseach: This is the first time I have even been referred to as a magic dragon. There may have been a few dragons in it in terms of the public health decision. I believe that a Dáil debate on this matter is a very good idea. Perhaps it can be facilitated next week because we need a reflection and an analysis on people's inputs on the advices we received from NPHE on the decisions that we subsequently took as a Government, and on the broader position as we move out now in the next number of months with policies that we need to embed within our health service, and so on, in dealing with any further surges, iterations or new variants of concern. I would be in favour of that.

We had a discussion earlier on the issue of energy prices. The legislation governing the rebate from electricity prices should be coming into the House next week. Maybe that will give an opportunity on Second Stage for a debate on the issues that Deputy Mattie McGrath has raised. That would make sense to me.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements for this week agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Agreed. Thank you very much. On the Order of Business, I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Women of Honour came forward to share personal and harrowing stories of sexual harassment, violence and bullying within the Defence Forces. I commend their courage. As the Taoiseach will know, the women have been very clear in their call for an independent investigative statutory process to look at these very serious allegations. Despite this, the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, insists that only a review will take place. The women have rejected this as a paper exercise. Women of Honour will meet with the Minister for Defence again this afternoon. Will the Minister finally listen to the women and put in place the thorough, independent investigation they are seeking? If he refuses to do that, will the Taoiseach intervene to make sure this happens?

The Taoiseach: First, I again commend and pay tribute to the Women of Honour for their courage in coming forward to tell their stories and also to effect fundamental change in terms of the culture and behaviour in the Defence Forces in respect of any violence against women in the Defence Forces, or against vulnerable males as well. The Minister for Defence is acting, and has engaged, very sincerely with the Women of Honour on this issue. He will make an announcement this evening, but he is meeting with the group later this afternoon. I do not wish to pre-empt that meeting or the Minister's decision. A range of measures have been taken already but, notwithstanding that, there certainly is a need for a more fundamental independent review.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Unfortunately, the delayed right to request flexible work law comes too late for many workers. What many want is to continue the flexible arrangements that were put in place. With the flexibility over the last two years, statistically more women were in full-time employment than ever previously, moving from part-time work to full-time work. This is an important factor in the Government's decision today. The Government has outlined 13 reasons whereby employers or bosses still have the upper hand. What has emerged from the Government does not take any account of the changed circumstances workers have had over the last two years. The power is still with the bosses. The idea that somebody can go to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, where there is a 15-month waiting time and no legal aid, is just a joke. Will the Taoiseach not guarantee workers, particularly women who have benefited hugely from this statistically, a real right to flexible work and continued flexible work into the future?

The Taoiseach: We should acknowledge the progress that has been made since the first strategy relating to remote working was published early last year. In fact, I believe Finland, Luxembourg and Ireland top the EU league table in terms of working from home, at over 20%, although I am open to correction on that. That is an indication of the progress-----

Deputy Ged Nash: It has been a necessity.

The Taoiseach: -----and also the balanced and partnership approach that has been the hallmark of the Irish employer-employee relationship generally. The heads of the legislation the Government agreed today in respect of giving an employee the right to request remote working is another positive, progressive step forward. That will come to the House to be debated and all Deputies will have an input into it. In addition, we have made significant progress in all the investment we have made in remote working hubs. That has been quite dramatic and will facilitate remote working for many people.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Yesterday was International Day of Education. While we laud ourselves as a country with high completion rates in mainstream education, as has just occurred in the debate between the Taoiseach and Deputy Paul Murphy, the fact is that many students are being left behind every year. The DEIS retention rate for the leaving certificate is 84.8% compared to 91.5% nationally. This has left alternative education providers and centres, such as the Cork Life Centre in the Taoiseach's constituency, to provide a second chance at education. They have been doing this with great, but often unrecognised, success. In 2018, the then Department of Education and Skills conducted a formal review of alternative education under action 88 of the DEIS plan. It is still not published, although we know it has been completed. That plan is with the Minister and the Department. When will the review of alternative education be published? We cannot move forward with strategies for a sustained future for alternative education without this report being released.

The Taoiseach: The Minister secured record additional funding this year for the DEIS programme. The details of that will have to be announced, but I believe it could represent a 20% increase in additional cover for DEIS schools; in other words, an additional 20% being added to the existing cohort. That will be good and impactful. We have provided additional funding to the Cork Life Centre. I will check with the Minister. The broader review should be published as soon as possible.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach raised some interesting points in the previous discussion about a wage price spiral. He seemed to indicate he was against the idea of workers submitting claims for pay increases that would be in line with inflation, leaving aside the fact that he did not seem to express the same concerns when Robert Watt got a pay increase of €81,000. It is one rule for the top people and another for ordinary working people.

Let us look at the matter at hand. We are told the consumer price index is up 5.5%, and that does not include many costs, including rent. The real rate of inflation for working people is higher. It seems that what the Taoiseach is saying in reality is that workers must accept a pay cut or suck it up and not put in for higher wage increases. I think workers should put in for higher wage increases and pursue them in a vigorous fashion.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Mick Barry: I have a final point. There is talk of giving people €100 when their energy bills are up by €1,000 per year. That is a joke.

The Taoiseach: Once again, the Deputy is clearly distorting what I said. I never said anything of that sort. I said the Government must enter into discussions with social partners and others to see what would be the most targeted and effective way to give families and workers a way to protect their disposable income without adding to the inflationary cycle. That is what I said.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, the Taoiseach specified wage inflation.

The Taoiseach: I am talking to Deputy Barry.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is not what the Taoiseach said, in fairness.

The Taoiseach: It is what I said.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It was not.

The Taoiseach: It is what I said. Sorry, Deputy. Let us not start distorting.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Taoiseach is wrong.

The Taoiseach: The Deputies can do that when they are part of the Opposition. They can always label the Government as wrong.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach was targeting the idea of-----

The Taoiseach: I was very clear in what I said. I said we would enter into discussions with the social partners. It is on the record. I mentioned a more targeted approach, and I instanced as an example the Vincentian model in terms of minimum income standards.

Deputy Mick Barry: Let us check the record of what the Taoiseach said.

The Taoiseach: I instanced the changes that have been made already in health-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Let us check the record of what he actually said.

The Taoiseach: -----relating to the eligibility of children for GP care, the drug payment scheme threshold being reduced and hospital charges for children being reduced.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: There are targeted ways of doing this without adding to the inflationary cycle. That is what I am saying.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach spoke of a spiralling wage inflation at a time when people's wages are flat and those people are put to the pin of their collars.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Scientific research has been a key plank of Ireland's economic and industrial policy and it has also been vital in enabling us to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. That is down to our scientists, many of whom were inspired to go into research through their engagement with Science Gallery Dublin. Science Gallery Dublin has gone international, with offshoots ranging from the United States to Australia. Next month, however, the original gallery here in Ireland is set to shut its doors for the last time, undermining our strategy as a country to position itself as a world leader in science and technology. Reading between the lines, it seems the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media are in dispute as to which will contribute to the operational shortfall. This short-sighted internal bickering must stop and the doors of the gallery must be kept open for Ireland's sake.

The Taoiseach: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has engaged with Trinity College Dublin. With the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, it has offered to provide funding for a number of years to help to contribute towards a sustainable model in Science Gallery Dublin. Trinity College Dublin needs to do work to develop a new vision and a sustainable financial model for the long-term future of the science gallery. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is awaiting a submission from Trinity College Dublin on those matters. There is a separate issue around the contractual arrangements with the existing staff of the gallery and that is a matter for Trinity College Dublin and its staff.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach promised numerous times in this Chamber and in the convention centre that he would meet the action group for St. Brigid's hospital in Carrick-on-Suir, which his Minister closed unceremoniously in the middle of the so-called pandemic. Will the Taoiseach meet those people or why does he keep telling us that he will? It is a simple request to meet the committee and the Taoiseach said he had no problem meeting them. He said he would meet them at the drop of a hat. He has never met the committee and neither has the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, nor the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy Butler. These people want to plead their case for the wonderful facility they had, including four hospice beds that are badly needed for the community. It has served the area of east Waterford, south Kilkenny and south Tipperary well. That hospital needs to be reopened. Will the Taoiseach meet the committee? There is no point in the Taoiseach telling me that he will. I ask him to arrange to meet them, to facilitate them and to listen to them.

The Taoiseach: I do not know if the Deputy asked through my office or what-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I asked here in the Chamber.

The Taoiseach: Has a request come in?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I am sure it has but I will check it again.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Umpteen times.

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, did meet with the group.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Outside in the glass cage for a few minutes.

Deputy Mary Butler: I did meet them.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McGrath just said that she did not.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is very specific. Will the Taoiseach comply with the will of this Dáil in relation to the national maternity hospital? On three different occasions, the Dáil, including the Taoiseach's Government, unanimously agreed to a motion providing that the new hospital will be a public hospital on a public site, owned and run by the State through the agency. I want the Taoiseach to commit, please, and to tell me that he is going to act in accordance with what we have asked for in three separate motions over the past nine months. The Government has accepted those motions on each occasion. There might have been a nuanced difference, but that was all. We want a public maternity hospital on a site that is publicly owned.

The Taoiseach: Motions never built a hospital. It just amazes me the degree to which it takes so long in this country to build hospitals. We urgently need a national-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That was not the question.

The Taoiseach: I just want to make my point in response.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is on the Taoiseach's watch.

The Taoiseach: It will not happen on my watch. It is going to be built, and it will be com-

menced and be done with the public interest as the number one with regard to the lands and governorship and so on.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I would like to raise with the Taoiseach today the issue of autism spectrum disorder, ASD, provision in secondary schools in particular. I spoke to the Taoiseach privately about this in the past, and I have spoken about it publicly here in the Dáil. At present, small villages outside the city of Cork, such as Dripsey, Farran and Berrings, have three, four or often five ASD classes. Unfortunately, larger urban settlements in those areas sometimes have one or two such classes, if any at all. Will the Taoiseach indicate when we are going to implement a policy that ensures every child in this country has the opportunity to attend an ASD class in their own locality? At present, the ratio is 3:1 primary versus secondary school with regard to ASD class provision. That is not sustainable, and we need urgent action.

The Taoiseach: I agree with that. The Minister for Education is pursuing that. I do not have the timelines for the policy initiatives on that front, but I will revert back to the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Over recent years, tens of thousands of individuals have filled key roles in our society working in hospitality, healthcare, logistics and much beyond. Many of these individuals are on precarious visas and work permits. While there have been some very welcome extensions throughout the pandemic, many of these people are facing a very precarious future. I ask the Government to commit to a blanket two-year extension of all work permits and all visas, to ensure that those people who helped us when we were at our worst can enjoy this country properly, and that we can address many of the major labour shortages across an array of industries.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has made a very fair point and I will certainly pursue that with the Minister.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the time today. The recent “Crimes and Confessions” series has shone a spotlight on the interrogation and investigation of innocent people by some members of An Garda Síochána: people including Nicky Kelly, Osgur Breatnach, and the Hayes family in my own constituency. We have heard allegations of bullying, assaults and torture. We heard about statements that were tailored or, in the words of the Hayes family solicitor Mr. Patrick Mann, “dovetailed” to fit the information that they had. I ask the Taoiseach to support an independent statutory public inquiry into the investigation and prosecution of these people, compliant with international human rights standards and under a recognised judicial figure.

The Taoiseach: Generally, we need to reflect on the broad issue of having statutory public inquiries one after the other, irrespective of this, and I do not believe anybody would doubt that these are serious cases the Deputy has raised.

3 o’clock

Previously, the Oireachtas decided to have statutory inquiries that have gone on for five, six or seven years with no conclusion. It is not a model that is working.

Deputy Pa Daly: The apologies are not-----

The Taoiseach: The inquiry model is not working, if I am honest. It takes an inordinate

length of time for them to conclude at an extraordinary cost. Deputies have referred to Siteserv. I could name them all. I am making the point that we all genuinely felt the need to have-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then find another model.

The Taoiseach: We have. A commission of inquiry was meant to be an alternative model to a public inquiry.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: There is a lack of capacity in this country to have an inquiry without an adversarial dimension, barristers and lawyering up-----

Deputy Pa Daly: The apology-----

The Taoiseach: I have to make the point. I want to be fair.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach could answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: It might be a Topical Issue, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I am answering the question. The easy answer is to say “Yes” or “No”. It is a more honest to ask whether we need to interrogate this model before we start an inquiry. Every week someone asks for an inquiry about something.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should not trivialise this.

The Taoiseach: I am not trivialising it; I am serious about this. We need to analyse this as an Oireachtas because it is the Oireachtas that decides to have inquiries, but they take an extraordinary length of time and are not giving people closure at the end of it all.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Taoiseach does not want to respond to the question.

The Taoiseach: I am serious. I will meet with party leaders to discuss this, if the Deputy wishes. We need a discussion about this.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I would like the Taoiseach to give people answers to their questions-----

The Taoiseach: I am giving the answer, but the Deputy-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and not trivialise it-----

The Taoiseach: I could name seven inquiries that there should be in Northern Ireland about the activities of your movement over the years, but we have never had them. Talk to the people in Northern Ireland who were kneecapped for decades. There was never any closure.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: I will meet with people to discuss this, but at the moment the model we have is not working.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please. This is chaotic behaviour. Will we please come back to some sort of order? A number of people will not be called simply because of this carry-

on.

The Taoiseach: I wish to make the point that I did answer, and I was heckled again for answering.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know you did.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The medical board of appeal for primary medical certificates resigned at the beginning of the month. The reason cited for the resignation of the board was a unanimous view that the criteria are too stringent and, in its view, exclude a lot of people who should be entitled to the payment.

I want to tell the Taoiseach about Dwayne, who at 14 years of age was diagnosed with two serious neurological disorders, one being a brain defect and the second a cyst that has caused significant damage to his spinal cord for the past 20 years. He is now aged 35 and has progressive symptom of numbness and dragging his right foot. He cannot drive a vehicle unless it is modified. His appeal to the board was unsuccessful. Naturally, he feels aggrieved and discriminated against. Evidently, the board was correct in its assumption that people who are worthy are not being included in the scheme. Given that almost 400 cases have to be heard, when will a new board be appointed? Will the criteria be amended to include people such as Dwayne who need and deserve a primary medical certificate?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for asking this very fair question. The Minister for Finance, on foot of the decision by the board, is now reviewing the entire issue. It is to be hoped he will be able to come back with proposals on it.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Does the Taoiseach agree that now is the appropriate time to establish a Government commission of inquiry into all of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 23 residents from Covid in Dealgan House nursing home in April 2020? Of the 460 nursing homes in the country, this is the only one where the HSE took over operational management to ensure appropriate medical and nursing staff were in place to make sure that residents' well-being was looked after. There are major concerns over the way the home was run and the absence of appropriate management. No GP was physically present to support the residents between 17 April and 30 April. Will the Taoiseach examine and appropriately appoint a commission of inquiry, as happened in the case of Leas Cross, given the exceptional circumstances surrounding these deaths?

The Taoiseach: I have to be consistent with what I said in response to Deputy Daly's question. I am not convinced that commissions of inquiries are the optimal way to investigate these issues. They go on much longer than people anticipate or expect. This is a genuine issue; I do not want the Deputy to get me wrong. The Department is examining a variety of options as to how best to respect and meet the needs and concerns of families of those affected.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The Leas Cross inquiry worked.

The Taoiseach: There may be more.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: People will not be satisfied unless there is an inquiry into this.

The Taoiseach: I know, but people will not be satisfied with an inquiry that goes on for six years. I am just trying to be honest with the House.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It will not go on for six years.

The Taoiseach: Some can and some do.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This one will not.

The Taoiseach: I am saying there might be other ways of doing it. There might be a better way of doing it.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This is the only home that was taken over by the HSE. No other home in the country-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We have heard his point.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What I am going to ask the Taoiseach for is very sensible and sound and I am sure everyone in this House will agree with it. When a person receives a diagnosis of cancer, I humbly ask him, the Minister for Health and the Department of Health that for a three-month period an emergency medical card would be given to that person. This was the case in the past. It was not a law or a rule, but unofficially the diagnosis of cancer equalled a medical card for a period of time to allow the person and their family to come to grips with the enormity of what they were facing in their lives. I think we should look at it again.

At this time the message should go out from here to our hospitals to allow a proper phased reintroduction of visits to people who are suffering from illnesses like cancer in our hospitals because they desperately want their visitors to come in. I would be very anxious for the Taoiseach to help.

The Taoiseach: The Department is always very reluctant to pick one condition over another condition for eligibility for medical cards. There is provision for people who get a terminal diagnosis. We are trying to reduce the cost of care for people in certain situations. We are also extending eligibility, particularly through access to a GP visit card, which, as the Deputy knows, we have for children. I understand the points he is making. As he knows, discretion has applied in many circumstances.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The €100 to offset the absolutely shocking increases in energy and fuel prices that people will be struck with over the coming weeks is pathetically inadequate. I am already getting reports of people getting energy bills that have increased by 125% in the bills that are going to drop in the next few weeks. The Government needs to do more than it is doing. We have repeatedly urged it to use its powers under the consumer Act to declare an emergency in energy prices, to control the unit prices of electricity and heating fuel, and to expand access to the fuel allowance for the many pensioners and people on low pay who do not benefit from it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The point is made.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Government take the sort of radical action that is necessary?

The Taoiseach: There is a global context here and I am very struck by the apparent refusal by those on the Opposition side, who are asking questions about this, to acknowledge the role of Russia in the supply of gas to Europe. The Deputy can nod all he likes, but it is a key factor here.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We will talk about that later.

The Taoiseach: No, the Deputy never talks about it. That is the problem. He never will.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We do not side with NATO on it.

The Taoiseach: We are working on it. I replied earlier.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The Government's announcement last Friday had a notable absence that caused considerable worry among a significant portion of the population. There was no mention of nursing homes. Residents in nursing homes have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Will the Government issue specific instructions to nursing homes ensuring that our older people have appropriate access to family visits, as some nursing homes are still denying these? We need clear guidelines to ensure that a balance between physical and mental health. I note that the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, are present. If the Taoiseach cannot answer, perhaps they can.

The Taoiseach: Basic guidelines and rules that were there are still there in respect of nursing homes and, therefore, the same rules apply. A comprehensive package of indirect and direct supports has been given to nursing homes since the onset of Covid. That continued engagement between the HSE and nursing homes will continue, particularly in respect of nursing homes that may have had outbreaks. The HSE will be there to assist and support nursing homes in whatever challenges they have. The supports continue with free personal protective equipment; free FFP2 masks; public health Covid-19 response team; infection protection and control training; and so forth.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There is no mention of the citizens' assembly on drugs in the spring legislative programme. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Feighan, was before the Joint Committee on Health last week where he made a number of references to the assembly. He was talking of a way of dealing with the difficult outstanding issues and progressing them. Is this still a priority of Government and when does it intend to establish the assembly, as per the commitment in the programme for Government?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State and the Government are keen on a more specific approach to drugs policy, particularly in an approach to area partnerships as a broader way of dealing with the issue, particularly in areas that have a higher level of challenges in respect of drug use and misuse. A number of a citizens' assemblies have been proposed in respect of a lord mayor in Dublin, drugs and biodiversity, and I am anxious that we get a number of those up and running this year. I will revert to the Deputy. I have an interest in getting the citizens' assembly on biodiversity up and running as well. The drugs policy is an issue not just for a citizens' assembly but for current policy.

Education (Inspection of Individual Education Plans for Children with Special Needs) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Pauline Tully: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Education Act

1998 to grant additional functions to the Inspectorate to examine and report to the Minister on the prevalence and standard of individual educational plans for children with special educational needs on an annual basis; and to provide for related matters.

I am sharing time with Deputies Guirke and Ó Laoghaire. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSEN, Act was passed in 2004 to ensure that children with additional educational needs could be educated in an inclusive setting and that all children would have the right to be educated in a mainstream school unless it would not be in the best interest of the child or the effective provision of education for other children in mainstream education. Yet 17 years later, many sections of the Act have not been implemented and one such section is the requirement for individual education plans, IEPs. Under the Act each child assessed with a special educational need should have a personal education plan. However, there is currently no date for the implementation of IEPs. In many countries this is underpinned by law. I am aware many teachers prepare IEPs for their students but that is not compulsory and not inspected. There are guidelines on how to prepare a plan on the National Council for Special Education website. They have been there since 2004 when it was fully expected that the Act would be implemented.

An IEP is a written document prepared for a named student and it specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time, as well as the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals. This should be prepared by the school in consultation with the student, if possible, and with the parents and other stakeholders such as a therapist the student may be attending. This Bill asks that this section of the EPSEN Act be implemented as soon as possible. We seek to amend the Education Act 1998 to grant additional functions to the inspectorate, to examine and report to the Minister on the prevalence and standard of IEPs for children with special educational needs annually, and to provide for related matters.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: The EPSEN Act was passed in 2004. Almost 17 years later, we still do not have dates for when the implementation of the section relating to IEPs for children with disabilities will be implemented and made compulsory. In many schools where it has been implemented, it provides teachers and parents with the opportunity to have a practical and realistic dialogue about the student's needs and to develop creative ways to meet those needs. The IEP directs the student with special educational needs on his or her school journey. It also allows for a certain amount of structure that is essential to the students' families and educators who are dealing with learning disabilities.

Students know what to expect from their programme each day, how they will be taught and what milestones they should reach. If implemented, it would also help the individual in a post-secondary school context in the forms of training, employment, independent living skills and so on. We all know that students with special educational needs should be placed in the least restrictive environment, thus keeping them involved with general education and letting them prosper. We should not have to wait any longer for this part of the Act to be implemented and help these students to reach their full potential.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As the Taoiseach knows, the EPSEN Act came into law in July 2004. He was the Minister at the time. With its signing into law came great hope for children with special educational needs and their families. It contained many useful provisions but the reality is that in 2022 we are still waiting for the Act to be fully implemented. Children born in 2004 will turn 18 this year. Some of the supports they might have expected during their

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lifetime in school they will now not receive and they will have finished in the education system. It is a failure of the political system.

One of the key provisions that was not implemented relates to individual education plans. These play a vitally important role. They are being provided by many schools but there is no obligation on them. It is not mandatory and many schools do not provide them. The other element of this is that the quality of such plans varies significantly, as do the standards involved. It is a vitally important tool in these children's progression, in transition, and in being able to tailor their educational needs and the plans that are necessary over their lifetime.

The Government has a long way to go to heal the relationships between families of children with special educational needs in the State. When I speak to them it is always the case that they have to argue and fight for everything. They have to fight for an IEP as things stand; they have to fight for an assessment of need; and they have to fight for an adequate school place. Everything is a fight. Everything is a battle.

I urge the Government to support this Bill to provide children with special educational needs with a thorough and timely individual education plan and to go some way to healing these relationships and to make that uphill battle for educational resources a thing of the past.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

The Taoiseach: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022: Referral to Joint Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022,

copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 17th January, 2022, be referred to the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which, not later than 8th February, 2022, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

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

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Minister for Health

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

National Risk Assessment

1. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [61416/21]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recently published national risk assessment. [61501/21]

3. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent to which the ongoing national risk assessment has identified particular issues needing priority attention. [61939/21]

4. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [63548/21]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [3328/22]

6. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [3336/22]

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [3608/22]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the national risk assessment published by his Department. [3611/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, together.

The national risk assessment has been prepared annually since 2014 and provides an opportunity to identify and discuss significant risks that may arise for Ireland. The experience of the past number of years has brought home the importance of work in the area of risk management

and preparedness. By promoting an open and inclusive discussion on the major risks facing the country, the national risk assessment plays an important role in this work. A draft national risk assessment was published in July last year for public consultation thus providing opportunities for stakeholders and Oireachtas Members to contribute to the development of the report.

More than 50 organisations, public representatives and individuals participated in the consultation process. The final version was published by the Government in early December. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and social and economic inequality emerged as the most significant concerns highlighted in the submissions received, and risks across each of these areas are captured in the final report. Many of the risks included in the report had been identified in previous assessments, however, there are a number of new risks related to Covid-19 and a number of other previously identified risks have evolved significantly. For example, new risks identified in the report include inflation, economic scarring and digital exclusion. The combination of the pandemic, Brexit and supply-chain constraints have also exacerbated previously identified risks, including skills shortages and the supply and affordability of housing. This is at the same time as major risks, in particular climate change, are taking on even greater importance.

The national risk assessment also references emerging international views on lessons for risk governance from the Covid-19 experience, in particular an emphasis at EU level on improving resilience. There will be scope in the months ahead for further consideration of lessons learned for risk management. It is important to note that the national risk assessment is just one element of the overall system of preparedness and resilience planning for Ireland and is not intended to replicate or displace the detailed risk management and preparedness carried out across Departments and Government agencies. However, it is an important opportunity to reflect on strategic risks facing the country in the years ahead.

An Ceann Comhairle: As there are eight questions in total, we will have to stick to one minute per question.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach provide the House with an update on the current status of the recovery from the recent cyberattack on the Department of Health and the HSE? Has the Government quantified the cost of the cyberattack economically and, more importantly, in terms of health and fatalities in our hospital system? For example, is the number of appointments that were cancelled known? Have the delays in the delivery of health services been quantified? Before the attack, the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, was funded to the tune of €5 million. To put that in context, the Taoiseach's Department spent three times that amount on PR during that period. As a result of the queue of crises that have developed in the State over recent years, the Dáil has taken its eyes off this particular crisis. It is really important that an update be provided on the damage that was done and the steps taken by the Government to make sure such a thing does not happen again.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We are in a very precarious situation with regard to what is going on with Russia at the Ukrainian border. There is also an issue here in our own territorial waters regarding the activities of Russian submarines and the manoeuvres of the Russian military. I listened quite intently to Mr. Patrick Murphy, CEO of the Irish South and West Fish Producer's Organisation. I spoke to him before I came into the Dáil today. This could have serious consequences for the environment, for fish stocks, including stocks of tuna and blue whiting and, possibly, for our communications cables. As the Taoiseach knows, this group is going to take a flotilla of boats out to the waters where they fish next month when the Russian manoeuvres are under way. As Mr. Murphy put it, this is their farm. Will the Taoiseach update the House on

any communications he has had with the Russian embassy? Even though it is down four ships, will he send the Irish Naval Service to accompany the group that is going out to fish in these waters while the Russian manoeuvres are taking place?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is sufficient emphasis being placed on the supply of goods and services in the update and review that is taking place in light of the issues arising from Brexit and its ongoing implications? To what extent are the Taoiseach and his Department continuing to identify the best way to offset any negative impacts now emerging? The supply of fuel, an issue that has already engaged the House today, is obviously a very pressing issue and one that is becoming more important as time goes by. Is sufficient provision being made to provide alternative energy from this country's own resources and capabilities? What is being done to determine the availability of such energy resources at an earlier stage and to address issues in respect of offshore and onshore electricity generation?

Deputy Mick Barry: On several occasions during the pandemic, our health service was threatened with being overwhelmed. Ministers argued that this was due to the power of the virus, but this was only partly true. It was also down to the weakness of our public health service infrastructure. There were not enough beds, including ICU beds, and there were not enough staff. We got through it thanks to the heroic efforts of the health staff but we were also lucky. The result of this was that society was locked down for considerably longer than would otherwise have been necessary. Another result is that the Government ended up paying money to private hospitals for bed capacity, amounting to €115 million at the pinch points. I put it to the Taoiseach that, if we are to learn the lessons of the pandemic to date, two key changes need to be made. The first is that the public health service needs to be significantly expanded, with particular attention paid to bed capacity, ICU capacity and staffing levels. We also need a single-tier public health service. We need to nationalise private hospitals and integrate them into a fully public health system.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Healthcare capacity has to be included in the national risk assessment along with issues of public health. It is beyond question that, when a public health emergency hits, it is already too late. I commend those who work on the front line in that system. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, we had the longest waiting lists in the EU. We had a series of some of the longest and strictest lockdowns because we had so little spare capacity in the health system. Today, more than 800,000 people are on some form of waiting list. This includes 96,000 children. Last week, when the end of Covid restrictions was announced, six ambulances were lined up in front of Mayo University Hospital. Some of those patients had already waited five hours for an ambulance. We just do not have the capacity required. It is an enormous risk. I spoke to a woman last week who had been urgently referred to the breast clinic by her GP. Despite this, she was told she would have to wait three months. This also presents an enormous risk. Will the Taoiseach assure us that healthcare capacity will be front and centre in our risk assessment?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will mention the risk of people dying unnecessarily during the winter, as happened in this country even before the energy price hikes. Every winter, 1,500 to 2,000 people, most of whom are elderly and less well off, die as a result of the impact of winter, the cost of heating and so on. That situation will get exponentially worse in light of the current price hikes. I again ask whether the Taoiseach will use the powers available to him under the Consumer Protection Act 2007 to control the price of energy, including electricity and heat, and to expand the financial assistance available through the fuel allowance to cover more households. Of course, there is an international context to this matter but this country lining

up with NATO in a conflict between it and Russia is not a very sensible strategy to address that wider international context.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is very positive that the Omicron wave was less destructive than had been feared. The question for now is how not to waste the breathing space we have been afforded. We should use that space to make our society more Covid-resilient and pandemic-resilient rather than just forgetting about it all. The question for the Government is whether it is going to ensure that workers have the right to clean air in their workplaces. Will it proceed as quickly as possible to implement our Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021, which has passed Second Stage, to ensure that everyone has the right to clean air? Will it provide needed HEPA filters to schools and ensure that every worker has the right to a high-quality, high-grade FFP2 mask or equivalent like those provided to Deputies and Senators? If we are to avoid more variants of concern, we must scrap patents on vaccines. We should support the People's Vaccine campaign to ensure that vaccines are distributed to the 40% of the world's population who still do not have a single dose.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. Deputy Tóibín raised the issue of cyberattacks. These are a clear risk to the country. Cybersecurity is vitally important to our economy and to wider society. The attack on our health system last year had a devastating impact on health services, particularly on front-line services with regard to access to scans and so on. It also had an impact on patient care for that period and on senior HSE staff who worked around the clock to try to deal with the issue. Additional funding has been provided. The national cybersecurity strategy sets out a framework and a range of measures for protecting the State from cyber threats through building up infrastructure and capacity in that area.

The NCSC is responsible for a range of measures to improve the resilience of critical infrastructure and public sector ICT. It also manages the State's incident response process. It works with the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána. It is now working on a detailed risk assessment of critical infrastructure vulnerabilities in the State. We are prioritising expanding our cybersecurity and resilience infrastructure and increasing resources in that regard. The Government has agreed a package of measures that will ensure the continued development and expansion of the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, including increasing its staff complement to 45 by the end of this year.

Regarding the point made by Deputy Kelly on territorial waters, the broader issue concerning the situation with Russia and Ukraine is a serious one. We appeal for a de-escalation of tensions in respect of the massing of thousands upon thousands of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border. There are fundamental principles at stake here as a country, including a rules-based international order, which is what Ireland is about. Deputy Boyd Barrett said we are about lining up with NATO. We are not. We are for a rules-based international order, first and foremost. That is Ireland's principle, and Russia should acknowledge that too, as well as the territorial integrity of states, democracy and peaceful co-operation. Ireland wants a diplomatic resolution not just to this situation but also to the illegal annexation of Crimea. That is the Irish position. We have updated our travel advice. We are recommending that citizens avoid non-essential travel to Ukraine.

Regarding the proposed Russian activities within our exclusive zone and territorial waters, legally and technically they are entitled to do that. This is not, however, a regular occurrence at all, despite what has been said. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has spoken to the Russian Ambassador and made it very clear that the Government is very unhappy and

does not welcome this development. The Minister attended a meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, yesterday, where Russia's continued aggression and threats against Ukraine was condemned. I like to think that is something on which the entire House could agree unanimously. Russia was called on to de-escalate, to abide by international law and to engage constructively in dialogue through the established international mechanisms.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up and we need to move on to Question No. 9.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There were a couple of other questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: There were, but I am afraid 31 questions are being answered today. We are not going to have time to debate them all.

Northern Ireland

9. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the first year of the shared island initiative. [61417/21]

10. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the progress to date in the development of the shared island theme; and the various entities with which his Department has interacted in recent times in this regard. [61938/21]

11. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent to which he and his Department continue to engage in dialogue with all communities in Northern Ireland with a view to strengthening and improving confidence through the medium of the shared island concept. [63310/21]

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit of his Department. [2230/22]

13. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach his priorities for the next phase of the shared island initiative. [3069/22]

14. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the progress made on the shared island initiative; and the extent to which specific objectives can be and are being achieved. [3252/22]

15. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island initiative of his Department. [3308/22]

16. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [3316/22]

17. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island initiative. [3329/22]

18. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the first year of the shared island initiative. [3609/22]

19. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the first year of the shared island initiative. [3612/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 19, inclusive, together.

The Government's shared island initiative is working to realise the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement, to enhance co-operation and connection on the island, and to engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. We are working on an ambitious and whole-of-government basis, and through all-island partnerships, with the Northern Ireland Executive, the United Kingdom Government and with local authorities and civil society across the island.

Progress in 2021 included the allocation of €50 million from the Government's shared island fund to move ahead with key cross-Border investments; new phases of the Ulster Canal; the Narrow Water Bridge project; a major new North-South research programme delivered by the Higher Education Authority; commencing an all-island strategic rail review, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive; setting new shared island investment priorities across virtually all sectors as part of the revised national development plan, backed by a total all-island investment commitment of more than €3.5 billion for the decade ahead; the roll-out of the shared island dialogue series, with participation by more than 1,000 civic representatives across all regions, communities and sectors in seven events, which have also fostered exciting new civic initiatives, such as an all-island women's forum; and a comprehensive shared island research programme - working with the Economic and Social Research Institute, the National Economic and Social Council, the Irish Research Council, and other partners - which is now publishing a stream of high-quality work to inform discussions.

On 9 December, I addressed a shared island forum event, which more than 3,500 representatives attended online. I outlined the Government's priority investment projects and policies for the shared island initiative in 2022, implementing our national development plan and programme for Government objectives. I also launched a report by my Department on the shared island dialogue series over the past year, which highlights issues and suggestions from civic society for the future of the island across a wide range of themes, of which the Government is taking account. A copy of the report has been sent to every Member of the Oireachtas.

The dialogue series has provided an inspiring view of our shared island society - diverse, dynamic, hopeful and ready to write a new chapter of reconciliation on this island. We are continuing the shared island dialogue series this year to foster deeper civic engagement regarding how we can work in practical and meaningful ways across all communities for a shared future.

The first shared island dialogue of 2022 took place last Thursday, 20 January, on the theme of tourism on the shared island. More than 150 stakeholders from across the island joined the discussion, and the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, participated in the dialogue on behalf of the Government. The next dialogue on sport is planned for late February, and the series will continue through this year, with in-person and regional events convened when possible. The participation of so many people from a range of backgrounds has been encouraging, notwithstanding the limitations imposed by the impact of Covid-19.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Taoiseach for that update and for the report sent to our offices. I was struck by the remarks of the Taoiseach at the engagement in December and by the pertinent remarks made by Patrick Kielty that went viral. We must be honest about the shared island initiative and unit having great potential but that, due to the impact of Covid-19 or a need for a wider buy-in, it may perhaps not be reaching that potential as much as it could

be. I was very taken by the last comments made by the Taoiseach when he said the plans for the roll out of the series are already afoot, including the engagement last week on tourism. We must, however, be extremely ambitious this year to make up for lost time.

Let us be frank that politics in London are chaotic, while politics in Northern Ireland are getting sharper as every day that passes brings us closer to the assembly election. The shared island dialogue series has an important role to implement and show people across this island the benefit of closer co-operation in every aspect of life. I would like to know more about how we can supercharge that endeavour through 2022.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. To what extent can he use this shared island facility to establish a greater level of confidence between the communities in Northern Ireland and between the North and the South? This is an important issue now, namely, the building of confidence to progress the rest of the objectives of the programme.

Is the Taoiseach satisfied with the progress made to date? Does he propose to take further initiatives to identify more ways and means of advancing the causes set out in the programme? Is it intended to expand the debate in this context beyond the shared island initiative structures? I refer to the addition of a citizens' assembly debate, for example, or something like that, to promote the positive elements of the structure.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree with some of what was said. We must be ambitious about the shared island unit and the initiative. I do not think that it will come as a shock concerning Sinn Féin's position in this regard. We believe that planning for Irish unity must occur. Within that context, there must be a citizens' assembly to allow all voices to be heard. I have had this type of interaction with the Taoiseach before as well, and he said that he did not think that such a mechanism is sufficient in the context of what needs to be done. That is fair enough. We must then look at the shared island dialogue as something that can be expanded. We cannot shy away from the constitutional question, because it is happening. It is part of the reason there is an element of chaos within political unionism and that is just the reality. I welcome the infra-structural project work, such as the Narrow Water Bridge. The research aspects are incredibly interesting and we have had discussions on this topic before, particularly in respect of future modelling and educational attainment North and South.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: It has come to light that there has been a slew of racist, sexist and misogynistic tweets by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Doug Beattie. These tweets were shockingly derogatory, and included comments about women and Muslims. He used incredible terms about the Traveller community. I am not going to introduce the language used in those tweets into the Chamber today such is its severity.

For generations, unionist politicians have spoken derogatorily about minorities, especially Catholics. Ian Paisley is on the historical record as having said that Catholics breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin, for example. Does the Taoiseach agree with me there is no place for tweets like Doug Beattie's in the modern day and will he join me in calling for his resignation as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party?

Deputy Alan Kelly: The shared island initiative is the Taoiseach's flagship proposal. Can he tell the House that his successor, the current Tánaiste, is going to continue it? Is that agreed? As regards the North-South Ministerial Council, with the DUP not participating even though it has been declared illegal by the court in Belfast, what work is under way in trying to ensure that

the DUP participates? This cannot go on forever. What projects does the Taoiseach expect the shared island initiative to fund? There is €500 million in funding proposed up to 2025. One was an all-island strategic rail review which recently closed for submissions. There is an idea of a high-speed rail link between Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Is this one of them, for example? Is it going to go the way of Boris's bridge? Genuinely, what projects are going to be funded in the next year or so?

Deputy Mick Barry: Regina Coeli hostel in Belfast is the sole female-only homeless hostel in Northern Ireland. With domestic violence at a 15-year high in the North, it provides accommodation and support services for up to 200 women a year. Many residents are vulnerable women who have left abusive relationships or struggle with substance abuse. The Legion of Mary has decided to close the building, stating it cannot afford the cost of necessary repairs. I salute the workers, mainly women, who have decided to fight the closure and are occupying the premises. I support the demand of their union, Unite, that the Legion of Mary hand over the facility to the state.

If I could, I would like to ask Deputy McDonald whether Sinn Féin's Northern Ireland Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA, will instruct the Housing Executive to take on the facility. Seeing as this is Taoiseach's Questions, however, I ask the Taoiseach, in light of all the fine words spoken in this House last week about gender-based violence, if he will make defence of this facility a real priority for the Government in its dealings with the Northern Ireland Executive.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One thing among others that people in the South and the North share is fuel poverty. The Taoiseach did not have a chance to respond in the last round of questions but I hope he will this time. Fuel poverty in the North is 22%. It is only 13% in England. The ESRI estimates one in six in the South suffers from fuel poverty. A RED C poll last year found that 19% of people turn the heat off because of fears of not having enough money to meet other bills and the cost of food. We share, North and South, a failure of government to deal with energy price hikes that are impoverishing working people, the vulnerable, pensioners, disabled people and so on. Will the Taoiseach take a lead in taking some measures to address this?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I also want to ask about the ongoing protests against the planned closure of the Regina Coeli hostel for women in Belfast. This hostel is the only one of its sort in the North, providing for women who have suffered from homelessness, drug addiction or domestic violence. Now they have been told by the Legion of Mary that it is to close. The workers have refused to accept it. They have occupied the building. A petition by Unite the Union has gathered in excess of 11,000 signatures. People are demanding the relevant Minister, Sinn Féin's Deirdre Hargey MLA, intervene to save the hostel, bring it into public ownership, save the 12 jobs and defend this important service. Will the Taoiseach join us in urging the Legion of Mary to hand it over instead of shutting the doors and urging the Minister, Ms Hargey MLA, to intervene to ensure this happens?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for raising a variety of issues pertaining to the shared island programme and agenda. Deputy Richmond raised the broader issue in terms of potential. The Patrick Kielty contribution was an extraordinary one. It certainly struck a chord with many people who watched his contribution over and over again. It went viral and was very widely accessed by people. It illustrates the potential of ideas through the context of the shared island dialogue having an impact, getting people to think and reflect.

The research programme undertaken by the shared island fund has been quite comprehensive, in respect of the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the National Economic and Social Council, NESC. For example, the ESRI has done a very good piece of research on enhancing the attractiveness of the island in terms of high-value FDI, and on FDI intensity. There are a number of FDI projects in high-value sectors. Ireland ranks fourth and Northern Ireland 17th in Europe. Northern Ireland is above Scotland, north-east England and Wales. It goes through the different complementarities North and South and the different strengths. The advantage of the protocol for Northern Ireland has clearly been confirmed by evidence in the report that the European Union market potential has been a major driver of the location of choice of high-value FDI, including in manufacturing, which is a particular sectoral strength for Northern Ireland.

Shared island research was published in June on collaboration on healthcare on an all-island basis. There was a shared island dialogue on health participation with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and more than 120 sector stakeholders. There will be 11 publications under the Irish Research Council shared island programme in 2022, from June onwards, across a range of themes, and two reports on educational underachievement issued at the standing conference on teacher education in October. These are just illustrations of the kind of very detailed research underpinning a lot of work which we are funding. We are on the cusp of awarding up to €40 million in research projects between third level institutions in the Republic and in the North. Deputies will remember a call went out. It has been oversubscribed, which is a great illustration of the fact all in our third level community on the island are working together on projects that will be of benefit to the entire island, addressing challenges the island as a whole faces. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will be in a position to announce that shortly.

Deputy Kelly raised issues about other projects, including the railway and so forth. The €40 million is the most immediate, the Narrow Water Bridge. We are looking at greenways, the north-west industrial development potential between the north-west development partnership group and Donegal County Council in terms of industrial centres on both sides of the Border to create attractions for employment.

In response to Deputy Durkan, the confidence in this is strong, particularly in the non-political field if I am honest. Many people want to get on with this and there is a lot of buy-in.

Deputy Ó Murchú and I have had the discussion before, as he referenced. The full potential of the Good Friday Agreement has never been realised, in my view. The shared island initiative is a very good mechanism and avenue to realising its full potential in that respect.

I will come back to the hostel in Belfast.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: We will communicate with the Northern Ireland Executive but it is a matter for it. On Doug Beattie, he has made it clear himself how unacceptable his tweets were.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He has been liking tweets to say he is sorry.

The Taoiseach: He himself has come forward and made it very clear they were absolutely unacceptable and wrong and he should not have done it.

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Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I still did not get an answer. That is two different rounds where I did not get an answer.

The Taoiseach: I dealt with fuel. I have answered and responded on fuel poverty all day today. The Deputy asked questions earlier.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On price caps.

The Taoiseach: I have indicated the approach we intend as a Government, working with the social partners to deal with the cost of living and issues, including energy.

An Ceann Comhairle: We need to move on to Question No. 20.

Taoiseach's Communications

20. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken to the new German Chancellor. [61488/21]

21. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he has been in contact with the new Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. [61601/21]

22. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he has had recent discussions with the President of the European Commission. [61739/21]

23. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he has been in contact recently with the President of the European Commission. [61991/21]

24. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken to the new German Chancellor. [63549/21]

25. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent meeting of the European Council. [2231/22]

26. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken with the new German Chancellor. [3309/22]

27. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on recent correspondence he has had with the new President of the European Parliament. [3317/22]

28. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he has had recent discussions with the President of the European Commission. [3330/22]

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent meeting of the European Council. [3610/22]

30. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent meeting of the European Council. [3613/22]

31. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent meeting of the European Council. [3616/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 to 31, inclusive, together.

As the House will be aware, Chancellor Olaf Scholz took up his office on 8 December as the head of the new German coalition Government. Ireland and Germany are close partners and friends, and I was therefore pleased to have the opportunity to talk to him by phone on 1 December, prior to his formal appointment. I also subsequently wrote to congratulate him and to express my commitment to working with him on shared challenges the EU faces in the period ahead. In our call, we discussed some of those challenges, including Covid-19. We noted the importance both of our Governments attach to climate action and the need to achieve a green transition. I also took the opportunity to brief him on the importance of the Northern Ireland protocol as a means of mitigating the negative consequences of Brexit and protecting the Good Friday Agreement. I expressed our appreciation for the solidarity the previous German Government had offered Ireland throughout the negotiations on Brexit, and he was very clear to me this would continue under the new Administration.

I had the opportunity to meet him in person, along with other European leaders, at the meeting of the European Council on 15 to 16 December. Our meeting had a wide agenda, including Covid-19, crisis management and resilience, energy prices, security and defence, migration and a number of external issues, including Belarus, Ukraine, our southern neighbourhood and Ethiopia. Ahead of our meeting, the EU 27 leaders attended an eastern partnership summit, which was also attended by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus has suspended its participation in the partnership, and at our meeting we left a symbolic empty chair, which we hope will be filled by a representative of a democratically elected government in Belarus in the near future.

I also attended a euro summit on 16 December at which we heard the economic assessment of the President of the European Central Bank, ECB, Ms Christine Lagarde, and the president of the Eurogroup, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. We also considered progress on banking union and capital markets union.

I most recently met the President of the European Commission at the meeting of the European Council. The Commission has played an important role in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, including in relation to vaccines, and I am in regular contact with the President by phone on this and other matters.

I wrote to the newly elected President of the European Parliament, Ms Roberta Metsola, this week to congratulate her on her election and I look forward to working with her on the challenges Europe faces. I also welcomed her tribute to victims of gender-based violence, including Ashling Murphy, which resonated so strongly with everybody here.

Deputy Seán Haughey: It is a fact there is a Franco-German axis at the heart of the EU project, which all member states, including small ones like Ireland, recognise. There is always momentum coming from that axis for further European integration, which has been given a new impetus during the current French Presidency of the EU. For many reasons, Germany is important for Ireland and Ireland is a friend of Germany. Germany is Ireland's largest market in the eurozone, for example. Mr. Olaf Scholz is Germany's new centre-left Chancellor. I hope the Taoiseach will be able to develop a good relationship with him. The Chancellor has a significant issue to deal with just now, that being, the Ukrainian crisis and the threat of war on Germany's doorstep. It seems Chancellor Scholz has adopted a more critical, robust and pragmatic policy towards Russia. Now he has to decide whether to issue an operating permit for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Will the Taoiseach confirm that Ireland and the EU support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity? Does he believe the EU should unite in solidarity with Ukraine and that all member states should, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, said, support the most comprehensive and severe range of sanctions and restrictions on Russia in many decades should Russia invade Ukraine? Does the Taoiseach agree every effort should be made to bring about a negotiated settlement of this dispute and avoid a military confrontation in the region and that this would be far more preferable to military action by Russia and NATO-led countries?

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Taoiseach is well aware, since 2016, the European Commission and individual member states of the European Union have been supportive of Ireland's interests in the Brexit negotiations. Some difficulties have emerged regarding the operation of the protocol and concerns have been expressed by the British Government, but I hope whatever obstacles exist can be removed. From speaking to my constituents as well as to people north of my home area, businesses there want to ensure there are no impediments to trade or to people going about their daily business. We have seen the transformation that has happened since 1998 with the development of the all-island economy.

I have been engaging with members of the Ukrainian community in my constituency. They have expressed to me the concerns they are hearing from their people at home. They are very concerned about a possible invasion by Russia and are anxious the EU sends a clear message that, if Russia takes such action, severe sanctions will be put in place. They also ask that we clearly express our concern about military training in the Atlantic. Will the Taoiseach assure the House that Ireland will raise these critical issues at Security Council level in the UN?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all agree we are dealing with a ratcheting-up of the situation by the Russians. In the Taoiseach's interactions at the European Council but also in any other engagement he may have had, be it with the Commission or ambassadors, what has been the Irish Government's position on the matter? What conversations is the Taoiseach having? To some degree, people are wondering where the EU stands on this question. I accept this situation is the outworking of a serious geopolitical play between NATO and the Russians.

We all know Ireland has certain radar system failings. There is a possibility that Russian operations, which should not be undertaken, will be carried out off Cork. Mr. Tom Clonan has spoken about the need for Ireland to build up our peacekeeping capacity. In saying that, we all accept we are not going to war with Russia, but this is an incredibly serious situation that needs to be resolved. What conversations has the Taoiseach had, particularly at EU level?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The issue of inflation in the State cannot be overestimated. There is a massive problem with prices increasing across the State, especially for fuel. Farmers are being hit significantly by large increases in nitrogen and input costs. The Taoiseach has indicated in a number of replies that some of that price pressure is coming from the actions of Russia and other external factors we cannot control. He has also stated he does not believe we can get a derogation on VAT to ameliorate the damage being caused by price increases, but has he asked the new President of the European Parliament? Has he requested a derogation? What have been his efforts to push for that? Is it the case the Government is putting its hands up, surrendering and saying it cannot do any more, or is it the case we have an active Government that is fighting for the needs of citizens, including farmers and families, throughout the country in seeking a derogation?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Vladimir Putin is a thug and autocrat who has done very

nasty things recently to working people in Kazakhstan, has waged a bloody war in Chechnya and is now flexing his muscles in Ukraine, so of course we should condemn what Russia is doing, but why is there no condemnation from a country that is supposed to be neutral of a clear agenda by NATO to expand eastwards and escalate military tensions with Russia? Why does the Government correctly condemn Russian military exercises in Irish waters but allow the US military to use Shannon Airport every single day of the week to prosecute wars across the world and kidnap and torture people in its rendition programme? We do not condemn that. Why is the Government saying nothing about the fact NATO wrote to EU foreign ministers before Christmas asking them to increase military expenditure and align more closely with the NATO military alliance, which is a US-led and aggressive military alliance? Neutrality means not taking sides in dangerous conflicts and game-playing between major imperial powers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: At the start of January, there was a mass movement in Kazakhstan, an uprising triggered by an increase in fuel prices. The move started with a strike of oil workers in Zhanaozen and became widespread general strikes and protests across much of the country. It was put down with incredible brutality by an incredibly brutal dictatorship. The military and police were given orders to shoot without warning. They did so, killing well over 160 protestors. More than 8,000 people were arrested and many remain in prison. It was horrific brutality.

4 o'clock

The response of the European Union was to call on protestors to avoid any incitement of violence and to make a similar call on authorities - in other words, to blame both sides. Why? The reason is that the European Union is interested in protecting western oil interests because the Kazakh regime is happy for western as well as Russian oil interests to exploit the massive natural resources that exist there. I call on the Irish Government and the Taoiseach to condemn what happened in Kazakhstan and to condemn the Kazakhstan dictatorship and the brutal repression of the protestors.

The Taoiseach: I was intrigued by Deputy Ó Murchú's comments. He said we all agree that Russia is ratcheting things up. I do not know what that means. To be fair-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Obviously, what Russia is about to do off the coast of Cork is fairly ratcheting things up.

The Taoiseach: In fairness to Deputy-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I think that is a fair commentary.

The Taoiseach: I just note the difference in language between Deputy Ó Murchú and Deputies Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy, who, to be fair, have called out Russian activity. I do not hear the same sentiments from Sinn Féin's benches at all for whatever reason.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Vladimir Putin is bad and what the Russians are doing is absolutely disgraceful. Is that clear enough?

The Taoiseach: Yes, that is good. Good man. I got that out of the Deputy.

Deputy Haughey spoke about the Franco-German axis and the more pragmatic approach being adopted by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Ireland accepts Ukrainian territorial integrity. As I said earlier, our principles in our approach to the Russian-Ukrainian situation involve, first of all, acceptance of and adherence to that fundamental, rules-based international order. That is

the essence of Ireland's independent foreign policy. We are not politically neutral but we are militarily neutral. It is an important distinction. We are members of the European Union. We work with our European Union colleagues on rules-based multilateral approaches to international disputes. We want a diplomatic resolution to this. We want this de-escalated. We do not believe it necessitates the massing of so many hundreds of thousands of troops. It does not necessitate a war or an invasion or the violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity. That is clear. Holding military exercises in international waters off our coast is not welcome and not helpful. There is an ecological issue here, which Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan has highlighted, in that there are other implications for marine life, biodiversity and so on that may flow from the Russian military exercises off the west coast. Ireland, along with its EU colleagues, will support comprehensive sanctions if an invasion takes place. I earnestly hope it does not. If the de-escalation of the aggression could happen, I think the world would breathe a collective sigh of relief. The world is trying to come through Covid-19 and all its implications, and now to go through another crisis, which could occur as a result of an invasion, would, I think, be very difficult for the world as a whole to deal with.

The European Union Commission has been very supportive on Brexit, and I hear what Deputy Brendan Smith has said. Ireland will play its part at the UN Security Council as a voice for peace, a voice for reason and a voice for the de-escalation of violence.

I have responded to Deputy Ó Murchú's points about the radar and so on. We have to be realistic and proportionate about the issues here. Ireland is not in the league of the big powers militarily and never will be. There are issues. The defence commission we established will come forward shortly with a view to the more medium-term strategy for the building up of our Defence Forces into the future and according to our needs as a country.

Deputy Tóibín raised the issue of inflation, which has been a constant theme today. It is very clear to us in terms of the VAT issue, but we do think there are other ways. We have already taken measures in the budget and-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Did the Government ask the European Union?

The Taoiseach: The President of the European Parliament does not have an executive function in this regard.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I refer to the European Union in general.

The Taoiseach: We know the rules-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Change the rules.

The Taoiseach: -----and I think it would be a very dangerous move in some respects. I think there are other ways to reduce the impact of this on people. That is the key point.

I think I have dealt with Deputy Boyd Barrett's points.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No.

The Taoiseach: We are a country with a policy of military neutrality, and that is scrupulously observed by us as a country. It is not inconsistent, by the way, with military neutrality that military aircraft of-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why no criticism of NATO?

The Taoiseach: I do not think NATO is being aggressive here. As for the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, there is a reality.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is NATO not expanding eastwards when it is not static?

The Taoiseach: Countries eastwards have opted to join the European Union; many more want to do so.

Deputy Thomas Gould: What about Cuba, when it was the other way around?

The Taoiseach: How do you mean, what about Cuba? I have been to Cuba-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Yes, and there is a blockade on Cuba-----

The Taoiseach: -----as Minister for Foreign Affairs, and as for the situation with Cuba, I would support-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tríd an gCathaoirleach, más é do thoil é, mar táimid ag rith as am.

The Taoiseach: I think we are running out of time for Cuba, you are saying to me, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. All right. I hear you.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Not quite.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What about Kazakhstan?

The Taoiseach: I think that what happened in Kazakhstan is absolutely wrong and shocking.

Violence against Women: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I join Members once again in reading into the record of the House my deepest condolences to Ashling Murphy's family; her boyfriend, Ryan; her friends; her work colleagues; her pupils; and members of her local and wider community in County Offaly. Although nearly two weeks have passed since this tragic occurrence, there remains a palpable sense of shock in every community throughout the country. The outpouring of grief, support and demonstration is a very clear indication to us that the issue of violence against women has been simmering beneath the surface of our society on a much wider scale than had previously been recognised. Although Ashling Murphy's immediate community in County Offaly has closely felt the harsh brunt of this trauma, the chilling effect on women has rippled out to every corner of our island. As a national community, we are now facing the harsh reality that many women in Ireland are, unfortunately, living in fear of violence. We must reflect deeply on this and the picture it portrays of our so-called "modern society" if women do not feel safe in their own communities.

I very much welcome the comments of the Minister for Justice in this House last week on the development of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has been working on this strategy for over a year and has listened to those in the sector and those who work on the front line. The work, support and contribution from the front-line cohort will prove invaluable to this process, as will the input of victims and survivors. Obviously, it can be very difficult for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual assault and other forms of violence against women to relive the traumas they have suffered, but they have done so with the greater good in mind, and I commend them on their heroic efforts. There is a whole-of-government approach to the development of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The process will receive input from the Departments of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Education; Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Social Protection; Transport; and so on. There will also be input from our State agencies, and I am truly encouraged that the all-embracing nature of this approach reflects a tenacious determination from all of us in government to make a lasting impact on this issue. I am reassured that this strategy will be underpinned by clear actions, timelines for reform and robust accountability mechanisms. Having discussed such matters with my Government colleagues this past week, I am also confident that this process will be provided with the necessary resources. It will be built on four pillars, namely prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. The goal, as stated by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice last week, is very clear: zero tolerance of violence and abuse against women.

Everyone has a contribution to make to this movement, which needs to start from the ground up and requires not just a whole-of-government approach but a whole-of-society response also. We must not and cannot accept a situation by which fear, harassment and violence towards women is normalised to any degree. We cannot be bystanders. We must call out all misogyny, intimidation and violence against women by men when we witness it. As I stated last week, men can make a huge difference in this process in leading by example, showing our younger boys and men that such behaviours are no longer acceptable and need to be replaced by an enhanced level of respect for women. The men in our society need to be more active and understanding about the issues which face women in this country each and every day. I believe there is a strong willingness among the majority of men to be part of the solution and this is a positive starting point. However, we have an awful lot to do if we are to see the mass culture shift which is obviously required to better all facets of our society for women. We need to remind ourselves of all the women in our lives, who are so close to our hearts, as we strive for the monumental shift in culture that is required within our society. The mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, partners, nieces and friends we rely on in our everyday lives are the women we should look to for motivation on this journey toward meaningful change.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Two weeks ago, Ashling Murphy went out for a run along the canal in Tullamore. It was the start of the new year for the talented musician and much-loved beautiful young woman. She never made it home. Ashling's tragic and horrific death shocked the nation. I wish to convey my deepest sympathy to Ashling's family; her partner, Ryan; her friends; her colleagues; her pupils; and the community in which she was so loved and had an active part. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

Ashling's death did indeed stun the country. It also brought us together to say that enough is enough and violence and abuse of women will not be tolerated anymore. Where we see it or hear it, we should call it out. We should call out whoever is involved in it. Whether that abuse or threat is in the workplace, in a person's home or online, we should call the abuse out. I

agree with the Taoiseach that it is time for a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women.

When I attended Ashling's funeral in St. Brigid's Church, close to her home in County Offaly last week, I was struck by the little notes placed alongside the candles in the nearby community centre which recalled Ashling in all her brilliance, youth, happiness and talent. The commitment of friends and fellow musicians was so evident at her funeral. I will never forget the tearful faces of the players, strumming on the guitar or playing the bosca ceoil, united in grief on that cold morning at the cross in Mountbolus as Ashling's remains passed. Scores of musicians later attended the graveside where she was buried. That moment showed how Irish rural communities rally round each other when there is pain or suffering.

Equally, as a society we can build support to ensure that violence against women ends. Violence against women is not a string of random, freak or isolated events. They are frightening to hear about and it is perhaps more comforting to think of them as individual. However, we will never move to a truly equal society until we admit the depth, breadth and pattern of gender-based violence. Whether in the most private or public of settings, the fact is that women and girls are less safe. As the House knows, work is progressing on a new whole-of-government strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Work by the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, is nearing conclusion. The crux of the strategy is what we talked about: zero tolerance of violence against women. There are legislative improvements, too. The commencement of the Domestic Violence Act 2018 on 1 January 2019 created significant improvements, including the creation of the offence of coercive control. The Minister of Justice also prioritised the enactment of Coco's Law, which outlawed image-based sexual abuse, and she is committed to working on a Bill creating new criminal offences for stalking, an area on which Senator Chambers is also working. However, preventing abusive behaviour also requires an end to certain attitudes held by men. Misogyny in our society must stop. There is no easy way to end domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It will take a combination of new, well-resourced services, robust legislation, fresh thinking, dynamic new strategies and above all, education and awareness.

Briefly, I will outline areas that I am progressing under my responsibility as Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. In relation to the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, an online safety commissioner will devise safety codes to ensure services minimise the availability of harmful content. This includes reducing the availability of criminal content that disproportionately hurts women, such as image-based abuse, revenge porn, threatening content and harassment, and reducing the availability of material used to bully or humiliate people. In relation to the protection of women in the arts, my Department recently funded the Irish Theatre Institute's report on bullying and harassment, *Speak Up: A Call for Change*. It found that 70% of those surveyed in the arts experienced some type of harm, including sexual harassment or assault, and women were three and a half times more likely to experience sexual harassment than men. In response, the allocation of public funds in arts agencies will now be in line with work safety and reporting rules. Counselling has also been extended for artists and work-based training has been improved. My Department is also funding vulnerability training courses in the night-time economy. The objective of six recent courses was to enable workers in the night-time economy to identify issues around vulnerability management and violence against women. Hundreds of staff across 70 venues took part and training was delivered with the support of An Garda Síochána, vintners groups and practitioners in night culture, such as Give Us The Night.

Whatever sphere of life violence enters through, it pierces the heart of every corner of life.

One woman described it to me:

[It is] a source of great pain that it happened to me when I was a young woman. That scar never gets to truly heal over. It opens every time I hear of another woman who has been raped, assaulted or worse. The edges widen when that violence is diminished.

Tá mná agus cailíní ag éisteacht liom inniu atá ag fulaingt de bharr foréigin agus fanann sé leo ar feadh a saolta. Is iad ár máithreacha, ár n-iníonacha, ár ndeirfiúracha agus ár gcairde. Tá sé i ngach réimse den saol agus i ngach cearn den tír agus cibé áit atá sé, tá daoine ciaptha agus céasta dá bharr. Equality for women and girls, as our end goal, must start with the elimination of violence that has a basis in gender.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: First, I wish to begin by expressing my heartfelt condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy on the tragic passing of their beautiful daughter, who was so full of life and had so much to do in life. There is so much hurt for her family to endure. I wish to express my deepest sympathy to her family, her boyfriend, her friends, her school and her community.

Ashling's death has brought the country to its knees in grief and has sharpened the political focus on violence against women in our country. Last October, Mary McDermott of Safe Ireland made a very comprehensive and chilling presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice in relation to the lack of joined-up thinking and inter-agency co-operation that is a glaring gap within our Government Departments. That needs to be addressed and changed. There are so many arms of the State that are required to provide a comprehensive response to this societal issue. New relations need to be forged between the Departments to respond swiftly to the crisis. Yesterday, we heard Chief Superintendent Colm Noonan from the Garda National Protective Services Bureau reference some really staggering figures. I am sure all Members listened to that interview on the news. In 2021, there were 48,000 incidents of domestic abuse, an increase of 10% on 2020; there were 8,600 charges for crimes involving an element of domestic abuse, up 13% on the previous 12 months; and there were 4,250 charges for breaches of the Domestic Violence Act, up 6% from 2020.

I want to take this opportunity to remember the women who have lost their lives across the Cavan-Monaghan area through violence. They are Sheila Lynch, aged 44, who died in December 1998; Sr. Philomena Lyons, who was 68 years of age and died in December 2001; Jamie Farrelly Maughan, aged 13, who died in July 2004; Amy Farrell, who was 21 years of age and died in January 2006; Patricia Kierans, aged 54, who died in September 2013; Antra Ozolina, who was 49 and died in June 2014; and Clodagh Hawe and her three boys, who died in 2016 in County Cavan. I do not want any more names added to the list and I know that neither does the Minister. I want a comprehensive, compassionate Department that responds to the needs of women and their children who find themselves in these terrifying circumstances. I want safe environments throughout the country in refuges that provide highly specialised facilities. We know that at present nine counties are without these. Refuges should be designed to respond adequately to domestic violence. We do not want places that do not provide the facilities we need. They need to be innovative. We need to rethink and make sure we do not reinvent existing problems. I thank Siobhán McKenna from Tearmann, which does heroic work in Cavan and Monaghan protecting, supporting and advising women who find themselves in aggressive and violent situations.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I express my condolences to Ashling Murphy's family on what

happened. In recent weeks all of us have received phone calls and emails in our offices from members of the public wanting to know where we stand on the issue of zero tolerance of domestic violence and gender-based violence and how we can do more to ensure we stamp it out forever. Many the issues we speak about particularly are with regard to sentencing. The guidelines relating to gender-based violence are a serious problem that many people in the general public have identified as an issue we can do something about. I implore the Minister to ensure adequate sentence guidelines are in place along with training for the Judiciary and members of the Garda Síochána who deal with this on an ongoing basis.

An issue that comes up all the time is overcrowding in our prisons, which leads to many violent offenders often being left out on bail. It is widespread in all sectors of criminality but it is certainly a problem when it comes to violent offenders of this nature. We want to see the Government move to a zero-tolerance approach. We do not want it just to be a discussion. We need to see it happen. We all want to work together to ensure it happens. At present we have a situation whereby a judge has to impose that a sex offender will not work with children or vulnerable people and it is not automatically part of a sex offender's order. We need to ensure it is made an automatic part of it.

This weekend the *Irish Examiner* had an interesting article. We all know the courage and evidence required for a judge to issue a domestic violence order. We found out that a number of gardaí have these orders in place. This is quite alarming. There is no restriction on the duties of these serving members of the Garda. They can often be called out to scenes of domestic violence. This is something on which we need to reflect. I encourage the Minister to speak to the Commissioner in this respect. It is something that has alarmed people. Gardaí are the guardians of the peace and to have no restriction on duty in this regard is quite alarming.

The Minister is aware of the reports this weekend of an incident in Sligo in my constituency of two very young women, in fact they are children, who were sexually attacked. I do not want to get into the case but many of us are thinking about it. If the DPP and Garda do a good job and there is a prosecution, we wonder what will happen when it goes to court. In many of these cases we see situations where it is the victim who is put on trial rather than the perpetrator. There are issues with questions such as what a victim was wearing and how she ended up in the situation. All of this needs to be dealt with adequately.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The brutal murder of Ashling Murphy has appalled us all. It has also shone a light on what women in this country have had to live with forever. Last night I watched a programme on television that highlighted the case of the Kerry babies. Joanne Hayes is another woman whose life was destroyed by a sustained campaign of institutional violence against her that lasted almost 40 years. The State apologies while trying to sweep our shame under the carpet are not good enough at this stage. Gender-based violence is endemic in our society. It is time we were mature enough to recognise it and, more importantly, to do something about it.

One crime that saw reports skyrocket during the pandemic is domestic violence and this has been mentioned by many speakers. It was seen in every county. However, the budgets for 2021 and 2022 failed to address it in any meaningful way or to prioritise domestic violence as a Statewide problem. Official Ireland ignores the reality while women live in fear and suffer appalling violence.

A 2020 report by Transport Infrastructure Ireland found that more than 50% of women would not use public transport at night. One in 10 women surveyed in Dublin had experienced

sexual harassment on public transport. This is unacceptable. Only last year we found out that gardaí had cancelled more than 3,000 999 calls relating to domestic violence. Women are crying out for help and the calls are ignored and not even logged by the authorities.

There are only 144 spaces in refuges throughout the State. Safe Ireland received more than ten times as many requests for accommodation in the first half of last year alone. Dublin has 31 beds for its population. At least Dublin has beds. We know there are counties that have no beds whatsoever for victims of domestic violence. Austerity era cuts have not been reversed in many sectors and many projects have less money year on year and find it impossible to provide the level of service required by those who rely on them. The domestic violence Bill of my colleague, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, is being discussed in committee as I speak. Domestic violence dominates a person's life. It follows them from home to the workplace. Workers need greater protection. If anything happens following these debates, it is that we need to see action and not just words.

Deputy Martin Browne: I send my deep condolences and those of the people of Tipperary to the family of Ashling Murphy and to her boyfriend Ryan. The horrific events that happened in Tullamore served as a wake-up call to all of us in this country about how the scourge of gender-based violence continues and the need for adequate measures to address it. This is why it is important that we have been discussing this matter at length in the House. Every one of us has a duty to ensure that no longer will violence against women slip off the agenda until another horrific event acts as the next wake-up call.

The truth is that gender-based violence is happening far more often than official records suggest. Everyday sexism, harassment and misogyny is systematic throughout society. It has been allowed to continue as in large part it has been swept under the carpet over the decades. This has led to a situation in which lives such as Ashling Murphy's are lost and women are subject to everyday limitations in terms of where they feel safe. This is not because women are afraid of their surroundings. It is because they are afraid of violent and abusive men.

Ashling was in a public place in broad daylight when she was attacked and her short promising life was taken from her. Practically every woman has a story to tell about how they have encountered sexism, harassment and misogyny. They are our daughters, sisters and mothers. As legislators we have responsibility on a number of levels to address this inequality in Irish society. Unfortunately this has not been done effectively to date. We need to address this through education, legal sanction, adequate investment in support services and a comprehensive set of wraparound supports for women. Overall, we need a zero tolerance approach to male violence against women and a political attitude to making these changes that does not cut corners or delay rolling them out.

As Women's Aid has pointed out, we need a policy change in education systems to ensure the casual sexism that girls and women experience is unacceptable. We need stronger legislation on street harassment and stronger enforcement of legislation on harassment in the workplace. We must also see an end to the fragmented approach taken towards gender-based violence. This approach is inefficient as it is spread across a number of Departments. Sinn Féin has called for the establishment of a domestic and gender-based violence policy. We have nine counties with no women's refuge. There has been no increase in the capacity of women's refuge centres for the past seven years. It is crazy that we are speaking about this and there has been no increase in the numbers.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I extend my deepest sympathies to Ashling Murphy's family, partner, friends and community. They are all in our thoughts and prayers. I considered seeking speaking time on this subject because after having listened to the National Women's Council, Women's Aid and to my female colleagues here I felt it was important that I sent out a clear message that the men stand firmly alongside women when it comes to looking to end gender-based violence and having a zero-tolerance approach.

I am a father with two daughters, a husband with a wonderful wife, a brother with two great sisters, I have family and friends and I am a coach to women. They are not just my daughters, my wife or my sisters but they are people in their own right. Each of them deserves to feel and to be safe. When I go out at night for a walk, I do not worry about, or tell someone, where I am going. I do not skip areas because they are unsafe or unlit. I do not have to carry my keys in my pocket because I do not feel safe so why should my daughters and my wife have to do that?

I do not think that apps or segregated areas want to bear the burden of male violence. I want to say that it is time to teach men, and boys in particular, that they need to stand up and call out sexism when they see it. If they do that I know that I and everyone in this Chamber will stand with them. I say that to every teacher, coach and every man and woman in the country.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I offer my condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy. There are no adequate words of comfort that I can provide except to say that we are thinking of her and her family.

I take this opportunity to remember a young woman called Karen Buckley. Karen was murdered in Scotland in April 2015. She was a postgraduate occupational therapy student from Mourneabbey, Mallow, County Cork. I do not want us to forget about Karen; I want us to remember her as a person of great character and intelligence and as a warm and caring person. Our thoughts go out to Karen's parents, John and Marian, and her brothers and wider family as we approach the sixth anniversary of her death.

It is important that we remember Karen and Ashling, what their families have lost and what we as a community have lost through their absence. The common thread that binds Karen to Ashling is the great love that their families had for them and they for their families. They were both young women, forging career paths in professions that are by their nature caring ones and that says so much about their individual characters. Today, we remember them and we must ensure that we do not forget them.

If there is one practical measure that people in our profession, the profession of politics, can support, it is the Bystander Intervention programme operated by University College Cork, UCC. I acknowledge the work of Professor Louise Crowley of UCC and the bystander team. This programme aims to educate and empower young people to speak up as a bystander when they notice sexual harassment and violence and demand a zero-tolerance approach. It is not enough that we merely remember these young women. It is our responsibility to ensure that we fund and support programmes such as the bystander intervention programme, which seeks to shift attitudes and the culture of sexual harassment and violence against women that seems so endemic in our society. I am grateful for this opportunity to speak for a few moments and to reiterate again that the families of Ashling Murphy, of Karen Buckley and of so many women are in our thoughts.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Tomorrow will mark two weeks since Aisling Murphy

was attacked and murdered by a man in Tullamore. While I welcome the fact that two weeks later we are still having this conversation and discussing the issue in the Dáil, we have to ensure that we continue to discuss this issue and focus on the issue of violence against women and that we do not let the cry for help from women right across Ireland just fade into the distance. I ask that it becomes part of everything that we do from now on.

It never enters my head when I leave the front door and go for a walk to have a key in my clenched fist in the event that someone might attack me. I never think about or consider texting friends or family to tell them where I am going. I do not do these things because I am a man and I feel safe. Women, unfortunately, do not feel safe in those circumstances. As men, it is of great importance that we wake up to that fact and that we begin to have a conversation with ourselves but that we also begin to have a conversation with each other as to how we behave and act towards women. Unless we have that conversation, we cannot make Ireland a safer place for women and girls.

We need to listen to women and I mean listen properly. We cannot just nod our heads and pretend that we understand but we need to listen to what women are saying. Part of that and probably the most important part is education. We need to educate men, young and old, that we have no right to interfere emotionally or physically with women. We need to educate ourselves as men as to how we can become allies to women. I firmly and fundamentally believe that if we can become allies to women, that is the best and most important way that we can ensure that women and girls are safe in this country.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome this opportunity to contribute to this important debate and take this opportunity to express my sympathies to Ashling Murphy's family, her partner, her friends, the entire school community in Durrow National School and the people of Tullamore and Offaly for their incredible loss. There was a spontaneous groundswell of support and solidarity shown to Aisling's family in the vigils that took place right across Ireland and further afield in the aftermath of her death. I attended a number of these vigils in County Clare, two of which took place in Ennis and another in Clarecastle. I pay tribute to all of the organisers of these special events and to those who attended them. The brutal killing of Ashling has shocked the entire nation and the fact that this extremely tragic event took place in a popular recreational space and in broad daylight continues to stun the nation.

These shocking events have led to a wider debate about women and their personal safety. For far too long violence and fear have been part and parcel of women's lives. Women have a right to be safe, full stop, on our streets, in our homes and throughout our communities. Far too often, this is not the case. We all have a role in changing this situation. We as a society must educate our children, especially our young boys, that we need to look out for and protect women and girls.

Violence in any form is not acceptable. We must educate our children in our homes, schools and colleges that there must be respect and equality for everyone, irrespective of gender, sexuality, religious ethos, race or age. I welcome the strong stance of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on violence against women and her general work in this area. We must all move as a nation towards zero tolerance of domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. I understand that the Minister intends to have a new national strategy by this March. The Oireachtas must work together to ensure that this happens, and that the issue of violence against women remains a priority. We owe that to Ashling Murphy and the other women who have died violently in this country.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Like others, I wish to extend our sympathy to the family of Ashling Murphy and to the community in general. It is so sad that we are speaking on this subject this afternoon. Ours is supposed to be a more civilised society as time passes. We expect that we have learned from the past, but I am not so certain. What is emerging now is an increasingly aggressive and violent society. We should be able to understand this from dealing with our constituents when they come to tell us about the things that have happened to them, whether people are of a different religion, sexual orientation, race or whatever the case may be. They are entitled to their rights. Individuals, be they men or women, have their rights. That is being challenged daily now.

Yes, we must go to the schools and impart the knowledge to the upcoming generation that these ways and means are not acceptable and that it is not acceptable to be misogynist, to be violent towards women or to be violent towards anybody. Incidentally, a number of my colleagues have mentioned that the male population can fend for themselves. Unfortunately, I have dealt with a number of cases where that did not happen and where very young teenagers attacked an older, seemingly stronger person, brought the person down and damaged the person for life. There are also those situations.

I believe this a wake-up call. The movies, pornographic videos and so forth that are available are unfortunately influencing our younger generation. It is creating a problem. If a problem was not there, it certainly will be there. We need to address that and try to ensure that people are not influenced by what they see on pornographic videos or any other type of video, for that matter.

I wish to make a final point. I believe we must now address the issue as a nation. We have to call a halt and make it quite clear to all and sundry that what has happened in this and other cases of attacks against women or attacks against anybody is completely unacceptable and must come to a stop. It is said that people can be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The wrongdoers can be in the wrong place at the wrong time as well, and this is what we have to create. I congratulate the Minister on the initiatives she is taking in this area. I hope she is successful and that the progress through the House of the legislation she is proposing is rapid.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Gender-based violence is an issue that effects every socioeconomic group in the country. It is an abuse that can manifest itself in many different ways, be it through physical violence or coercive control, and is not reserved for any particular age category. In 20% of detected sexual violence incidents, both the victims and the offenders are under 18 years of age. Unfortunately, we are not witnessing the dying embers of a misguided misogyny of a bygone era. Gender violence is as prevalent now as it ever was. Some of the weapons have changed, such as the use of social media and the sharing of intimate images, but the intent of power and control remain the same. Unfortunately, too often in this country such violence has led to the violent death of women at the hands of men.

I realise that many of the women watching the proceedings today, and I am sure many women in this Chamber, will have been targeted by the everyday sexism, harassment and misogyny that is present in every aspect of Irish life, ranging from the workplace through recreational and social pursuits to, perhaps worst of all, the home. We have an obligation to prevent another generation of women and girls experiencing misogyny and gender-based violence. There are many things that we can do as legislators, but there is so much more that we can do in our everyday lives. For too long we have ignored or downplayed misogynist comments and sexually aggressive language. Zero tolerance cannot just be a call made to the courts. Zero tolerance of

misogyny must be the clarion call to all of us, particularly men and boys, as we go about our daily lives. As a society and as legislators we must do more to end this scourge. Recent figures provided by the Garda in Limerick show that in the Limerick Garda division there was a year-on-year increase of 21% in reported domestic abuse incidents.

Ashling Murphy's death united a nation in grief. I send my deepest sympathy to Ashling's family, her friends and her pupils. From Belfast to Limerick, people attended dignified vigils. The message was clear that they have had enough. An average of almost ten women have died violently each year over the past 25 years in this State, which is a truly shocking figure. The onus is now on all Members in this Chamber to do more. In November 2020, Safe Ireland issued a report stating that between March and August of that year, 1,970 women and 411 children each month were receiving help from a domestic violence support service. People have talked about this being a watershed time. Hopefully, on a cross-party basis, we can ensure that by working together we can bring about the seismic change that is needed.

There are many things that must be done as a priority. One that we can do immediately is introduce a provision for domestic violence leave. In November 2019, I and my party leader, Deputy McDonald, introduced the Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Bill. It has been reintroduced in this Dáil by Deputies McDonald and O'Reilly and was before the committee on children today. I hope it can be progressed as fast as possible. The Bill proposes to provide for paid domestic violence leave days for those experiencing domestic abuse. The intent is to provide the space for those experiencing such abuse to take time out of work to put in place safeguards to protect themselves without the fear of losing pay. This legislation is an important addition to existing workplace rights. The provision of a statutory entitlement to paid leave would be an acknowledgment by legislators of the challenges workers may face when trying to escape an abusive relationship. Sinn Féin's legislation provides for up to ten days paid domestic violence leave.

If we are to end the epidemic of domestic abuse in Ireland we must have a whole-of-society response that both supports and protects women. Research tells us that abusive partners often do not give a damn about the split between home and work. Stalking, persistent telephone calls and threats in or around the workplace can often occur. Coercive control, now recognised under the Domestic Violence Act 2018, can lead to abusers focusing their efforts on a partner's workplace for the purpose of ending the employment. Legislators and employers have a responsibility to respond to this avenue of abuse by putting in place the necessary workplace and employment rights and protections for victims.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I extend my sympathy to the family of Ashling Murphy and everyone who loved her, and many did, as well as to the other women who have suffered from domestic or gender-based violence, who have died from it or who have lived intolerable lives because of the impact of violence against them. Like everyone else in the country, I have had time over the past couple of weeks to reflect on the type of society in which we live in Ireland. I have used the time to imagine what kind of country we would live in if women were not afraid of so many things, such as going for walks or runs by ourselves or being out at night by ourselves. If we had an Ireland where women could live with the same freedoms and rights as men in this country, it would be a very different country. We would have vibrant cities, public transport that women could avail of and use, more women in public roles and, probably, more women in politics who were free from the fear of online abuse.

Unfortunately, no woman in this country has ever lived in that type of country. We have

never lived in a time in which we have not been afraid and never lived in a time in which we have not tried to make ourselves smaller or invisible as we move within our lives and from work to home. We spend an awful lot of our time and energy monitoring and restricting ourselves in how we behave and what we do. In fact, it has become such a normalised part of our lives that we do not even know that we do it anymore. That is a sad state of affairs and speaks volumes about the type of country in which we live. We have a unique opportunity now to use not only what happened, the lessons we have learned and the reflections we have had over the past couple of weeks but also all the experiences of all the women who have suffered. There is a responsibility on us to build a much safer country for women, including our daughters and sisters, as well as all those who will come after us. If we create a safer society for women, there will be a safer society for every person in this country.

To do this we will need a transformative cultural change and that will be difficult; it will certainly not be easy. It will mean changing how we look at schools because there must be a holistic approach. We must change the culture and curriculum in schools, bringing programmes into sporting institutions, youth services and third-level institutions. It means ensuring casual sexism is tackled in all aspects of society and it means we must have stronger legislation to tackle street harassment, as well as stronger enforcement of measures against harassment in the workplace. This is possible but it will take time. It could take generations for us to enjoy the full effects of such measures.

We can act in the meantime. There has been much talk about what we need to do and there are needs that must be met now. I welcome the work being done by the Minister on the national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It is really important and I welcome that she is doing that, along with all the other initiatives she has progressed in her term in office. There are elements that could be put in place immediately. I have been reviewing all the issues and I was shocked to learn it can take more than a year for some women to get the counselling services they need if they have experienced sexual violence. I raised this with the Taoiseach last week and he said he would speak to the relevant Ministers. There is a need for an emergency fund for those services so they can provide that very immediate wrap-around support that those women need.

I was struck by an article I read in which somebody from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre said it is so difficult when a woman is brave enough to bare her soul and tell what happened to her when it could be a year before they can get her the help she needs. If the Minister considers that, it would be a very positive step forward. We also heard a great deal about all the different refuges and the lack of supports and funding. Before Christmas I did a fundraiser for the Bray women's refuge in Wicklow. The community was fantastic and raised a lot of money but these services and supports should not rely on the charity of local residents. Will the Minister look at providing immediate funding while she is progressing the strategy? If immediate emergency funding was provided to those services, it would go a long way in helping.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaker is Deputy Costello, who is sharing time with Deputy Alan Farrell. He is not yet in the Chamber.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Deputy Farrell is taking his time but I will try not to go over my allocation. I welcome the opportunity to speak to this important matter. I used some time last week during the Order of Business to raise related matters. I welcome the Minister's commitment to the important elements of developing stand-alone legislation related to stalking and non-fatal strangulation.

Much has been said and I just want to add one or two elements to the discussion. Given the weekend just gone by was the anniversary of the murder of Ms Urantsetseg Tserendorj. Deputy Hourigan and I, along with others, attended a memorial ceremony and spoke with the family afterwards. This highlights the vulnerable position of many migrant women in this country with regard to violence, and they are over-represented in the femicide statistics. There have been warnings that we have been failing to reach vulnerable migrant women so it is important that in the forthcoming strategy and the work we do, we should think about these vulnerable women, who may have difficulties arising from their migration status, language and literacy difficulties. They may have difficulty accessing online services. This applies not just to migrant women but many other women fall into those categories because of poverty or literacy issues. We need to think about all women but especially these vulnerable women, and we must reach out to them.

Last night, I watched the RTÉ documentary on the Kerry babies case and what struck me was the structural violence often inflicted on mná na hÉireann. Anyone watching the show last night would have seen that. The Kerry babies case is not recent news but the structural violence and mindset that informed that case is still very much around. It is something of which we must be conscious and one of the ways to address it is certainly to get more women elected and in here talking about such matters so it is not just me and my male colleagues doing it. We should be able to hear directly from women.

We must ensure the legislation we pass in here does not contribute to structural violence. I looked at this morning's report from Amnesty International on the violence suffered by sex workers and the conditions they face. They are asking that we keep them safe. There is also the question of human trafficking. We have tumbled from tier 1 to tier 2 to now being on the tier 2 watch list, according to the US State Department Trafficking in Persons report for 2021. Again, this is an example of structural violence we are not addressing. As well as a cultural shift and personal responsibility, we, as legislators, have a special responsibility relating to those structural elements to ensure we are not contributing to the problem with the legislation we pass.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank Deputy Costello for sharing his time. Since 1996, Women's Aid has reported the murders of 244 women, along with 18 children who have died with their mothers. Of the resolved cases involving those women, 89% of the victims knew their murderer, with the balance being strangers. Thousands of women are in supportive care, such as refuges, on a daily basis because of the nature of the violence perpetrated on them by men. As some of those statistics have shown, the vast majority of the women in question know the men who are violent towards them.

As a society, we require significant changes to prevent this chain of events from continuing from decade to decade. The men in this room and in society are entirely responsible for that change. We have it within our authority to change the way in which we treat the women we are fortunate to have in our lives. We must also ensure that change is passed to the next generation.

The disgusting and horrific murder of Ashling Murphy has struck a chord in society. Like my colleagues who spoke before me, I offer my deepest and heartfelt condolences to her friends and family, her colleagues and those who loved her. I was listening very carefully to Deputy Whitmore, and although I know many colleagues said it previously, as a man the idea of sending a text message to a loved one or family member before getting home or minding what street we take is almost unheard of; it is a daily occurrence for the women in our lives and we must ensure that changes. The onus is on us to change our attitudes and tackle gender-based violence, coercive control and all the other attributes of what is a horrible societal norm.

If we are committed to tackling this matter, we must do so in almost every aspect of society. It should start in education and in every house. As I have said, the misogyny, including derogatory remarks, behaviour and even elements of television programmes we are subjected to, is being normalised when it should not be. We must take the necessary steps to eradicate it.

As others have said, I welcome the initiative from the Minister in the forthcoming publication of the policy for the removal of gender-based violence from our society.

5 o'clock

That strategy will be published in the coming months. It is a very important step in the right direction that Members of this House can get their teeth into, suggest improvements to, and try to work towards implementing those policies. It is not just a policy from this House, however, and it is not just a policy from the Government. It must be something of which every man in Irish society is aware. I listened, as we all did, to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte's recent comments and those of my colleague Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, in her remarks about the othering that went on by certain men in Irish society following the murder of Ashling Murphy, which I am pretty sure all of us were appalled to hear.

I echo statements made by others before me. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has made the access to rent supplement a permanent attribute of the supports offered to women seeking to escape violence against them. We must do more in this House and we must do more in government to ensure the access to supports necessary for those women is much faster.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I extend my condolences to Ashling's family, her partner, her friends, neighbours, colleagues, and her students. I stood with hundreds of people in Dublin West at the Draíocht Theatre when Ashling was remembered. People expressed their horror at the violence she had experienced. We also remembered those women in Dublin West over the years who were murdered by men. They were Miriam O'Donohue, Eugenia Bratis, Anne Colomines, Jean Eagers, Linda Evans, Michaela Davis, Bente Carroll, Anna Finnegan, Marilyn Rynn, and Anastasia Kriégel. We also remembered the many other women throughout Dublin West who are experiencing gender-based violence daily at the hands of men and who are unable to leave due to the lack of services and the lack of places in refuges, with the housing crisis being among the barriers to women leaving violent and abusive relationships. If we are serious about this being a watershed, which so many people have talked about, then we need to get serious about the services that provide pathways to women.

On the day I was asked by a man "What can I do to make a difference?" I told him we need men to stand up and be counted on, to be the ones who call out verbal and physical violence against women, who call out the misogynist jokes, videos, and social media posts, and who stand up and call it out for what it is when men in the pub, in work or in a football stadium are making comments or chanting.

We also need to start with schools and education as early as we possibly can around gender-based violence. We as legislators need to ensure we put in place laws that treat gender-based violence with the seriousness it deserves. I hear constantly in this Chamber that we are going to do this, and I genuinely hope it happens. The Government needs to ensure that when women need a safe place, it is available. Today we heard the shocking statistic that in 2015 there were 142 places in refuges, but in 2022 this has now dropped to 137. This is not acceptable and it needs to change. We need to ensure refuges are resourced and supplied with an adequate level

of support in each and every county. I note there are nine counties that do not have a refuge. This also needs to change. We also need to ensure there is appropriate access to step-down and transitional accommodation so that women can move on from their time in refuges, feeling safe and supported to do so. I have worked with families and with women in domestic violence and this was one of the biggest barriers we faced constantly: trying to get a place in a refuge and then trying to get somewhere to live after that when the time in the refuge had finished.

We call on the Government to correct the historical underinvestment in domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services in the State and for genuine political action to improve outcomes for survivors and victims. “Enough is enough” is what we heard throughout the State, from Cork, Belfast, Dublin and Galway. Enough is enough. We all need to stand up against gender-based violence.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The murder of Ashling Murphy was an absolutely unspeakable and horrific act. I can only imagine the grief the family must be feeling. I pass on my deepest sympathies to her family, her friends and her community.

Against that background of an utterly unspeakable senseless murder and tragedy, it has been very heartening to see the amazing response of people throughout the country, coming out on vigils and insisting we must address the reasons our society continues to produce this phenomenon of violence against and murder of women because they are women. Violence of any description needs to be stamped out, but violence against women and the murder of women because they are women is a particularly horrendous thing.

On the vigils, it was brilliant how so many people were saying that of course the wheels of justice will have to grind out an explanation and a punishment in the individual case, but everybody insisted we must also look at ourselves and our society to ask how it is our society continues to produce this phenomenon. I certainly do not have all the answers, and I do not believe any individual does, but there are a few things we can say.

There is an urgency demanded by people in addressing this phenomenon and for taking measures to stamp this out and to change the culture - whatever it is about our society that produces this violence - to get to the root of it quickly and change things. Some of these have already been alluded to. First of all, if a woman is in such a relationship, and given we know most domestic violence takes place among people who know each other and in the family home, it is self-evident that if she has nowhere to go, cannot get out of where she lives, and therefore does not have the ability to escape violence, there is a greater likelihood the violence could end up with tragic consequences. It is a matter of absolute urgency we provide the refuge places.

I am aware that in my area there is no women’s refuge in the whole of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The Government has now committed to it, but it is worth saying that people have been talking about it and campaigning for a refuge in Dún Laoghaire for as long as I have been in representative politics since I was first elected as a councillor, which was 12 or 13 years ago. We still do not have a refuge.

It is not just about refuge spaces, however. It is also about alternative accommodation and the housing situation more generally. I will highlight one issue with Minister, which is that, even now, of the cases I am dealing with this minute, there are women in domestic violence situations who cannot leave those situations because they are joint tenants with their partners and therefore there are bureaucratic obstacles to them getting onto the housing list due to them

already being tenants. This means they do not want to leave the house even though they are in a situation of domestic violence. This is crazy. Those barriers must be removed. As long as we have a housing crisis and until we address it, women will be left trapped in these violent or abusive situations.

The other aspect is the question of objective sex education. I do not have all the answers for where this came from, but in Irish society the State for much of its history prevented people from having divorce and getting out of bad relationships. The State also did not want women to have control over their own bodies. We have had the horrific organised institutional abuse of women and children in the Magdalen laundries and the mother and baby homes. Against that background, it is crazy that religious institutions with particular views of women, sexuality and so on, still control 90% of our schools, and have any control whatsoever of the sex education that is taught to our young people. That issue has to be addressed as a matter of urgency so that people get factual and objective sex education, and we do not have religious bodies that are not giving people the proper education they need running our schools.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I welcome this debate. People have been alarmed by the death of Ashling Murphy. The serious realisation that violence against women is an endemic and serious problem in this country has dawned on us all. For most men, we react with anger, guilt and confusion to this because there is a chilling realisation that at the heart of the violence women are suffering is an attempt by men to abuse power. The statistics are alarming. Ten women in Ireland die violently every year. Sexual assault has increased by 60% in the past five years. Less than one tenth of serious sexual assaults are reported and the detection rate is the lowest of all crimes. Even after two years 80% remain undetected. Other assaults are four times more likely to be detected and more than one in ten women have said in private surveys that they have been victims of the equivalent of rape.

I very much welcome the strategies the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is developing. They are badly needed. We need top-down strategies, including legislation, prosecution and prevention. We need strategies in education. Lord knows, SPHE is badly in need of updating to modernise it so that it can address the challenges of the toxic masculinity that continues to be prevalent in Irish society. We may well need a Cabinet level position to co-ordinate some of this work.

I fear all of these measures risk signalling that the responsibility for this is to fall to a Minister, gardaí or teachers and not to ourselves. If this is to be a watershed, we cannot bundle in a new curriculum for SPHE and assume the responsibility has been dealt with. We have to shift the culture of toxic masculinity that exists which tolerates the sort of abuse that is so widespread. We need to do more. All of us, as men and boys, must become involved in an active response to the culture if it is to change. It cannot be done by a well-intentioned Minister or teacher.

To enable men to make this step forward, we should seriously consider a requirement that every public body develop a justice for women statement. This would mean there would be a mandate for every organisation, initially every public body, to address this and provide a platform where people could discuss and think about this issue. It is encouraging to see universities and other bodies seriously examine the way they develop policies internally. That approach needs to be much more prevalent.

When child safety first statements were introduced, they made a huge difference. They impinged on our consciousness. I agree with others that we need to encourage men to step

forward and take a lead in this. It cannot be left to women's organisations to lead. It is the responsibility of men and we need men who are influencers to be part of the dramatic shift in culture if we are to achieve change.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The death of Ashling Murphy has united communities throughout Ireland. It is probably only in recent days that the realisation of her loss has begun to settle in her community and county of Offaly. I offer my sincere condolences to her family. What happened in Tullamore two weeks ago has brought about an incredible sense of national solidarity. We must also be respectful of the fact that many other communities have experienced similar losses and shocks over the years.

However, the tide has changed strongly and our communities have come together to say that enough is enough. We want and need a zero tolerance approach to violence against women. This will require all of us as a society to commit to lasting change. We need to ensure our communities feel safe and that people of all ages can go about their business without fear for their personal safety. We need sufficient supports and services available throughout the country, appropriate legislation, an effective policing response and a cultural shift within our society.

We all know there is no single solution to ending domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Tackling it will require a multifaceted approach, with genuine engagement and partnership. I am confident the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, is leading the way in developing and implementing an all-of-government strategy to prevent and counter violence against women. I look forward to working with colleagues in the House to make sure we can reach that end goal.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I extend my sympathies to the family of Ashling Murphy. Like everybody else in the House this week and last, I am horrified by what happened. It is now important we allow the family privacy to grieve.

There is no place in our society for violence, in particular violence against women. The safety and security of women should be at the core of our society's values. I spoke to some of the women in my life about this issue at length in recent weeks. I spoke to my wife, who told me there are certain parts of Cork city where she does not feel safe and that she carries keys in her fist. I did not know that until this incident triggered these types of discussions. My sister is a regular walker, and I knew she always walked with her friends. I thought that was for social reasons rather than the need to feel safe or due to a fear of being attacked or apprehended on the road or whatever the case may be. When I was younger, I remember we always left a key on the latch or hidden inside a pot in the front garden. My mother always made a point of that and the door in the family home was always open. Sadly, my mother said those days are long gone. Unfortunately, this horrific incident has triggered discussions throughout the country.

The consensus from those discussions was that we need an end to violence against women and the approach must be multifaceted. For example, we need to prioritise a public education campaign to raise awareness of gender-based issues and have a stronger justice approach when women come forward to report attacks. There simply must be tougher sentences.

Sexual harassment needs to be taken far more seriously, especially when people come forward to report it. Many women have expressed concerns about coming forward, about the system for reporting, and the action, if any, that will be taken. Many felt it was part and parcel of everyday life. This narrative is very damaging and must change. I would like to note the

work Senators Lisa Chambers and Fiona O'Loughlin have done on their Bill in the Seanad dealing with the issue of stalking. They have worked with victims such as Eve McDowell and Una Ring.

Many women feel they must regulate their behaviour rather than society addressing the problem. We must ensure we have a criminal justice system that works for victims at every stage of their journey. We need to take practical steps in our local authorities to ensure public spaces are well lit, monitored and conducive to being an exercise amenity.

The Department of Justice is leading the development across Government of the third national strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I commend the Minister on her action to date regarding this. She is putting a lot of work into it. In her reply to the debate she might confirm whether it is still the intention that the finalised strategy will be brought to the Government in March.

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 Thomas Gould - to discuss the value for money of local authority long-term leases through the mortgage to rent scheme; (2) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss recognition of the essential role of special needs assistants, SNAs, by the Department of Education; (3) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss the provision of toilet facilities at Muine Bheag train station in County Carlow; (4) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the lack of affordable medicine for pregnant people suffering with hyperemesis in Ireland; (5) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the future funding of the Irish Community Air Ambulance based in Rathcoole, County Cork; (6) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the rationale behind the continued failure to provide a Covid test centre in Drogheda; (7) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the need to resume day care services at Abbeyleigh Hospital; (8) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the need to renovate and utilise derelict houses owned by the HSE in Portrane, County Dublin; (9) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss traffic management concerns on the Redcross to Bardarrig road in County Wicklow; (10) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the need to upgrade the N25 national road between Midleton and Carrigtwohill, County Cork; (11) Deputies Pa Daly and Martin Kenny - to discuss a statutory inquiry into the prosecution and investigation of defendants in the Sallins mail train robbery; (12) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the breakdown of the allocation of €80 million announced in funding for Irish sporting organisations; (13) Deputy Patrick Costello - to discuss historic issues and malpractice raised by the RTÉ documentary "Crime and Confessions"; (14) Deputy John Brady - to discuss the rationale for the failure to appoint an independent investigator to the inquiry into events in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020; (15) Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Mark Ward - to discuss the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's plan to have €1.5 million paid to street traders; (16) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss changes by Dublin City Council to arrangements where private rented properties are purchased to enable the tenant to become a council tenant; (17) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the postponed route selection process for the Cahir to Waterford M24; (18) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss provision of funding by the National Transport Authority to commence the third Sligo town bus route, known as the S3; (19) Deputy Pat Buckley - to dis-

cuss the progress of the school campus build in Carrigtwohill, east Cork; (20) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss steps to address continued overcrowding at the University Hospital Limerick; (21) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss the need for national and local co-ordination to commence three school projects in Celbridge, County Kildare; (22) Deputy Johnny Guirke - to discuss the need for stronger advocacy in Washington on Irish-American issues; (23) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss a uniform approach to allowing fire and rescue service personnel act as first responders in health emergencies in all counties; (24) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the need for additional Garda resources for Carrigaline; and (25) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae - to discuss the need for a deer cull within our national parks.

The matters raised by Deputies Jackie Cahill, Holly Cairns, Michael Healy-Rae and Pat Buckley have been selected for discussion.

Violence against Women: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not think there is anyone here who was not shocked by the horrific murder of Ashling Murphy. It knocked us for seven. At times like this, we become aware of numerous cases of violence against women in our towns, some of which end in absolute tragedy for those women and their families. This struck a nerve across the board. I was in Strasbourg for a meeting of the Conference on the Future of Europe at which there were numerous meetings. The matter was raised by a Cypriot colleague at one meeting, and by Deputy Niamh Smyth, me and others. It was noted that this was a requirement for a strategy not only here but also across Europe and that there is a failure across the board. Like many issues that relate to women, violence against women is an issue that is often left to one side from time to time because something else takes precedence. We cannot allow that to happen here now.

When I first became aware of this brutal crime, like many other people, I said this needs to be marked locally even though I am not always sure that does justice. I, like others, offer my condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy. As I said, this should not be something that just makes it into the television programme “Reeling in the Years”; this must be a point at which we actually do something. That applies at every level, including obviously at a national strategy level. There is an absolute requirement on the Minister and the Government to ensure that work is done.

We all know the difficulties relating to people trying to flee domestic violence and we all know the financial constraints. We need changes at local authority level. We need to look at multiple means. We need to look at means of de-escalating really bad circumstances that gardaí come across. In some cases, a person does not necessarily need to leave, the situation just needs to be de-escalated so that terrible things do not happen. All these things need to occur.

When we spoke in Dundalk about the need to mark this, as a man, I said I did not want to look like I was politicking. I did not want to look like I wanted ownership of it. Whether it was right or wrong, I and others felt it needed to be a woman who does it. We all contacted Women’s Aid. Anne Larkin from Women’s Aid in Dundalk came back to us. She was obviously very busy at that time dealing with the regular issues with which she needs to deal. A number of us determined that there should be a meeting of stakeholders involving the Garda, local authorities, NGOs and State agencies to discuss what can be done at a local level. Cases

need to be escalated to the State and non-State bodies that need to deal with those issues. We need to give space for that, accepting that we all need to look at how we deal with everything regarding WhatsApp groups and so on. There is a particular onus on men.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate today. First, I would like to convey my deepest condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy, her boyfriend, her school community and the wider community in which she played such an active and important role.

Her needless death has touched everybody in many ways. It has raised many questions that need to be addressed: about our justice system; about gender-based violence; about women's safety; and about men and their attitudes towards women.

Over the course of this debate, we have heard from many female colleagues about their own experiences. It brings home to me that this issue affects us all. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the violent death of Ashling and the deaths of 244 other women who have died violently since 1996 result in changes being made that will ensure society becomes a safe place for women. The bottom line is that we need to have an attitude of zero tolerance when it comes to violence against women.

In my opinion this is simply not just a criminal justice issue. Preventing abusive behaviour towards women will require the eradication of certain social and cultural attitudes held by many men which contribute to women feeling unsafe. I agree with the Taoiseach when he stated that we need a sea change in culture and attitude in our society. As men we need to listen to women. Misogyny is not acceptable and needs to be eliminated from our society. To put a stop to violence and abuse towards women in Irish society we must eradicate the societal and cultural attitudes that make women feel unsafe and threatened. To do this requires a change in our cultural attitudes so that we are not all bystanders and look the other way when we see behaviour that is not acceptable to women. We must call it out for what it is. It must be no longer ignored. The bottom line is that all women bar none have a right to be safe no matter where they are or what they are doing. We all have a responsibility in this, not only society but also Government. This terrible tragedy must bring about real change.

We need to have adequate services that allow women to reach out when they are victims of domestic violence. It is absolutely wrong that nine counties have no women's refuge centre. As has been pointed out here, Government funding has been cut in many instances. This is wrong and must be corrected as a matter of urgency. Women in desperate need of help must be supported. We must ensure that at the very least every rape crisis centre and refuge centre in the country is fully funded.

The Istanbul convention standard requires that at the very least we must have one refuge space per 10,000 people. The Government must immediately put in place measures to ensure that at the very least we comply with this convention.

We also need to look at our justice system and how it deals with sexual assault and violence. The statistics are not very encouraging. There is significant under-reporting of sexual assault and violence, and detection rates are as low as 10%, the lowest in any of the categories recorded. We need to ask ourselves why this is the case. There must be reforms in this area. Women must feel safe when reporting these terrible crimes and supported in doing so. It must be remembered that they are the victims in these circumstances.

Another area that needs to be addressed is the type of violence that is played out on our television screens almost daily. I have spoken on this before and made the point that children are now seeing this type of violence nearly as normal behaviour. They are seeing it on television, on the Internet and on their phones. It is as though this violent behaviour is part of normal day-to-day life. This is where education needs to step in. It must be shown that violence is not normal and is not part of day-to-day life. It should never be glamorised. Children having easy access to porn is another issue that needs to be addressed. Children are growing up seeing porn as normal behaviour. Again, we need to challenge this and show that it is not real life.

Aggression and bullying on social media also need to be addressed. Abuse online is getting nastier all the time. We need to tackle this. Healthy debate is good but when it starts to get nasty, personal, insulting and threatening then it becomes an issue. Many female colleagues have in the past week described the abuse they receive online, which is not acceptable. Education is the key to eradicating this sort of behaviour. We must show our younger generation that this type of behaviour is not acceptable and that it is wrong. We need to demonstrate the damage it can cause.

Once and for all we must address the issue of gender-based violence. It starts with us as legislators, we must have legislation that is fit for purpose. Men must also address issues relating to misogyny. We must have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to violence against women.

The tragic and needless death of Ashling was a terrible tragedy and must never be forgotten. It is our responsibility as a society to ensure this marks a point in time where we all say enough is enough. Violence against women must end.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will be sharing my time with Deputies Brendan Smith, Flaherty and Phelan.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this extremely important and solemn debate, and one which, like everyone, I simply wish we had no need to have. First, like others, I would like to express my sincere condolences to the family, friends and boyfriend of Ashling Murphy and all those in this country who have been touched by the brutal effects of that tragic murder. Unfortunately, it is yet another example of a woman being murdered at the hands of a man in this country. Once again, it is utterly unacceptable.

Like many, I spent the last few weeks listening to women share their experience of male violence and intimidation. I have listened both to my colleagues in this Chamber and to the women in my life. In doing this, I have been exposed to another side of the lives of my friends and colleagues, a side I simply can never and will never experience. While I believe all men must continue to do this listening to try to understand what our female friends, family and colleagues go through on a daily basis, I welcome that beyond this listening there is an opportunity for us to continue to act more fervently in this area.

I welcome the progress the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has made ensuring that a new domestic sexual and gender-based violence strategy will be introduced into the Dáil before Easter. I welcome that stalking and non-fatal strangulation will be made criminal offences in the sexual offences Bill which will extend victim anonymity and ensure legal representation for victims. While this legislative work is crucial in creating a zero-tolerance of violence against women, we cannot rely on legislation alone to solve this issue.

Within the last year we have had a very sincere debate on domestic violence in this Cham-

ber. A number of people made very important contributions and I was struck by one by my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, from the Labour Party about the need for us men to be role models in our communities at every level. That is something we need to think about and we need to take our work here in the Chamber and more widely in society more seriously and we need to be more thorough. We all have a part to play in improving our solidarity. All of us in the Chamber can and must do our bit. It is the least we can do for Ashling and her family.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: The brutal murder of Ashling Murphy shook this country to its core. It was a callous taking of a young life. It behoves us as legislators and as a society to ensure we act now and act decisively to address the deficiencies in the supports for women at risk of violence. What shocked most people was that Ashling was murdered in the early evening on the banks of a canal in a small provincial town. It was not the stereotypical location for a violent murder, but perpetrators of violence against women know no geographical boundaries. The threats are just as real in rural Ireland as they are in large towns and cities.

In County Longford, we are very fortunate that Longford Women's Link has managed a dedicated a domestic violence support service since 1995. Last year, it dealt with 400 women and children and a similar number in the previous year. I acknowledge the ongoing support of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for the service and her recent statements of intent on the issue of gender violence. If we want to do right by Ashling Murphy's memory, we need to address the inadequacies and shortcomings in the service. Arguably, the biggest issues include the lack of safe accommodation. Not only are refuges needed but also appropriate and secure housing is also needed into the future. In rural areas, transport to access domestic violence support is a huge problem. Obviously, women cannot bring their children with them when they go to the Garda station to make a report and, equally, childminding is as big an issue.

We need to build local networks using services and local knowledge to create an holistic structure to support women and children. In other words, we need to build a one-stop shop structure so that women do not have to access multiple points for support. One of the significant issues arising from Covid is that we are expecting more women to come forward who have been unable to do so until now. People who have experienced intense trauma during the past two years, but have not accessed any services, will need highly specialised support.

It would be a key contributor to a suitable memorial for the late Ashling Murphy if we could say in 12 months' time that we have enhanced and improved domestic violence support services across this country. Anything less than that and we will do Ashling and the grief of a nation a serious disservice.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I join others in extending my sympathies to the family, boyfriend and friends of Ashling Murphy and, indeed, other female victims of violence not just in the recent past but over many years. I agree with those who have welcomed the detailed set of proposals that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, wishes to introduce with the help and support of both Houses of the Oireachtas to deal with some of those matters. I will limit myself to a couple of issues.

I listened to last week's debate and I listened to Deputies Bruton and Whitmore earlier today. The issues around violence against women fall into many different categories. Deputy Whitmore mentioned the casual sexism that we all see from time to time in social groups, in social media groups, on the bar stool or wherever. We certainly need to adopt a zero tolerance approach to that. More institutionalised versions of this exist within various types of organisa-

tions and in workplaces.

On the issue of violent crime, I ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to look strongly at the issue of sentencing. I have spoken about this previously in the House. On a fairly regular basis, we see instances of men who are convicted of some of the most heinous acts against women, sometimes involving sexual assault or very violent assaults, not receiving custodial sentences. They receive suspended sentences or other orders. That type of sentencing system cannot remain in place. It is time for the Government, with the support of both Houses, to act to ensure sentences for such offences are much stronger.

Deputy Brendan Smith: It is evident that we need an immediate strong, political and societal response to the increasing rates of violence against women in this country. I welcome the statements by the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, last week in regard to a new strategy, new administrative structures and additional supports. When I attended the vigil in memory of the late Ashling Murphy in Cavan town, I saw at first hand the groundswell and passionate support for a proper, full and comprehensive response to this pressing societal issue. That evening, we had the opportunity to pass our sincere condolences to the Murphy family and, indeed, to other families of female victims of violence who died in similar horrific circumstances throughout this island. People want effective measures to be put in place without delay.

For far too long, I have been strongly pushing for a dedicated refuge centre for Cavan-Monaghan. The nearest refuges in which victims of domestic abuse in the Cavan-Monaghan area can be accommodated are in counties Meath, Louth or Sligo. It is horrendous for people to have to leave their home. When there are children involved and they have to travel a distance, in many circumstances those children cannot go back to their school because of the distance involved. In the review of accommodation that is to be published shortly, I sincerely hope counties like Cavan and Monaghan will be catered for. We do not want accommodation alone. We need a suite of services and proper supports, both legal and financial, for those women and for male victims where that occurs as well.

It has been demonstrated that the best outcomes arise for children when they are close to their own school. Some level of normality is retained when they can go to their own school and maintain friendships with their friends. There are significant emotional consequences for children who have to leave the home, generally with their mother, and who are cut off from normal day-to-day activities such as attending school, playing and participating in games. It is essential that in the most difficult circumstances when a mother and her children have to leave home, the children can retain some semblance of normality by attending their school, meeting their friends and continuing with the games they participate in. I ask the Minister to give urgent consideration to the provision of a refuge centre in the Cavan-Monaghan area. It is urgently needed.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputy Michael Collins is sharing time with his colleagues.

Deputy Michael Collins: Much has been said in the past week of the manner of the death of Ashling Murphy, a lovely young woman whose life was cut cruelly short in a gruesome manner. This death has shocked the country and rightly so. Her family, or any family, should never have to go through this horrendous pain. I heard many strong words from outside this House and within, much of which I fully support as they were meaningful and needed to be said. Sadly, some of the commentary in this House last week was distasteful, to say the least, pointing at

churches and church-run schools, which we now know had absolutely nothing to do with this shocking happening. Their statements show that they will use any mechanism possible in the House to get their sad points of view out there and, by God, some of their points of view are beyond sad. I suppose an apology from these Deputies is beyond them.

We must look for major improvements in sentencing. Yesterday, we learned of the sentencing of a man with 4,000 child images on his computer. He received a suspended sentence. When so many people who hurt women or families in such a terrible way get small sentences, it does not show a deterrent to those monsters out there who need to be shown up for what they do. Another area where parents and schools have to take better control is the mobile phone. Tablets, laptops and computers in the hands of children are like a loaded gun that the child cannot handle and lead our younger people to building up some terrible thoughts. If we cannot start with how we work with our great young people, how do we expect them to grow up and respect women and each other?

The events of the past week will never leave the minds of so many. Words are one thing, but action is needed. People need to see this fast. It would send a message that no one from this country, or from outside this country, should think for even one second that they can get away with perpetrating a crime like this, or even a lesser crime, against a woman or any other human being here in Ireland.

Another area improvement is needed in is that of CCTV. Quite a lot of improvements in this regard have been made down through the years. Communities have set up CCTV systems. I have seen it in places like Schull and Bantry in west Cork in my own constituency. It has acted as a brilliant deterrent. It is a great deterrent and should be installed in every community. Nobody should be able to refuse a community such a system.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I made some points last week but I will use this opportunity to talk about some excellent services we have in County Kerry which deal with people, particularly women, who have been subjected to domestic or sexual abuse or violence. I compliment, and give my heartfelt thanks to, Ms Vera O'Leary, the manager of the Kerry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre, and her excellent staff, who are kind, caring and considerate. I ask the Minister and her Government for assistance with the service the centre provides. We need more resources. The centre provides an absolutely brilliant service. I have seen the refuge where people are helped when there is a crisis at home or when they need urgent protection and a safe space to stay. In dealing with constituents, I have seen at first hand the kind and caring consideration and practical assistance they get. However, we need more resources.

There has been great support shown here by Government and Opposition Members but I need to see action on the ground in County Kerry. When people contact the rape crisis centre, they are referred to other agencies for assistance with different aspects of their problem but they have to go on a waiting list. My goodness. After all of what the Minister and other Government speakers have said and the very kind words they have spoken, why should a person, for instance, a lady, who rings the rape crisis centre in Kerry be told that she must be go on a waiting list for up to two months? That is totally wrong. No Government can stand over somebody in a crisis situation having to wait eight weeks. I plead with the Minister.

In case anybody thinks that this issue is being blown out of all proportion and that it is not a problem, I became aware of a completely new case only today and I am trying to assist in it. A very young vulnerable person had been sexually abused by a family member. That is hard

stuff to deal with and to assist with. Imagine how hard it is for the young person who is told they must wait up to two months before they can be dealt with. I ask the Minister to please give the Kerry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre more resources to deal with the waiting list it has but should not have. I am sure every other rape crisis centre around the country is facing the same types of problems but I am obviously highlighting the issues in the county I am here to represent.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: As the Minister will know, this is my third time speaking on this subject. I do so with a sense of utter frustration. I have said that. I will try to use my time positively. I have heard many statements to the effect that this is a watershed moment, that a light has been shone on the issue and that we know now. We have known for a very long time. On the last occasion, I had two minutes. I have a few extra today.

I will refer to the report of the task force chaired by the former Deputy, Eithne Fitzgerald, which was issued in 1997. It states:

The Task Force's aim is to ensure women experiencing violence can have real options, that when they disclose what is happening they are listened to and believed, that public services are in a position to offer practical help and an assurance of safety. Women and children who have lived with violence need counselling and support

Interestingly, it also states:

Working with women and children only addresses one side of the problem. Programmes for violent men that confront violent behaviour must be developed and expanded. A society where women are not

regarded as equals, or which sees violence as a legitimate way of resolving conflict, is one where violence to women can flourish. Work with young people has an important role to play in preventing violence and abuse in a new generation.

That was written in 1997 following the first refuges having been set up 20 years previously and following the work of the organisations on the ground, particularly Women's Aid. We are now waiting for the third national strategy, which was promised before Christmas. We are also waiting on Tusla. I would really like the Minister to tell me tonight what the delay in publishing the completed report is. I understand it has been with the Government for a very long time. It has certainly been with Tusla for a very long time. I have repeatedly said that I believe in the Minister's bona fides. I respect what she is doing but why are we still saying that it will be published soon? The Taoiseach said so this morning. It is unacceptable to say that any more. Will it be published tomorrow? If not, why not? What has it shown up?

With regard to our knowledge about violence, you can pick any time. I have picked 1997. I could have picked the case of Sophia McColgan, subject of a book by Susan McKay that was published in 1998. I could have picked the case of Kelly Fitzgerald or the Roscommon case. I could have picked the Kilkenny incest case, a report on which was published by Catherine McGuinness SC, who subsequently became a Supreme Court justice. What jumped off the page in that report, which was published in 1993, was that it stated that the level of violence in that family was not atypical, or words to that effect. It was not unusual for the area.

In every single year of every single decade, we were fully aware of the extent of violence, not just domestic violence but also violence outside of the home. Everybody is hurt and di-

minated by that, as is our economy, the consequences of domestic violence having cost it €2.2 billion at a conservative estimate. Nobody who has been subjected to that level of abuse, particularly a woman, can participate as an active citizen in a democratic society. It simply cannot be done.

I am beyond statements. I am using my few minutes to say that I will work with the Minister. There are practical actions to be taken. The Minister should publish the Tusla report. She should make that most basic accommodation, which is necessary, available and she should make it multifunctional for the future.

I have heard a lot of talk about education. I do not know what the Department has done with regard to the Manuela Riedo programme. It was run on a pilot basis and evaluated in Galway. The pilot programme was run by the Galway Rape Crisis Centre along with Tusla and other rape crisis services. It is exactly what Deputies are asking for. The Minister should mainstream it. She should meet the people involved and mainstream the programme if she considers it right to do so. I do. I have read it. There has been a report and an assessment on it. Is the Minister aware of it? Manuela Riedo was a beautiful young girl. All of the women who were murdered were beautiful. That murder happened in 2007. It was never to happen again. The rape crisis centre in Galway and a number of others throughout the country worked closely with Tusla and the Manuela Riedo Foundation to make sure that change would be brought about. It has not happened even though the pilot project was extremely successful, if that is the right word. It probably is not when talking about such horrific violence. However, the result of that pilot programme was very positive.

Last year, the Citizens' Assembly reported and wrote to every single Deputy in the Dáil to point to its recommendations but those recommendations have been ignored. Again, they related to dealing with the perpetrator as well. What is interesting about that is that we in this Dáil, of which I was part, were so out of touch with the Citizens' Assembly when it was set up that domestic, sexual and gender-based violence was not included in the terms of reference. Can the Minister imagine that? It was not even included. The assembly and its chairperson, Dr. Catherine Day, had the sense to change those terms of reference or to at least interpret them differently. I am over time. Gabh mo leithscéal.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Acting Chairperson for the time to come back in and respond to the Deputies. I thank the Deputies for their contributions, including those who have contributed a number of times. This is also my third time to discuss this issue in the Chamber in less than a week. It is clear from the very fact that we had to extend this debate and discuss this issue numerous times just how important an issue it is for colleagues because it impacts each and every one of us. It also shows a clear determination to do better. There is no one thing we can do or no one law we can pass. No one policy, organisation or grouping has responsibility for this. We must all work together on this issue. It will involve all of us in this House, in the Seanad, in the Government and in all our Departments working with our State agencies and our community and voluntary sector. Most importantly, this will involve working with the victims and survivors who have lived experience.

What do we do from here? How do we achieve the goal of zero tolerance of any kind of violence or abuse against women? We must first build on the work that has been done. In that regard, I appreciate that we have had many reports and recommendations over the years. Progress has been made and many structures and new laws have been put in place. The question now is how we can build on those developments. It is my intention that this third national

strategy will be the most ambitious strategy to date. It will be built on four key pillars coming from the Istanbul Convention.

Prevention in that context will concern looking at education. We must ensure we implement the programmes we have that work, not just at primary level but also at secondary level and in higher and further education and college as well. We must also ensure that education takes place in our homes and that parents have conversations with children. Partners, work colleagues and friends should also have these difficult conversations.

We must also maintain public awareness of the programmes we have at national level. This means ensuring that programmes like Still Here and the programmes we are going to run on consent are clear and visible and that people are aware of the challenges that we face. Protection also means ensuring that women take the difficult step to come forward. When they do so, the requisite supports must be in place, whether that involves a refuge or the wraparound supports, including housing needs separate to a refuge, health needs or financial supports. It must be ensured that all those supports are in place when women come forward.

The prosecution aspect concerns the criminal justice system. The work I am doing on the Support a Victim's Journey policy will be a key part of this strategy in respect of how we improve the criminal justice system, most importantly to encourage victims to come forward. In addition, they must know they will be supported and treated with respect if they do so. Again, this facet is about education, new laws, strengthening the laws we have and introducing new measures to provide the supports and the wraparound service required.

Then there is policy co-ordination, which involves bringing all these efforts together and making certain at Government level that we are working with those on the ground and on the front line to ensure we have a co-ordinated approach and response. In that regard, we have given a clear commitment in recent weeks that I will be responsible not only for policy and co-ordination of the third national strategy, but also for the delivery of services and wraparound supports as they exist.

In addition, as we continue to develop this strategy and as it continues to evolve and we continue to live and learn from experience, it will be important that we take on board the lived experience and learn from the information and data that we gather. In recent years, we have seen that by listening to victims and survivors and by understanding the situations they find themselves in, we have been able to bring about new laws and new policies in this context. I am thinking of the law on coercive control, for example. Until recently, that was not seen as an issue, as a criminal offence or as something that impacted women. That type of behaviour, though, is just as damaging as the physical violence that so many women experience. This strategy is about making sure that all our policies and laws, and the supports they provide, work. We must ensure that all those aspects encourage people to come forward and that there are clear ways to prosecute those responsible for these types of crimes.

All the Deputies' recommendations, suggestions, proposals and ideas will be taken on board and listened to. I intend to strengthen and improve the third national strategy in any way possible. There is still time. I never committed to presenting or publishing the strategy before Christmas. What I had said was that we would have a draft in my Department and that there would then be further consultation, not just with the sector but also with the public. As part of this process, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I had committed to exploring collectively all those points raised in the context of the audit undertaken in my Department to examine how

all this was co-ordinated and structured in line with the refuge spaces. That was to ensure that when we presented the strategy and the new structure, we would have answers to all the questions which would arise concerning refuge spaces, such as how they would be delivered, by whom and what kind of resources they would have. Therefore, we are not delaying the presentation of anything in this regard. It is important that when we make the presentation, it is clear what the goals and objectives are, what is being done by whom, what the timelines in that regard are and that the whole endeavour is properly resourced. We intend to do exactly that in the coming weeks and months. I look forward to working with all my colleagues in this House and in the Seanad to ensure we achieve the goal of zero tolerance of any kind of violence or abuse against women or girls.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is críoch leis na ráitis maidir le foréigean in aghaidh na mban é sin. Ba ráitis suntasacha iad.

Leaving Certificate: Motion

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— Leaving Certificate students faced significant disruption to their learning when school buildings were closed between January and March 2021, particularly those without access to electronic devices or a stable internet connection;

— many Leaving Certificate students have had lengthy periods of self-isolation, as they unfortunately contracted Covid-19 over the course of the last year, or were named a close contact of a positive case; and

— many Leaving Certificate subject teachers similarly had to self-isolate, some more than once;

further notes that:

— high levels of absence amongst students and teachers, through no fault of their own, has had a significant impact on the ability of Leaving Certificate students to prepare thoroughly for their State examinations; and

— many classes, due to student and staff absences, have not had the opportunity to cover the entire Leaving Certificate curriculum;

recognises that:

— the lack of clarity on what Leaving Certificate 2022 will look like is causing significant stress and anxiety for students and their families;

— in a survey of over 40,000 students carried out by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, 68 per cent of Leaving Certificate students stated their preference for

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a Leaving Certificate model based on a choice between calculated grades and written examinations;

— Junior Certificate students have also endured significant disruption, and the Minister for Education needs to provide clarity on whether changes will be made to their exams to take into account any disruption they have experienced;

— the Leaving Certificate generally is in urgent need of reform, which has been highlighted further by the Covid-19 pandemic; and

— the varying levels of disruption encountered by students cannot be resolved through additional changes to the written examinations alone; and

calls on the Government to:

— place the voice of students at the centre of the debate on Leaving Certificate 2022;

— secure a choice for Leaving Certificate 2022 students, between calculated grades and written examinations; and

— take decisive and urgent action to bring clarity and peace of mind to the Leaving Certificate class of 2022.

In any year, the leaving certificate examinations are challenging and stressful. We have all heard the stories of people having nightmares about the examinations many years later and that reflects the urgent need to reform the leaving certificate examinations. The pandemic has highlighted this urgent need. It is not a fair and equitable way of evaluating students. It is not without its merits entirely, but it is a form of evaluation that places too much pressure in the context of relying on a final terminal examination. I refer as well to the pressure that comes from the leaving certificate not evaluating all skills and not having the flexibility we should have for modern students. It is vitally important to bear that aspect in mind as we discuss what we will do in this pandemic year to respond to the challenges that students face.

I say that because some of the arguments made against the hybrid model neglect to consider several things. They neglect the extent of the disruption and absences. They also neglect the extent to which those facets have impacted on education, and I will return to this point later. The other thing neglected, and Dr. Gerry McNamara of Dublin City University, DCU, made this point in *The Irish Times* at the weekend, is that some of those criticisms imply or forget that the leaving certificate was never truly equitable in any event. To some extent, it reflected existing inequalities and injustices in Irish society. There are, undoubtedly, ways in which people can gain an advantage through the current leaving certificate examination system.

When I speak to leaving certificate students and their families, and many teachers as well, they tell me that the anxiety, stress and uncertainty are becoming unbearable. Therefore, the first thing they need is clarity and an early decision on this year's leaving certificate examinations. It must be made as early as possible. The students need and deserve to know what kind of leaving certificate examinations they will be facing. They deserve to know what it is they are preparing for.

I am also tabling this motion because the students need a choice. I am certain that this is entirely warranted and that it is the fairest manner of evaluating these students in these circumstances. I am hearing the same story from many students, families and teachers across the State.

Let us consider that school buildings were closed for more than two months and that when students did return to school, they were not the highest priority at the time. Since then, a great deal of time has also been lost because of the self-isolation of students and staff. There were also many other disruptions. Many students are caregivers and have other responsibilities. They are struggling to cover the course. This is about the stress and pressure involved, but it is not just about that. It is also about how much time has been lost and how difficult it is proving to cover the course. Many students are telling me that their teachers have decided not to organise mock examinations or pre-examinations in a subject because they are not far enough advanced in the course. I note, in particular, that the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, NAPD, has called for a hybrid model to be used again this year. The Minister listened to the students last year and I welcomed that. I urge her to do the same thing again. She valued the voices of students on that occasion, and I ask her to do so again.

Given that we need to listen to the voices of students, I will quote from some of the comments I have received from students. One said, “It’s just so tiring [...] waiting for a decision to be taken”. Another said:

I am dreading this year’s exams. I am not sleeping recently. I usually do really [well] in school but I’m not prepared to sit the LC this year. We have so much of the course still to cover, as well as [struggling] to catch up on work because I was a close contact. I just want the stress to end.

Yet another said that, “As a Leaving Cert student my anxiety levels are sky high and we still have no clarity”, while another put it like this:

Many students struggled to cope with the pressure of a lockdown, myself included [...] On top of the pressure and stress of school work and the pandemic, it was a tough year to say the very least [...] we came back to school after the lockdown many teachers were out sick and there were not enough substitute teachers for classes which meant that we didn’t get all of the work done.

Since the weekend people all over the country are celebrating the lifting of restrictions and there is a sense of relief as the country can start to get back to some kind of normality.

6 o’clock

It is upsetting that most leaving certificate students cannot enjoy this in the same way as everyone else because unfortunately they still feel like they cannot breathe. One sixth year student said that the Minister should have a phone call with all the leaving certificate students so she can hear their stories; I agree. Students’ voices need to be at the heart of this.

According to the Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, since the Christmas break 49.5% of students have missed one to three classes on average a day. Some 9% of students have missed four to five classes a day. Of those who missed classes, 54% only had substitutes for some classes. Disruption is absolutely enormous. They are struggling to cover the course. It may not be the same as last year but it is not a normal year. It is a pandemic year. It is absolutely required to have that hybrid model and choice for students this year.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is not too late for the Minister to do the right thing. Over the past two years, more than 6,000 people have died with Covid in the State and 9,159 on the island. In excess of 1 million have contracted the virus. Millions more have been close con-

tacts. Leaving certificate students and their families are not immune. They are not different. They are part of society and what society had to endure. I do not think anyone would argue the fact that the high levels of absence among students and teachers, through no fault of their own, have had a significant impact on the ability of leaving certificate students to prepare thoroughly in the way they need to for what is probably the most important exam in their lives.

Leaving certificate students faced significant disruption to their learning when school buildings were closed between January and March 2021, particularly those without access to electronic devices or a stable Internet connection. I deal with issues every day in County Mayo and there is not a single home yet that has been connected under the national broadband plan. One mother wrote to me saying her daughter has been a consistent hard worker throughout her school life but the distractions of the past two years have knocked her confidence and she is struggling to get by from day to day. They live in a rural area of Mayo with an extremely unreliable Internet connection and, therefore, online learning presented its own challenges. Whenever the connection failed, there was a process of trying to catch up with other students. The constant loss of class time due to teacher and pupil absences, the freezing conditions in the classroom and the constant uncertainty have all wreaked havoc. She goes on to say that words cannot express how much it would mean to have an option of a hybrid model leaving certificate giving students the choice they are rightly entitled to, given the trauma that they have suffered.

A student wrote to me saying they had recently contracted the coronavirus and were extremely ill for a number of days. While the school was extremely supportive, the student did miss out. The student wrote to me as they are sure they are not the only leaving certificate student who has been in this situation. The student did not contract the virus through carelessness but through a parent who was a front-line worker. Many of the students I have heard from are sons and daughters of front-line workers who have been going through extreme pressure for the past two years as well. I ask the Minister to take that into consideration. There are many more emails and calls and I know every Deputy has received them as well. The accounts are far more convincing than the Government's justification for not offering the hybrid leaving certificate.

I fundamentally reject the idea that a hybrid model is to blame for grade inflation. Grade inflation can be a problem or it can be managed properly in any examination system. I believe it can be managed properly. The fact that grade inflation has been allowed to balloon two years in a row has created real damage to the system and caused stress and hardship for many students. This does not mean giving students the option of a hybrid model last year was wrong. It was exactly the right thing to do and was something I, Deputy Ó Laoghaire and other colleagues in Sinn Féin called for and supported. Grade inflation can, and must, be managed better to ensure we do not have a repeat of the past two years.

Government constantly pats itself on the back for increasing the number of college places but without proper funding to underpin it, it just means the third-level sector is bursting at the seams. Funding and resources need to be targeted, particularly for high-demand courses. The small numbers in medicine go nowhere near addressing the shortage of doctors, nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists and all of the healthcare disciplines.

This year's cohort of leaving certificate students should not be punished due to the mistakes in the management of the hybrid system last year. We should learn from that experience to ensure it is executed better this time around. Being decisive and making an early decision will help. It will give staff, the Department and all stakeholders who have been through an extremely challenging time more time to prepare.

I speak as a mother of a leaving certificate student. I am fortunate because we can get extra grinds or help if we need it. Inequalities are being created within the system by not giving a choice and this has led to stress and mental health problems. I am talking about really resilient youngsters who have gone through a terrible time in the past two years. I am asking the Minister to take that into consideration. We have time over the next couple of years to bring back the system to the way it should be through the reform of the leaving certificate as well. I ask her not to make this cohort of leaving certificate students carry the can for everything.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Leaving certificate students have faced huge disruption in their lives over the past two years. Their leaving certificate cycle has been repeatedly interrupted with many teachers struggling to cover the course because of the significant disruptions. Teachers and students have had to self-isolate with some having to isolate multiple times. There are cases of students not having access to the Internet due to many parts of the State still lacking basic broadband infrastructure. For a lot of young people these are seen as the most important exams they will do in their lives. The reality of the past two years has to be acknowledged. It would be completely unfair to expect these students to sit a normal leaving certificate exam.

I am sure there are some students who have managed the past two years well and feel prepared; that is great if they do. On the other hand, I know there are many students who have had the opposite experience. We need a system that treats people fairly and is mindful of how hard the past two years have been for our students. The survey of students that was conducted by ISSU shows that students want a choice. Just under 70% of the 40,000 that responded said they would favour a hybrid model. Their voices should not be ignored.

Students need clarity and they should not have to wait any longer for it. After all the disruption the last thing that is needed is further confusion. I hope the Minister takes this on board and does the right thing for our students. They deserve it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: B'fhéidir gur gá dúinn an sean-nath cainte, "Is aoibhinn beatha an scoláire" a athrú nó "seachas le linn paindéime" a chur leis mar ní aoibhinn beatha an scoláire le bhlianta anuas. As mic léinn dara leibhéal an Stáit, is iad daltaí ardteistiméireachta na bliana seo is mó a bhí buailte ag an bpaindéim Covid-19 ó thuirling sí orainn i bhFeabhra 2019. Nílím ag rá nach raibh droch-éifeacht ar chúrsaí oideachais scoláirí i ranganna eile ach, i gcás daltaí ardteiste na bliana seo, tá trí bliana scoile i gceist san iomlán.

In ainneoin iarrachtaí den scoth ó mhúinteoirí, ó phríomhoidí agus ó na daltaí féin ach go háirithe chun an seó a choimeád faoi lán seoil, tá trí bliana caite ag na daltaí seo ar chúrsa scrúdaithe a bhí curtha as riocht ina hiomláine. Tá a fhios agam go ndéanann roinnt daoine beag den, agus neamhaird ar an, idirbhliain ach is trua é sin mar tá sé lárnach agus na daltaí sin ag fás iontu féin. Tá cúrsaí oideachais san áireamh leis sin. Le teacht Covid-19, tháinig deireadh le cuid mhaith den obair a bhí leagtha amach dóibh do dheireadh na hidirbhliana.

Agus breis is 60,000 dalta ardteiste ag tosú an cúigiú bliain agus ag díriú isteach ar an obair i dtreo scrúduithe na bliana seo, ní raibh a fhios acu an mbeidh na scrúduithe sin ag dul ar aghaidh. Ní raibh a fhios acu an mbeidh na scrúduithe scríofa ar líne, an ndéanfar iad ó bhéal nó an mbeidh gráid chreidiúnaithe nó gráid bunaithe ar algartam i gceist. Fós féin, níl a fhios acu cad a bheidh i gceist. Fós féin, rinne siad iarracht tabhairt faoin staidéar agus faoi na ceachtanna, d'ainneoin na srianta, go minic, lena n-áirítear na maisc, a bheith scartha amach sna ranganna le fuinneoga oscailte agus iad préachta nó ró-the ag brath ar an áit a raibh siad suite. Bhí iad ag stánadh ar scáileán beag 12 orlach nuair a bhí siad sa bhaile ar feadh 12 uair an chloig

go minic, idir ranganna agus staidéar, nó fiú amháin é seo déanta ar a bhfón póca. Ní féidir linn leanúint ar aghaidh ag ligean orainn nach raibh tionchar beag nó drochthionchar ar scolaíocht nó oideachas na ndaltaí seo, m'iníon féin agus a cairde, dar ndóigh, san áireamh. Ar nós a lán díobh, bhí cur chuige díograiseach acu agus bhí siad solúbtha ó thaobh céard a caitheadh ina dtreo ach, fós féin, ní fheicim ón Aire nó ón Roinn fós aon fhreagra ceart a thugann cothrom na Féinne do dhaltaí na hardteistiméireachta 2022.

Deputy Mark Ward: During these uncertain times, some things remain certain. One of these certainties is that pupils will be sitting their leaving certificate this year in one form or another. The Minister has had more than enough time to get her house in order and prepare for the situation in which leaving certificate students now find themselves. The students want a clear message from the Government that they will be able to sit a hybrid leaving certificate this year the same as the class of 2021. The message from leaving certificate students could not be any clearer: they need a choice between written exams and calculated grading in recognition of the significant disruption that they have experienced in their learning over the past two years due to Covid-19. The findings of a poll this week by ISSU, the largest representative body for second level students on the island of Ireland, show that more than two thirds of leaving certificate students want a hybrid exam. These voices must be listened to. The Minister's proposal of traditional exams simply must not go ahead. Leaving certificate students, particularly those without access to devices or a stable Internet connection, faced significant disruption to their learning when school buildings were closed between January and March 2021. My Sinn Féin colleagues and I are calling on the Government to give students a choice this year. It is not too much to ask.

Covid-19 has shone a bright light on the failings in our educational system and the years of chronic underinvestment by successive Governments. My phone has not stopped ringing since last year with calls from parents concerned about getting secondary school places for their children. I have raised this matter with the Minister previously. Parents from Clondalkin and Lucan are seeing their children being placed on waiting lists for secondary schools with little assurance that they will get any. The youth population of Dublin Mid-West has increased over the years but Governments have failed to plan for this in terms of school provision. The Department of Education only recently decided not to build a school in Kilcarbery despite the council allocating land and the fact that there will be a further 1,000 houses in the area. The people and pupils of Dublin Mid-West are feeling ignored.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Anxiety is rising all over north Kildare on account of the leaving certificate. I am being contacted by parents from Celbridge, Maynooth, Leixlip and all the way down to Naas who are worried about their children because of the patchiness of the past two school years with so many of their excellent teachers out sick or isolating because they were close contacts. Students have been affected in the same way. They have had a disruptive two years and are now facing into more uncertainty around the exams.

The students who have contacted me are an absolute credit to their parents, families and schools. Not only are they so articulate about the academic and points issues they are facing, but they have also shown an incredible maturity as well as insight into themselves in their concern for one another and their mental well-being. When it comes to the leaving certificate, they want and need choice. This has not been life and study as usual, so when it comes to exams, there can be no business as usual this year. They are worried about doing their mocks and not having the course work covered. They are worried about the gaps in teaching and learning, about their points, about their health and about their futures.

At the stroke of a pen, the Minister could remove that worry and give the students and their families not just the peace they want and need, but the choice they want and need, namely, the choice of calculated grades and exams. That should not be done at the last minute, but right now so that the students can take a breath, steady their nerves and plan ahead. They have been isolated by infection and quarantine. Now, the Government should be insulating them against future anxiety and future shock. Choice is not rocket science; it is common sense.

Our young people have been putting their lives on hold for their families and communities for the past two years. They have gone above and beyond. It is now up to us to show our appreciation by giving them back their head space and giving them choice. The Department must listen to the students. They are telling the Minister what they need and want. After the past couple of years, this is the least they deserve.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I move amendment No. 2:

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

“notes that:

— students, including those preparing for Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle examinations, have faced challenges in their learning as a result of disruptions caused by Covid-19;

— students are naturally eager to have certainty about the approach to be taken in respect of this year’s State examinations; and

— school communities have made extraordinary and unstinting efforts to support the continuity of learning for their students during a very challenging and sustained period of time;

further notes that:

— through the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations 2022, the Minister for Education is in very proactive and positive engagement with all key education stakeholders; and

— this engagement is ongoing, with the advisory group having met most recently in plenary session on 20th January, 2022, and bilateral meetings with stakeholder groups taking place since that meeting, including over the weekend and into this week;

recognises:

— the importance in hearing and understanding all voices and perspectives in respect of the most appropriate approach for the 2022 State examinations; and

— the need to bring clarity to the position for students as soon as possible in order to empower them to focus on their preparations for Leaving Certificate 2022; and

agrees that:

— the Government will continue to engage with stakeholders with a view to reaching an appropriate solution; and

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— a decision in relation to these matters will be made as soon as reasonably practicable and that the decision will be announced immediately thereafter.”

I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire and his colleagues for tabling this motion for debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the House on the important matter of the State examinations.

I understand the sentiments and concerns underlying the motion and I appreciate that examination year students have faced significant challenges in their learning as a result of the disruption caused by Covid-19. I also acknowledge that these students are eager to have certainty about the approach to be taken to this year’s State examinations. The Department of Education and I are currently involved in a process of engagement with education stakeholders regarding the 2022 State examinations. It is important that this process be allowed to conclude to inform the decision that will be taken. Consequently, the Government is tabling an amendment to allow this process to conclude. I welcome the opportunity to update Deputies on the progress of the engagements to date. I also want to advise of measures that have to date been put in place by my Department and by the SEC to help address the disruption to teaching and learning caused to leaving certificate students as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am keen to lean on the wisdom of all in the education sector in helping to provide certainty to our examination students as soon as possible and to allow them to focus on their preparations for the 2022 leaving certificate. It is important to hear and understand all voices and perspectives in respect of the most appropriate approach to the 2022 State examinations. Most important is the need for clarity for students. In this regard, I welcome the opportunity this evening to hear the views of Deputies on these important issues.

My Department and the SEC have been progressing planning for the 2022 junior cycle and leaving certificate examinations. This has been done in close consultation with the advisory group on planning for the State examinations and, of course, with public health. The advisory group includes representatives of students, parents, teachers and school leaders as well as representatives from the SEC, NCCA, higher education and my Department. I acknowledge the significant contributions made by all members of the advisory group to the work on planning for the examinations.

I pay tribute to the extraordinary and unstinting efforts being made every day by school communities up and down the country to support the continuity of learning for students during what has been a challenging time. I am aware that the leaving certificate experience for the class of 2022 has been disruptive. The SEC, working with the Department of Education, has sought through a range of measures to take account of the disruption to learning experienced by these students. Adjustments have been made to the assessment arrangements that were announced in August 2021 for the 2022 state examinations. These adjustments were designed to take account of the disruption to learning experienced by students in the early part of 2021 as well as provide for some possible further disruption in the 2021-22 school year. They are considered proportionate to the students’ experience and loss of learning and are educationally appropriate. They also ensure that the overall structure of the examinations remains intact but will allow for greater choice for students.

Just before Christmas, I made an announcement regarding the arrangements for leaving certificate oral examinations in Irish and modern foreign languages and the practical performance tests in leaving certificate music. These examinations will take place outside of school time over the first week of the Easter holidays with the examinations running in schools during the

six-day period from Saturday, 9 April to Thursday, 14 April, inclusive. Holding these examinations over Easter and outside of school time will minimise disruption for schools and students. Timeframes for certain assessment elements of the leaving certificate applied examinations have been pushed out. There has also been a reduction in the amount of preparatory time required for some practical exams in order to give more time for tuition. Schools have been reminded of the available flexibility in terms of the dates for the completion and authentication of leaving certificate course work. I also announced that an alternative set of leaving certificate examinations would be run in 2022 shortly after the conclusion of the main set of examinations. This will be for students who are unable to sit the main set of exams for specific reasons. In addition to those measures focused on exam year students, I have announced a series of broader measures to enhance teaching and learning in our schools. With a view to increasing the supply of substitute post-primary teachers to cover teachers absent from school for Covid-related or other reasons, I have introduced a range of emergency measures to provide increased numbers of substitute teachers. These include the release of student teachers from their college programmes to enable them to support schools; the cancellation of all teacher continuing professional development that gives rise to substitution needs; the deployment of teachers currently serving with the school support services to work in schools; requests to retired teachers to return to teaching duties; the ending of the abatement of salary payments to retired teachers for substitution work for this school term; a relaxation of career break and job-sharing restrictions for substitution purposes; and permission for post-primary teachers to work more than 22 hours per week, working extra hours to provide substitution cover, up to a total of 35 hours. The capacity of the school system to provide for remote tuition has improved significantly in recent times. While schools were closed as a result of Covid-19 from January 2021, all students, including students who are due to sit the 2022 leaving certificate examinations, engaged in a programme of remote learning with their schools from 11 January 2021 until their return to in-person tuition. Fifth year students were also prioritised for a return to school following the return of sixth year students in spring of 2021.

I have introduced measures to address the greater impact on the education of some students and the learning loss suffered by them. These include the opportunity provided to primary and post-primary schools to offer summer provision, at a cost of up to €40 million, in addition to the €10 million allocated to a supplementary education programme, aimed at students with complex educational needs. In addition to this, provision of up to €52 million in extra teaching hours was made by the Department for the Covid learning and support scheme, under which a block of additional teaching hours is provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for students who have experienced difficulties in settling back into school and engaging with learning. Information has also been provided on well-being supports for leaving certificate students. This includes a series of supports on managing well-being, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, in the Department, to support students. My Department has worked with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure that the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for students.

As I have outlined previously, I continue to engage with all the partners in education on all matters relating to the leaving certificate 2022 examinations. At the most recent meeting of the State examinations advisory group a number of updates were received from group members, including reports of emerging and final results from surveys of their members which were conducted by some bodies. The meeting was positive and collaborative, with all parties committed to continued engagement in the short period ahead to provide clarity on the State examinations

in 2022. It was agreed that the members of the group would reflect on the contributions made at the meeting and that engagement would continue between me and the various stakeholders on a bilateral and intensive basis. This bilateral engagement has continued since last week, over the weekend and into this week, with a view to reaching an appropriate solution that responds to the concerns and issues that have been raised by students and other stakeholders. A further meeting of the advisory group will be held and I am working towards a decision on the State examinations in 2022 being made as soon as is reasonably practicable. I am mindful that, under Standing Order 59, I am permitted to speak only once to the motion. The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, will close the debate on behalf of the Government.

I commend once again all those working in schools to support students. The work of those who support students - teachers, school leaders, SNAs, bus escorts, secretaries, caretakers - has never been more important or more challenging. Those in examination years face added challenge beyond what is faced in normal years. My Government colleagues and I appreciate the need to bring clarity to the position for these students as soon as possible in order that they can focus on their preparations for the upcoming exams. I will continue to engage with stakeholders with the aim of reaching an appropriate solution as quickly as possible. I commend the Government amendment to the House.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I have been contacted by many students and by parents who are very concerned about the leaving certificate this year and how best to proceed to ensure that it is fair to all students. The students currently in sixth year missed out on three months of schooling this time last year. I acknowledge that online teaching was provided and commend all the teaching staff who went to great lengths to ensure that teaching was provided. Many teachers to whom I have spoken would have much preferred to be in the classroom setting to trying to teach online, which was very difficult to do. We have to be realistic, however. Not all students engaged in the learning process, and there were reasons for that, many to do with poor broadband, some to do with difficult family circumstances and others to do with the type of learner. Not every student is capable of engaging remotely.

Then the students returned to school. Since September in particular, however, students themselves have been absent due to contracting Covid or being a close contact and having to isolate. Teachers have been absent for the same reason. Students inform me that teachers were often absent for weeks at a time and occasionally longer. Substitute teachers were like hen's teeth. One parent told me that her daughter attended school and attended six periods without a teacher in one day. In some instances the class was not even supervised. This is not a level playing field for students this year. As for teacher absences alone, some schools suffered more than others, but also some classes within a school received different levels of teaching due to some teachers being absent and others not.

The overwhelming number of students want to see a hybrid leaving certificate similar to last year's. I believe the SEC is saying that this may not be possible as many students did not sit a junior certificate exam. If I recall correctly, however, and if I am incorrect the Minister can correct me, in 2020, teachers were told not to judge students on their junior certificate results. I also believe that teachers know their students well enough to be able to judge them. Last year, many teachers told me that the accredited grades and the results their students got in the written exam, if they chose to sit it, were very similar, while the grade allocated by the SEC was below that which the teacher gave. Students have had to contend with freezing cold schools and wearing masks all day, which is not easy. They are stressed enough. We can help them by ensuring there is a hybrid leaving certificate. Covid restrictions have impacted significantly our young

people and we could arrange for one less thing for them to worry about.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I commend the teachers and the other school staff. I know how hard they work and have been working over recent years in extremely difficult circumstances. As a parent of a leaving certificate student, I can tell the Minister that this is a very stressful period for both the students and the parents of many of those students. She can take it as a fact that I have been getting a large number of emails from students who say time and time again that what they have experienced over the past year has been extremely difficult and they are very concerned about own leaving certificate results and how they will then progress into college. The Covid pandemic was an uncertain time for us all. As adults, we had to navigate it and its uncertainty when it came to our employment and our mental and physical health. These students have lost out on a huge chunk of their social life. I refer to junior certificate students and those who have lost out on a lot of the milestones they would have otherwise had. They now have to cope with all these things alongside the leaving certificate and the exams.

I will give the Minister an example. My son's maths curriculum will not finish until March. It should have been finished before Christmas in order that the students could revise properly. They cannot revise something they have not learned. There are, therefore, huge difficulties because, as was explained earlier, there are teachers who have not been in because of Covid. One Irish teacher, because of long Covid, was not in for six weeks. There are other teachers getting Covid; there are students who had Covid. They are sitting in classrooms in the freezing cold. They are wearing jackets, hats and scarves. It is not an environment for children to try to learn in. Let us imagine us sitting in this room with all the windows open, in the freezing cold. We would not be happy with that experience. We would not be happy to sit an exam in those conditions.

I ask the Minister to consider a hybrid model and to listen to the students. Tomorrow I will meet students in Coláiste Pobail Setanta, Ongar, Dublin 15. They have asked us to come out there to listen to them. If the Minister has time tomorrow, I urge her to come out to the school to listen to those students, to listen to their experiences and to take them on board.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Covid-19 pandemic has affected us all. Our students and our teachers have to be creative in their learning. They faced massive disruption throughout the senior cycle, from remote learning to long school absences due to Covid or being identified as a close contact. It has been an incredibly disruptive senior cycle, I am sure the Minister will agree, for our current batch of leaving certificate students. Some have been unfortunate enough to have to isolate more than once; others not at all.

The learning experience has varied from student to student, often dramatically. I am particularly concerned about the impact it is had on DEIS schools. When all were in remote learning environments between January 2021 and March 2021, the difference in the learning experience was compounded by such issues as Internet access and the ability - or inability - of parents to support their children. I say that not to assign blame but rather so that we can appreciate that not every household has a stable Internet connection or an abundance of devices to enable workers and students to work and attend classes, respectively. Unfortunately, some parents were unable to cope with homeschooling themselves.

These students want clarity. They deserve choice. I am sure my constituency office is not unique in having been contacted by numerous local sixth year students and parents who are seeking a hybrid leaving certificate examination model this year. These students have had the

time to outline their legitimate concerns regarding the June examination. Their desire is to have a hybrid examination to reflect the hybrid learning experience they have had over recent years. These students have made the argument as strongly as any of us in this Chamber can.

I would like to quote from an email I received from one of the many students who have contacted me. It states:

We are not taught when we are absent from school, as none of the teachers stream classes online. We are just told to try and catch up on work we missed and we get the notes from other students. I was absent from school for a week. Thankfully, my PCR test was negative, but I was quite sick so I was unable to keep up with my school work and study plan for that week. My teachers messaged me what was covered in class, but I was not taught any of the material that was covered. I have tried my best to teach it to myself, but it is not as good as being taught by a teacher.

A recent survey undertaken by the ISSU was clear: students want the choice between the calculated grade and a written exam. These young students have faced huge disruption over the past two years, and alterations to the leaving certificate are not good enough. The issues need to be resolved pressingly, so I ask the Minister to support the motion.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I wish to start by acknowledging the campaigns and work done to date by all students throughout the State, especially in my own county of Wexford. From emails to petitions and student councils, I have been inspired by the passion and organisation displayed by Wexford pupils to ensure their voices and those of their peers are heard on this topic. I am glad to add my voice to that today. I also thank my colleague Deputy Ó Laoghaire for all his work on bringing this motion before us today.

The uncertainty of the past two years has been incredibly difficult for both teachers and students. The leaving certificate is a most stressful time in any young person's life without the added pressures and strains of a pandemic which has seen unprecedented pupil and teacher absences, delays, disruptions and stresses. I wonder, and indeed I have submitted a parliamentary question on the issue, if there has been any central logging and collecting of data on teacher absences due to Covid-19 over the past two years. Between illnesses and close contact restriction rules, we know students have had their curricular continuity broken and have faced disruption to class rotas and modular activities. Surely, the Minister agrees the 2022 leaving certificate students are going through the same difficulties as the students of 2020 and 2021. Despite this, the students of 2020 and 2021 were offered the choice of taking written exams or calculated grades. I put it to the Minister that a precedent has been set. Over two thirds of students this year want to be treated in the same manner as their predecessors before them.

There is also an economic downturn aspect to this issue, too. When schools were closed, some rural pupils faced the reality of having no Internet, tech devices and no place they could access them. These students may very well be our future doctors, teachers, nurses and innovators. They deserve to have a leaving certificate that takes into account the reality of trying to keep their studies up while struggling with a pandemic that disrupted every facet of their normal lives for almost two and a half years. This is why it is only right and fair students this year are given the choice and a definite decision is made between calculated grades and written exams. It is what students want. They have made their voices abundantly clear in respectful, passionate and inspiring ways. I urge all Deputies to support their calls by supporting this motion today.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I have been calling for a hybrid leaving certificate for this year's cohort of sixth year students since last July, when I raised the issue with the Minister in the Chamber and in the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, on the basis of what these students missed in fifth year. However, I must say I do not believe the Minister is the problem. In fact, I believe the Minister has always acted correctly when it comes to the leaving certificate. In 2020, when the Minister inherited the assessed grades system from her predecessor, the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, we in the Labour Party encouraged her to delete the school profiling element of leaving certificate 2020. The Minister did so, and did it for the right reasons. Quite a number of students got a fairer leaving certificate as a result. Last year, we appealed to the Minister to listen to the students because of what was happening 12 months ago. Again, the Minister did the right thing. When others were walking away from the table, the Minister was encouraged by the advocacy of the students who were at the heart of that campaign for a hybrid leaving certificate, found the solution and delivered it. I was the first to congratulate her on that occasion.

Now, the Minister has the opportunity to stand up in the face of those who sound like Shirley Valentine's husband, Joe, who said they always had steak on Thursday, when it comes to the leaving certificate. I do not understand why so many voices in education are so wedded and married to the traditional leaving certificate. What is so glorious about it? As the Minister is aware, we in the joint committee are listening to testimony after testimony about the leaving certificate as it currently stands, why it needs to be radically overhauled and reformed, how it is completely out of date, how it has not really changed since I did it or from the 1980s, when people older than me did it. We have heard how it is effectively the same, how it is far too much of a burden on young people at the end of their senior cycle and how it does not really reflect the abilities of young people as they go into the next stage of their lives. We have heard what they are asked to be assessed on and how they are assessed is completely out of date. All of these things are effectively being accepted by anybody who has an objective look at the leaving certificate. It is brutal and cruel. It may be transparent and fair, but it is very unfair for anybody who has ever had to go through it. I am quite sure that if you ask any Irish person whether they still have nightmares about their leaving certificate, they will say yes, and they will know that subject gave them nightmares. For me, it was biology.

Even now, with this national education conversation happening about the leaving certificate being unfair, I ask the Minister to imagine what it is like for students going through this unbelievably unfair and brutal process this senior cycle. Add into the mix the fact they are doing it in a pandemic, they missed a load of months in fifth year, they have effectively since October been facing issues with teachers and students being out because they are sick, and there is no guarantee that is going to change anywhere between now and June.

Others have mentioned the advocacy of the ISSU. I think the ISSU has been central to the change in the way education is being talked about. As the Minister knows, far too often in education, we have heard from everybody else except the students, young people or the children. We have heard from all these other people. We have heard those who have made these "we always have steak on Thursday" type remarks. They are married and wedded to the system they cannot move away from. They are rigid. They are the voices that rejected or were resistant to change in the junior certificate a number of years ago. They are the voices that are still resistant to change in the leaving certificate.

I must say, in this Chamber as a Labour Party politician, I am disappointed by the response

of the teacher unions to this debate. I think they could be more imaginative and responsive to the needs of their students. They advocated for schools not to open a number of weeks ago because they asserted the teacher personnel would not be available to keep the schools open. They must realise that if the teacher personnel was not there to keep schools open, then surely the teacher personnel cannot be there to properly empower, instruct and teach the students between now and June.

I know of all the arguments that have been put forward about the lack of data from the junior certificate, even though the majority of students actually have done a junior certificate. I know all these arguments about grade inflation. I understand the pressures the third level institutions are highlighting. However, if we are genuinely trying to put the student at the heart of the discussion, then we can always find solutions to these issues and stop problematising all the time. We can find solutions, as we did last year and in 2020. How many debates do we have in these Houses, in committee rooms, in this Chamber and in the Seanad, and in Irish society about the mental health of young people? We have exhaustive debates on the mental health of young people, the stresses on young people and the heavy burdens of living in modern society that are placed young people's shoulders. Despite this, when it comes to the leaving certificate, which is probably the most stressful thing they will do in their young lives, they are doing it in the middle of a pandemic when they are worried about their relations, older people and possibly themselves and the effects on their health that Covid could have. They have gone through all of this and missed out on in-school learning. They have had to do remote learning. If they are in a disadvantaged situation, it is doubly compounded. They now face a situation where they are unsure about their teachers being in. They have all this uncertainty about the leaving certificate. We will say in our response with regard to mental health that we have to go back to the traditional leaving certificate. It is like saying we always have steak on Thursdays. What I say to the voices in education is that they should try to broaden their perspective on what we are trying to achieve. This is not a quick fix. It is not necessarily an easy thing to do.

I am quite sure the Minister has her view on this but she wants to make a comprehensive announcement. There is not really any point in the Minister saying she believes in a hybrid model and then for all the questions to be asked of her and for the answers not to be readily available. I absolutely accept this. She needs to have the teacher unions on board if she is going to pursue a hybrid model. She needs to be able to answer questions on grade inflation. She needs to be able to answer questions on places in further education and third level education. I absolutely accept this.

We had an online petition and between students, teachers and parents we received almost 10,000 names. The Minister knows exactly what the ISSU has done. It has taken the time to survey its members and 68% of those due to sit the leaving certificate advocate for a hybrid model. The Minister knows what the Ombudsman for Children has said. The job of the Ombudsman for Children is to assess situations even-handedly and independently to see what is best for young people. Many leaving certificate students are technically still children. In this pandemic and time of national crisis it is his perspective that the best thing for students and for the system is a hybrid model. This is also the perspective of the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals. With all of this I accept it is not a quick and easy decision. I suggest it probably should have been made before now. If we had had this decision in November, and perhaps if the Minister had listened to me in July, we could be well along the way.

I repeat what I said at the beginning. The Minister has always made the right decision. Whatever criticisms I or the Opposition have of the Department or the Minister, and we have

had robust exchanges in the House, I have to say I will be steadfast in my view that the Minister has always done the right thing by leaving certificate students and junior certificate students. She inherited an unfair mess in 2020 and justifiably changed it. She changed lives in the way she approached it. Last year, when others were walking away from the table the Minister listened to those who were still there advocating for the student voice and she made the right change. She has the exact same opportunity this year to listen to those putting students at the heart of the discussion, who want what is best for them in this most anxious and uncertain time and who want to deliver to them what they need, which is a hybrid leaving certificate examination. I believe this is the decision the Minister wants to make. If she makes that decision, the Labour Party and other parties in the House will work with her as closely as we can to make it a success. We urge the Minister to conclude her deliberations as soon as she possibly can and make an announcement, if possible this week, that the leaving certificate students who have been advocating so brilliantly in writing emails to their local representatives will get what they have campaigned for, which is the fairest result of a hybrid leaving certificate in 2022.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I welcome the motion and the opportunity to debate an incredibly important subject relevant to the lives of students throughout the country. I have absolutely no issue with the substance of the motion and will fully support it. It has already been referenced by Deputy Ó Laoghaire in his contribution that a further debate we could be having on this is on the model of assessment that would be fair not only for 2022 but beyond it. A large part of my contribution will discuss this. To speak on the motion as it is, this year's students simply cannot sit a traditional form of leaving certificate. Even if, as is the hope, we will have returned to some degree of normality by late May and June, the opportunity for a normal leaving certificate experience has already passed this cohort of students. Therefore, we need to be adaptable and compassionate and, potentially, to be innovative. There is still time for us to do this.

It has already been said by every speaker, because every speaker has had the same level of engagement with leaving certificate students, that this year's students have missed a huge swathe of time because they or their teachers have been out of school. In some cases, and my sympathy really lies with them and it is an issue I have been raising since the very start of the pandemic, students have an underlying health condition or have a family member at home with an underlying health issue and simply have not been able to engage a constructive form of education and simply have not been catered for. There are a variety of reasons this year's cohort have been impacted and cannot have a traditional leaving certificate experience.

There have been obvious complications, not least the fact a percentage of this year's cohort did not sit a traditional junior certificate examination. There is a lack of data that will skew the hybrid model that was used last year. It means we might have to resort to historical records, which none of us want. All of this is a very real and relevant issue. It is certainly not insurmountable. It is absolutely not the fault of the leaving certificate students who were not able to experience a traditional junior certificate. They certainly should not be doubly punished as a consequence. Rather, the very fact the students did not sit a traditional junior certificate examination is further reason they should not sit a traditional leaving certificate examination.

I will say it again, and repeat the statement made by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals: we may need to get around the table to find solutions to this. No one is coming in here to say exactly how the model would work. I do not expect the Minister to do so during this debate. I do expect stakeholders to be around the table and to be innovative and solution oriented.

25 January 2022

I have said time and again, and I believe it to be so to the very essence of my being, the leaving certificate fails students every year. I want to make this very clear. There has been a creeping narrative in recent years, and I have particularly noticed it in recent months, that the leaving certificate examinations, the CAO system and the points race are pristine. We are told the leaving certificate is transparent and an upholder of equality and that students will be robbed of this system of equality if other methods of assessment are considered. I reject this completely.

Not to nitpick in any way, I refer to a contribution of the Minister from May 2020 prior to her becoming Minister for Education. The issue being discussed was what form of leaving certificate the first cohort of Covid students would have. She stated she profoundly regretted the plan B option of hosting the traditional leaving certificate did not come to pass. She stated that although it is flawed in a few respects, there is an essential fairness and equity at the core of the leaving certificate that is unmatched in any other type of exam. She stated it is independent and anonymous. This is the narrative we tell ourselves. We tell ourselves the leaving certificate rewards hard work and not privilege. This trickles down into individual narratives of success and failure and they become internalised. It is an everyday form of history being written by the victors. It is very important that those of us who have benefited from a traditional leaving certificate and those of us who have not hold up a mirror to ourselves to see why we value the system.

I often think of students who receive high points who never recognise the privileges that aided them in obtaining those results. These include the grinds they received, the fact they have parents who went to college and understand the system and the time and physical space they dedicate to doing well. I certainly do not begrudge anybody this. Likewise, there are students who face significant barriers, such as those whose parents left school early and never went to college, those who work part-time to try to help the household and those who do not have their own bedrooms or a quiet place to study. If these students fail to get the points they require they may think it is a personal failure and not a systemic failure. It is often easier to disguise privilege than to face oppression. The leaving certificate replicates privilege every year. Either the world opens up or it closes in for a student after the leaving certificate.

I believe the evidence year on year backs up that the leaving certificate is a postcode lottery. I will point to several Dublin postcodes. Dublin 6 is a wealthy part of the country. It has a 99% progression rate to university and college. In Dublin 17 the progression rate is 15%. I accept these figures are from 2014 but I guarantee the figure for Dublin 6 is exactly the same, with that for Dublin 17 increasing by a couple of percentage points, if even. Higher Education Authority data from 2017 found that students from affluent areas achieve an average of 446 leaving certificate points compared to an average of 368 leaving certificate points achieved by students in disadvantaged areas. That is based on the Pobal HP deprivation index. It also showed that 72% of students from affluent areas achieved over 400 points and 29% achieved over 500 points. In comparison, 37% of students from disadvantaged areas achieved over 400 points and 9% achieved over 500 points.

I was very lucky in my own educational experience and in many ways my politicisation came when I was afforded the opportunity to enter the Trinity access programmes which exist to bring students from underrepresented areas into universities into colleges. One of the questions Dr. Cliona Hannon, the director of those programmes, asked me during the session was whether it was simply the case that we keep the very intelligent people in Dublin 6, where 99% of people get to go to college, and the non-intelligent people in the community I grew up in, Dublin 1, where a mere 21% of people go on to college. It is simply not the case that we do so.

The leaving certificate is flawed or else it purposely replicates privilege. That is borne out every single year. One only has to look at *The Irish Times* feeder school list to see which schools get the best places in college. This happens by design.

We also know that the leaving certificate causes an enormous amount of stress. In 2016 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland reform the leaving certificate as the terminal exam was found to be imposing a disproportionate level of mental stress on young people. How did this committee find this out? It simply listened to the students and was compassionate in what it heard.

I also want to acknowledge that there is an alternative to the traditional leaving certificate that happens every year, which is the leaving certificate applied programme, which despite its benefits, including increased positive relationships between teachers and students and autonomy for students, is often ignored to the point that there is no pathway from the leaving certificate applied directly into our universities at the moment.

I had the privilege of teaching in those classes and I found students who were questioning, engaging and were very collaborative in their learning. It is not valued, despite the fact that they learn in a different way and it is no less important.

I have also heard a creeping narrative coming in that students who have not been afforded the opportunity to do the leaving certificate in the traditional form over the past year may be somehow less resilient because they did not have to take the hardship that is the almost “The Hunger Games”-like scenario of our leaving certificate. Let us be very clear. Every one of us who has been engaged by students over the past three years has encountered a cohort of students who are not only resilient but are holding themselves as accountable as Deputies and Ministers and in a way that I do not believe has happened previously. That has been a learning experience in and of its own, and one which we should not underestimate.

We are also told that not every student should go to college. The conversation then turns to stating that apprenticeships are equally valuable. I fully agree that is the case but it should not be the case that it is predominantly people from working-class areas who are expected to take up these apprenticeships. I fully believe that 99% of students in Dublin 6 going to college is too much. Perhaps we need more doctors from DEIS areas and more plumbers from more wealthy and affluent parts. If we are talking about more apprenticeships and saying that not everyone needs to go to college, let us also acknowledge that there are areas and communities where people have not had the same opportunities that people in other areas have had.

While I welcome the opportunity to speak on the leaving certificate today, and I fully support what this motion is trying to achieve, I also feel that it is important to look beyond it. I want to conclude by acknowledging that we need more than one type of educational model. Alternative forms of education are something that I raised with the Taoiseach earlier today. Very specifically, there is a report in the Minister’s Department on alternative education that started in 2018 and we need that work to be concluded and published because the leaving certificate is not the be-all and end-all.

I support the motion and thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Ó Laoghaire for bringing it forward. If the leaving certificate in its current form is proven to be unfit for purpose, I believe it will be unfit for purpose long into the future. It does not set up our students for progression on to university, does not develop them emotionally to deal with the stresses that come with being a

young person and does not provide pathways into work. We place importance on it because, culturally, we have always placed importance on it. Many people in positions of power and influence have benefited from it and those who have not, simply, have not had a voice at the table in order to call it out for what it is.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett is sharing with Deputy Barry.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire and Sinn Féin for introducing this motion on the leaving certificate. People Before Profit is happy to support it.

The very least we can insist upon in the particular situation of Covid-19 is that the voices of leaving certificate school students, as clearly expressed by them and their representative organisations, should be heard. They want a choice with a hybrid exam. They have been through enough and they need that clarity soon. They want the Minister to listen to their voice. We are happy to support that. As the Minister is aware, we wish to go further. We brought a motion to that effect to the Dáil last March, but the Government opposed it. I am going to repeat the argument a year on, as it is even more relevant now. We have tabled a short amendment which does not delete anything from the Sinn Féin motion but adds that we should have open access to higher and further education and apprenticeships, and that we should scrap the leaving certificate. We should get rid of it because it is a way of limiting access to higher and further education and it is irrational and unfair to do that. It forces people into a rat race for points which is extremely detrimental to the well-being of our young people. It is completely pointless. It is damaging and reinforces social inequality, is long past its sell-by date and should go. We are very clear about this.

School students who have led the way, by the way, on climate - we should bear that in mind - say that they want system change, not climate change but system change. System change is what we need in education and we need it now, not some time in the future with little bits here and there of tinkering around with the existing failed and unfair system. The unfairness of this has been magnified in the context of Covid-19 but it was always an unfair system.

Deputy Gannon has already referred to something that was in our motion last March. It is shocking that the Government can maintain that the leaving certificate is fair. It is ridiculous to say that unless one is not looking at the context of the leaving certificate. Some 99% of people from Ranelagh - I have nothing against the people of Ranelagh - go to university but 15% or 16% of people from working-class areas do so. Is that fair? It is grossly unfair and something has to be done about it. If one does not start by recognising that there is a problem, quite frankly one is defending the indefensible. I am delighted that the ASTI has now endorsed the view that open access is needed. We should listen to it, even though I do not agree with everything the teachers' unions have said on this issue, because it is absolutely right in saying that we need open access. That is about responding to the pandemic. We have gone on and on about where there is going to be a new normal. That is the expression. We are going to learn from Covid-19 but what we are actually trying to do is to drag ourselves back to the stuff before Covid-19 and to return to the *status quo*. We do not need that *status quo* when it comes to the leaving certificate; we need a revolution in education. We need the imagination to remember that once upon a time people thought it was fair and reasonable to limit access to second level education. We think that would be utterly preposterous now, but once upon a time that is the way it was looked at. Once upon a time significant numbers of people did not imagine that they would ever get past primary education. Now, equally, we think that is preposterous.

Why on earth would we ration and have a gatekeeping exercise for access to further and higher education? When we brought this motion forward last year, the Tánaiste said it was a nice idea but was totally impractical and asked where we would get the buildings. If one walks down Aungier Street, one will see a third level institution that has been sitting empty for the past two to three years. It is outrageous. If one goes along by the Merrion Gates, one can look at the Seamark Building in which a college could be fitted. It has been sitting empty for ten years. There are multiple buildings like that around the country. There is no problem with the physical infrastructure if we are serious about this.

The other comment I love is that everyone will want to be a doctor. This is the sort of nonsense that is wheeled out. We are defending a situation whereby in order to do the thing one would like to do, one has to be subjected to a regime of studying many things that one does not want to do, in order to get to the thing that one does want to do.

7 o'clock

Is it even the thing the student wants to do, given it is just a hierarchy of points to get into particular courses? Surely it is a little more logical to let people do the thing they really want and are enthusiastic to do in third level. Would that not be imaginative? Imagine the type of creative potential that could be unleashed if people were given the opportunity to do the things they are really keen to do. I believe that might produce better graduates. It might contribute better to our society to unleash the creative potential of the many people whom the system at present deters or to whom it denies access to education and the things they want to do.

It is entirely practical. The gap between the number of higher education places and the number of applicants is about 25,000. That gap can be filled. There are many part-time academic staff who would love a full-time job but who are on crappy part-time contracts or are paid by the hour. We have the people who could do the teaching and, believe me, we have buildings in which we could put the students. We just need the imagination of the Government to take this leap, and now is the time to take it.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last week, 500 school students in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Waterford, Wexford and Roscommon held a joint protest to demand that there be no traditional leaving certificate examination this year. I understand students are discussing the possibility of protests on a bigger scale. I sincerely hope such protests will not prove necessary. However, if the Minister and the Government choose not to listen to students and decide instead to drive forward with the traditional leaving certificate examination, there is a real possibility of large student protests to bring the Government to its senses. The Taoiseach told the Dáil today that students will have certainty within a week. If the Government fails to meet this deadline, sizeable student protests will also be a possibility.

These students have lost massive amounts of classroom time due to Covid-19. This is not a normal year and there can be no normal leaving certificate examination. Last week, the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, issued a public statement calling for plans for a traditional leaving certificate examination to be abandoned. This statement deserved more attention than it received. It is not acceptable for the Minister to go against the wishes of 68% of leaving certificate students and the wishes of the Ombudsman for Children when he is addressing an issue affecting 60,000 young people. I warmly welcome the decision of the ASTI's central executive council last Saturday to pass a resolution stating the ASTI formally proposes open access to third level education as the only fair and equitable alternative to the leaving

certificate examination of 2022.

Our society is crying out for more nurses, teachers, doctors and apprentices. Rather than forcing school students to compete against each for limited college places, the State should be creating more such places. Rather than having to throw money at employment agencies to scour the world for workers, the State should be training them here at third level. The State should invest heavily in third level education and provide a college place for all who want one. I would love to see the Teachers' Union of Ireland adopting a pro-open access stance as well, and to see both teachers' unions join forces with the school students' union to fight for college places for all. The leaving certificate represents the past. A college place for all on the basis of open access represents the future.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The leaving certificate year of 2022 did not have a normal two-year preparation for the leaving certificate examination. As a result, it is not fair to ask the students to sit a normal leaving certificate examination. The leaving certificate examination is specifically designed to allow for two years of preparation for it, and this obviously did not happen. Many students have lost at least three months of their face-to-face teaching and many teachers have been absent for significant periods of time during the period when the schools were open as well. Teachers will tell us that much of their core content is delivered in fifth year. Traditionally, very little new content is done in sixth year in the period after Christmas. Truth be told, many classes around the country at present still have new content to deal with in the months ahead.

The last two years have been a very difficult period for students. However, it has been different for different students. Some students have had a far harder experience than others. The technology disadvantage students have in respect of broadband access hurt many students in particular parts of the country. Many students, thankfully, come from backgrounds or households with high educational motivation. Those students are very lucky. When they did not have a teacher in front of them to motivate them, guide them or put pressure on them to do the right thing with regard to keeping up with their studies, they had a parent at home who was able to fulfil that role. Many of these students will do well as a result. However, for the students who do not have a background of high educational motivation, the loss of the teacher in the face-to-face, in-person setting was significant. It is a loss that will not be made up in the intervening time. It is very important to recognise some students will be significantly disadvantaged in the traditional leaving certificate examination setting if we continue with that.

I heard the Government mention that the junior certificate examination has not been sat by about 20% of students. As a result, there is less concrete guidance for teachers in predicting grades for students. However, the truth is students can change dramatically in the period between being a junior certificate student and a leaving certificate student. Many boys, especially, do much of their maturing in the period after the junior certificate examination and have a completely different set of emotional skills, maturity levels and circumstances when doing the leaving certificate. Using the junior certificate to judge the examinations of an individual will not be the right way for many to decide upon a predictive grade. To be honest, it is important to take into consideration that we need to make a decision on a student's ability, attitudes and focus now. In what other walk of life would we make a life-changing decision for a person on the basis of something the person did three years ago?

There is no doubt there are problems. There is significant grade inflation happening within the current system. The number of students achieving six H1 grades in the leaving certificate

examination increased almost fivefold between 2019 and 2021. That is an incredible level of grade inflation. Grade inflation does not help anybody. It may well be the case the leaving certificate grades of the past couple of years will be trusted less by future employers because of the grade inflation. It may devalue those results in the eyes of employers. We must ensure the grades in the coming year are not outliers historically in terms of previous years' grades. I have also heard people in the university system say they felt that, due to grade inflation and the lack of examinations and practicals, the intake of first year students was not as well prepared for university last year. That is a problem as well. The lack of practical examinations and serious examinations weakens a student's ability to deal with the challenges of university. In Aontú we believe all practical elements of the courses should be completed. Most courses have a practical element so we must ensure that happens.

Finally, I give credit to the Minister for making sure the education system started in January after Christmas. When a lot of the world was looking for schools to be put on vacation for another two weeks, the Minister kept the schools open from the start of January. Maith thú.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Everyone accepts we cannot have the traditional leaving certificate examination we had in 2019 and in previous years. However, it is also important students quickly get absolute clarity on the format of this year's leaving certificate examination. They acknowledge the provisions that have been made in the form of more choice in the examination papers. They do not feel it is enough to reflect the additional challenges they face as a result of Covid-19, which they experienced throughout their senior cycle. It is important that this is reflected in an alternative leaving certificate presented to students.

I have received correspondence from St. Cuan's College in Castleblakeney, which points out that over the past two years there has been significant disruption from Covid-19. The students point out they have missed important in-class learning and are continuing to miss valuable class time due to contracting the virus, waiting for PCR tests and having to isolate themselves due to being close contacts. It is not just students but also the teachers who have missed out, which affects in-class interaction. In that particular school, which is a small, rural secondary school in east Galway, there were multiple positive cases last November and the school had to move to teaching the leaving certificate class online as a result. That is over and above some of the experiences in other schools.

Another student who wrote to me points out she is now rushing against the clock to complete projects and portfolios, as well as finishing coursework assigned for sitting this year's leaving certificate. That is as well as trying to prepare for the mock exams.

The Minister knows that last May I raised concerns about the class of 2022 with her on the floor of the House. I pointed out that approximately a fifth of the students had not sat a junior certificate exam and that this should be taken into account with the provisions to be put in place for an alternative leaving certificate this year. In November, I raised the matter again with the Taoiseach on the floor of the House, indicating that leaving certificate students contacted me at that time because they felt they were completely forgotten about by the Department of Education and the true impact of Covid-19 was not being recognised. That was last November, never mind the disruption we saw in December and January. At that point students were saying they were incredibly behind and stressed out as a result of the impact of Covid-19.

Students are now facing into oral, practical and mock exams so they need absolute clarity quickly on this. I accept that last week the Taoiseach indicated here that there may be chal-

lenges for the third year in a row if a predicted grades process has an impact on capacity within the third level system. That was reflected at the weekend when Mr. Jim Miley, director of the Irish Universities Association, again flagged issues with the hybrid system. None of us wants to see a position where students must get into college based on a system of random selection.

I accept there are challenges from grade inflation and a fivefold increase in the number of H1s since 2019 highlights problems with the existing system. There is a discrepancy in that if a student is sitting seven exams and is competing with another student sitting three exams and taking predicted grades in the other four subjects because the teacher has indicated the grade that will be achieved, it leaves that student at a distinct disadvantage. I accept we cannot have the leaving certificate we had last year. We need an alternative mechanism, however, and surely we can work with some imagination to provide a fair and balanced system for the students this year.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: On behalf of the many students in Kerry who have my phone reddened, I ask that they be given a choice this year. In 2020, I asked the then Minister, Deputy Joe McHugh, the very same question and he responded. I believe I was the first to ask that students be given a choice. The Covid-19 virus is not yet finished and teachers and pupils could miss more time. This set of students missed three months last year and they also missed time in the autumn because teachers and pupils were missing.

I ask the Minister to please give these students a choice this year because they have been through a tough time. We should remember that these students did not sit the junior certificate exam. They must be given a choice now to either use a predicted grades system or sit an exam because they have been through such a tough time. They need that chance so the Minister should please give that to them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am also pleading with the Minister and her departmental officials on this. I know she has had a tough time and a baptism of fire. I wish her well in the post and I support her. These students, however, had no junior certificate and no proper schooling for the previous two years. They have had an awful time because they could not have fun or enjoy themselves. This is so important and their future careers depend on this.

The predicted grades system operated last year and we beg the Minister to operate it again this year. Those pupils who get high marks must be examined to tidy this up but we need clarity now. The entire school community, from management to parent councils and teachers, needs to be supported and get a clear roadmap of where they are going. Above all, students, parents and families are pleading with the Minister to understand this. She is a múinteoir herself and should understand it. It is not an easy role and although it has never been easy, teachers have had a torrid time throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

We in the Rural Independent Groups are pleading with the Minister because we have been listening to mothers, fathers, guardians and students. We have received emails from sixth year students that are heart-rending but they are so eloquent and well put together. I have great hope for the future. Ní neart go cur le chéile. Please look after them.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We talk about going back to a normal leaving certificate exam this year but what is normal? We can look at the current cohort of leaving certificate pupils but for the past three years there has not been any kind of normal for them. Covid-19 affected three years of their education and now they are expected to go back to "normal". What

is normal for them? They have never sat a State exam and they did not get to do their junior certificate exams because of Covid-19. They have been tutored on Zoom if they were lucky enough to have broadband and had the finances to purchase a laptop. If there were two or three children in the house, they may have had to share a laptop. What was going on in their homes? Was it a good learning environment in which to study? How can anybody talk about “normal”?

We also had absentees resulting from Covid-19 in both the student and teacher cohorts. There was a grave shortage of substitute teachers. How is that normal? This cohort of students have a right to a hybrid model because there has been nothing normal about their past three academic years.

I am the father of a leaving certificate student. I have seen first-hand what this means. He and his student colleagues even go to after-school services until 9 p.m. to try to catch up. He has never sat a State exam. These students are trying day and night to catch up and different teachers do not know what they have already learned. The Government argues that this is normal but it is not normal. The normal course of action would be to give these students the option of a hybrid approach or the choice of either a predicted grade or sitting the exam. It is the right thing to do. For my child, his friends and all the other students around the country, the Minister must be responsible and make this normal for them this year.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is undeniable that the 2022 leaving certificate exam cohort have faced multiple years of disrupted education. This includes lost tuition time, adverse classroom environments and a burden on their mental health that cannot be accurately measured. The combination of these factors has undoubtedly affected the education and well-being of these students in ways we cannot fathom. Therefore, it may come as little surprise that the Irish leaving certificate students are calling for a change in direction and have pointed to a hybrid model as the new way forward.

The Minister for Education cannot ignore the collective voices of student representative bodies, including the ISSU, and she must act without delay to give all these students the clarity they deserve. My office is inundated with emails from students, mostly looking for clarity. The education system cannot continue to be in wait-and-see mode. The calls for the delivery of a hybrid leaving certificate must be acted on by the Minister for Education and the Government. Where does the Government stand on this issue? Is the Minister seeking a return to the traditional exams? Will steps be taken to make further adjustments to the exams by having fewer questions, or by placing a greater weight on students’ projects, and so on?

The Taoiseach said two weeks ago that the possibility of a hybrid leaving certificate had not yet been ruled out, and that a decision would be made soon by the Government. How long will the wait go on for students, teachers and parents? Many parents and students are not at all happy with the Government for the current situation. It is a wait-and-see game but it is not good enough. There must be action today, and no later than today.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this very important motion before the Dáil to allow us to discuss this matter. I thank very much the students in County Kerry. I thank their parents, their teachers, the students’ unions and the teachers’ unions who, through no fault of their own, have had to endure a horrendous two years.

Following on from the meeting last week, which was all about getting clarity for everybody, I ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to try to deal with this as a matter of urgency. Our students

have had a horrendous time. They have been very disadvantaged during the whole Covid situation, again which was no fault or making of theirs. We are trying to give them an assurance that we will put in place a system that is most beneficial to them, and which would give them the greatest advantage of being the best that they can be, despite the upset in the tutorial programme and despite everything that has happened. These are our young people and we want them to have the best in life that they can have. We want them to achieve the best result they can get. The Minister comes from County Kerry and I know that she has nothing in her heart and soul only to take care of the students, but I ask that the Minister would come out please to clarify it and give us the clarity that we need. The teachers, the parents of the students and students themselves need clarity. They are the most important people of all. Any one of us here tonight does not matter. It is for the students. Their results mean so much to them. We want them to do the best that they can be for themselves.

Deputy Carol Nolan: As others have, I appeal to the Minister, Deputy Foley, to ensure that a flexible approach is adopted for our leaving certificate students who will have been so disadvantaged and disrupted over three years. An approach that involves ongoing assessment, accredited grades and a written exam has a role to play in this process. We must listen to the student voice. We have all received correspondence from the ISSU, which tells us quite clearly, on the basis of a report it carried out, that the student voice is very clear and it is obvious that the students want a hybrid model. The report refers to the stress, anxiety, uncertainty and fear of students. We are hearing the voices of students themselves and we certainly must act on what they are telling us. As a former teacher who worked with disadvantaged pupils quite a bit, I feel that the fairest way forward, to ensure no student is disadvantaged, is to make sure a flexible model is put in place for leaving certificate students. We must bear in mind they will have had three years of disruption. I have received direct reports from students who have told me that they are cold in classrooms in prefabs. This is also having a bearing on their concentration levels and everything else. I feel that we must be fair with them. As the Irish saying goes, “mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí”. Listening to the student voice is paramount in this whole debate. I am aware that the Minister is doing her best with this difficult situation but I call on her and appeal to her to do her best and take on board the students’ voices. The majority of students, 85%, are telling us in the report carried out by the ISSU that they want a hybrid model.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, which allows us to discuss and debate an extremely important issue, which is the format of the 2022 leaving certificate examination. As a former maths teacher at Mercy College Sligo, and as somebody who corrected State exams for more than 15 years, I am not an expert but I do have some insight. We are having this debate for very valid reasons, because of the very significant disruption for all leaving certificate students over the past two years. Some students suffered more than others, and for different reasons such as access to the Internet; the ability of 15- and 16-year-olds to manage self-learning and discipline their study; their space at home; their levels of maturity; and the fact that many of the students and teachers caught Covid or were close contacts who had to isolate for significant periods of school time. There is no uniformity here. One student might have had less disruption, while another would have had very significant disruption to their education and learning. Some students had to limit their time at school because of their underlying conditions, while others might have been living with vulnerable people. Some students might have had to take on certain extra responsibilities in the home that were Covid related. The students may have suffered long Covid. There is a very long list of valid reasons for students seeking a hybrid leaving certificate.

I listened carefully to what the Minister, Deputy Foley, said, and I am happy to accept that the Government significantly supported schools. I fully agree with the Minister's assertion that teachers, principals and boards of management put the education and well-being of their students first, and ensured that the system kept working despite very significant challenges and some very scary days. I listened to what the Minister said, and while I appreciate that various adjustments are being made to the leaving certificate exam for 2022, I am gravely concerned that they will not be enough, and that the adjustments the Minister referred to will, unfortunately, not be sufficient to take account of the different experiences of Covid disruption that different students had. For example, the Minister referred to greater choice. That is not enough. It could easily happen, and will happen for a percentage of students, that they must answer three out of six questions. They may have only covered three of the questions. This gives them no choice. Other students might be lucky enough to have covered five out of the six, which gives them a real choice. The Minister and I both know that this can happen by chance. It can happen that a student was absent in a particular week. It can happen because some parents can afford grinds to cover the gaps in the course. It can happen because some students are capable of self-learning. If it happens, and it will happen again and again, then some students will be disadvantaged and, despite the Minister's very best efforts, they will lose out.

The Minister also spoke about the rearranging the exam timetables, and holding oral exams during holiday time and out of school time. Many students use their Easter break for revision, to catch up, or indeed for a short break. All of that time will be eaten into and students will find their backs against the wall if they must sit oral exams then. In many ways, I believe that holding oral exams out of school time is a retrograde step because it puts students under further pressure, and this is the last thing that I want or that the Minister wants.

The Minister also said that she would increase the supply of teachers and substitutes, and she has. This is good, but we all know that this is a stopgap and that, in general, retaining one's own teacher is what makes the difference.

There will be time for a debate on the future of the leaving certificate when we have evaluated the current system and properly assessed the alternatives. We need to do that and we need to do it quickly but tonight we have an immediate and pressing issue to deal with. As a former teacher, as someone who loved her job, and as someone who corrected exams, I strongly support maintaining the integrity of the exam system we are operating. We could change the system but while we are using it we must maintain its integrity. Do not forget a traditional leaving certificate examination has its limitations. It is not always about the grades students receive on their exam papers, because they are often readjusted to conform with results in previous years. We know that the bell curve reigns supreme when it comes to the allocation of grades.

I will not be prescriptive about the type of hybrid leaving certificate we have. While not perfect, it will give greater certainty and clarity to students, and help our students and teachers to do what the Taoiseach asked all of us to do, that is, live with Covid.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I kept an open mind on this because I am no expert. I listened to the students and academics from third level institutions. The more I listened to them, the more I came down on the side of the students. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion forward because it is important that we hear some of the opinions we are hearing.

Tomorrow we will have statements on mental health among the youth. That is significant. Mental Health Reform represents 76 organisations. It has taken the trouble to write to all of us

ahead of tomorrow's debate to point out the impact on many areas of society affected by mental health. It has provided about ten bullet points, one of which is the detrimental impact of Covid on the lives of children in Ireland. I do not need to tell the Minister that; she is more than aware of it. It is interesting that we will have that debate tomorrow and we are considering this motion today.

Sinn Féin has been very reasonable. It is a moderate motion. After noting and recognising certain matters, it simply calls on the Minister to place the voice of students at the centre of the debate on the leaving certificate. That is not an unreasonable call by Sinn Féin, and I have no hesitation in supporting the motion in order to secure a choice for leaving certificate students in 2022 between calculated grades and written examinations, and for the Minister to take decisive action. Decisive action is very important, given what young people are facing.

All of the facts have been set out. I will not go through all of them again, but some of them jump out. Some 36,159 students have contracted Covid since schools opened in 2020 and an incalculable number of students have been identified as close contacts. I thank students and the ISSU for their approach. We are always talking about science and basing things on evidence. The ISSU went to the trouble of doing research and finding out people's opinions. Not alone that, it did so under pressure and set out the information for us in a very clear way. The returns on that piece of research are staggering. It showed that 67.81% of senior cycle students preferred a hybrid model.

Students are not just dealing with the stress of the leaving certificate, which every speaker has said. None of us would like to go back and do the leaving certificate, which tells a tale in itself. Outside of Covid, we need a proper debate on the best way to assess students instead of an examination that causes such stress. Students have pointed out that the stress of the leaving certificate while going through a global pandemic has impacted on education, in terms of the toll on their mental health. Students noted the negative impact on their mental health and so on.

The report from the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science released in January 2021 refers to the impact of Covid-19 on primary and secondary education and made a number of recommendations. It set out some facts, such as trauma and mood disorders like depression being identified as significant factors leading to early school leaving. Ireland does not provide in-school emotional counselling, therapeutic supports and so on. The report highlighted the deficiencies in the system.

I listened to some third level commentators justify not having a hybrid system this year by stating that certain students would get a mark that they do not deserve and brighter students who should have received higher marks would be disadvantaged. I thought that was a very weak argument and totally ignored how unbalanced and unequal the leaving certificate is in terms of those who can get private tuition, grinds and so on for their children. What about that imbalance? Perhaps those students are not able for third level courses without all of the extra backup they have. That was not taken into account by the academics who spoke. Having kept an open mind, at this point I am coming down in favour of the students. I thank Sinn Féin.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): On behalf of the Government, I welcome the opportunity to close what has been a very insightful and informative debate on this very important matter. The many contributions made during the debate will feed into the Department's continuing engagement with members of the advisory group on State examinations in planning for these examinations this year. It is important to hear

and understand all voices and perspectives in determining the most appropriate approach for the examinations, and an approach that is fair and equitable.

I agree with the view expressed by a number of Deputies that it is important to provide clarity on the position for students as soon as possible in order to enable them to focus on their preparations. I would also like to echo the sentiments expressed earlier by the Minister, Deputy Foley, who applauded the ongoing work of all of those working in schools to support their students during what have been and continue to be very difficult circumstances. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable role played by parents, guardians and families in continuing to support students in preparing for State examinations. I have a son doing the leaving certificate this year and, like all parents, I want to support him as much as I can.

The Minister outlined the various adjustments and arrangements that have been announced since August 2021 regarding State examinations in 2022, in light of the ongoing impact of Covid on the learning experience of students preparing for exams. These arrangements were announced following engagement with the advisory group on planning for State examinations.

More broadly, I particularly welcome the range of other measures put in place to enhance teaching and learning in our schools, including those measures announced to address the greater impacts on the education of some students and the learning loss suffered by them. These include the opportunity provided to primary and post-primary schools to offer summer provision at a cost of €40 million, in addition to the €10 million allocated to a supplementary education programme aimed at students with special educational needs.

I also welcome the provision of up to €52 million in extra teaching hours made by the Department for the Covid-19 learning and support scheme, CLASS. Under the scheme, a block of additional teaching hours is provided to each recognised school from which schools can provide additional teaching support for the pupils and students who have expressed difficulties in settling back into school and engaging with learning.

Students at post-primary level who have additional needs may have special arrangements made for them while sitting State examinations such as the leaving and junior certificate. Candidates with disabilities such as, for example, visual impairments, learning difficulties, motor and mobility impairments and so on can apply, through their schools, for the scheme of reasonable accommodation at certificate examinations, RACE. The purpose of that scheme is to allow candidates who have special educational needs that interfere with their capacity to engage with the standard examination arrangements to demonstrate what they know and can do without compromising the integrity of the assessment. Each school also has the authority to make special provisions for students with special needs during State examinations on the basis of what is best for them and in consultation with the students' families. The supports that have been made available to assist students in managing well-being, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety developed by the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, in the Department are also very welcome.

The Minister outlined the considered adjustments and amendments made to date regarding State examinations in 2022. She stated that she, the Government, her Department, the State Examinations Commission and the advisory group on planning for State examinations are working to bring clarity for all students as soon as possible regarding the leaving certificate in 2022.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for staying for the entirety

of the debate. I commend Deputy Ó Laoghaire on bringing the motion to the House and on being a voice for leaving certificate students in the House and beyond over the past number of weeks. One of the key qualities attributed to the leaving certificate by its advocates is the fact that it is a great leveller and there is equity at its heart. Of course, that is not entirely true. Money plays too much of a role in determining how well some people do in the leaving certificate. Notwithstanding that, there is some merit in having everybody sit the same exam in an anonymous fashion on the same day. However, this year we cannot say with any real authority that there has been equity.

The lockdowns have affected different people differently. Different schools were under restrictions at different times. Different people had different availability to broadband and other resources. Different people had very different home lives for those periods when they could not be at school. In other words, there have been too many different lived realities for us, as a House, not to reflect those different realities in the decisions that are made. Tonight, Sinn Féin is effectively asking the Oireachtas to place the voice of students at the heart of the debate on the future of the leaving certificate this year, to secure a choice for leaving certificate students between calculated grades and written examinations, and particularly to ensure that decisive and urgent action is taken to bring clarity to these matters.

On the other hand, the Minister's amendment before us is essentially saying that this House should not have a voice or an opinion at all and we should just leave it to the Minister to make a decision at some undefined point in the future. That is not good enough. If the House were to support the Minister's amendment, we would be doing a disservice to all those students from across the country who have contacted us pleading for us to recognise that this is not a year like any other. Of course, we need to have a wider debate on the future of the leaving certificate, but right now we need the Minister to provide the certainty and clarity our students have been crying out for. I am asking her to make that call tonight.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There is an uncomfortable sense of *déjà vu* in this debate. We had these conversations last year and those conversations have taken place repeatedly across households the length and breadth of the country. When we finally got to the hybrid model last year, those who campaigned for it and those who at times pleaded for it were glad that it was put in place. I ask the Minister to do the same again this year. We are now in early 2022 and we are weeks away from mock exams. However, we are still stuck in a similar vortex of confusion and a lack of clarity, as much in this House as those students, teachers, parents and other interested parties outside this House are. There have been several opportunities to reassure and to provide that clarity, but the Government has failed to do so. It is imperative that it is provided as soon as possible.

Earlier the Minister said, "A further meeting of the advisory group will be held and I am working towards a decision on the State examinations in 2022 being made as soon as is reasonably practicable." She does not say when, which is simply not good enough. This decision needs to be made as a matter of urgency. As one student put it to me today, the Minister needs to stop trying to convince them that black is white. We know the senior cycle is a two-year cycle and most pupils have been negatively impacted by Covid. That may have been students, themselves, being unwell or being a close contact and having to restrict their movements and unable to go to school. That was after schools had actually reopened. A considerable amount of in-person teaching time has been missed. It is critical that the Government listens to our students and their representative body which held a poll showing that two out of three of students want a hybrid model again this year. The precedent has been set. The structures are there, but

we are hearing excuses. Our leaving certificate students deserve so much better than that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I agree with the Minister in applauding the extraordinary work of so many school staff, particularly in the challenging period since Christmas. I do not agree with her on the amendment. As Deputy Carthy outlined, it effectively commits this House to nothing at all. Therefore, we will be pressing our motion.

I am not sure if the people who do not have a child in school or are not in regular contact with schools understand the level of disruption that has been caused. Since they came back, almost half of students missed one to three classes on average a day with 9% missing four to five classes a day. Nobody is to blame for teacher absences but it is the reality we are dealing with. Of those who missed a class because of teacher absences, 54% of students only had substitutes for some classes and 17.5% had no substitute cover for any of those classes that they missed. I will give the example of one student and this is far from an isolated incident. One student who spoke to me said that on their third day back to school, of the seven scheduled classes, they had only two classes and there was no cover for the other five classes, just supervision. That is the scale of disruption we are dealing with and shows how hard it is to cover the course.

There is no doubt that there is a challenge with grade inflation. However, if the hybrid model is not put in place, this year's students will be competing with last year's students who deferred. If the points are significantly lower, they will have quite a challenging set of circumstances. We need to look to next year and support them. We need to work on a longer-term strategy on that when we go for the hybrid model if, as I hope, we do this year. We undoubtedly need to plan for that. We create a challenging set of circumstances for this year's students if we do not adopt the hybrid model.

Regarding standardisation, as the Minister will be aware from what we said two years ago, we do not agree with the use of historical school data. Many options are available. Obviously, it needs to be done in consultation with stakeholders to produce a form of standardisation which we all accept is necessary. That could be using averages of a class group, a cohort as a whole or by using additional samples such as in the assessment tool that was used in the North. There are options that can be used to achieve standardisation. We should not be basing it on school historical data, which we know disadvantages pupils in schools which previously had lower results, very often in working-class areas or areas of high disadvantage.

It is important not to forget about the junior certificate students. They are also struggling with uncertainty. It is important that we ease the pressure and stress on them by offering them additional choice within exam papers.

What is needed is obvious. First, we need a decision. It has become very difficult for leaving certificate students to know what they are preparing for. What are they working towards? What will the coming momentous months look like for them? We need a decision as soon as possible. I have become even more certain as I listened to the contributions from various Deputies across the House. It is apparent that the circumstances in which these leaving certificate students are undertaking the senior cycle means that there is a clear requirement for a hybrid model.

It is worth recognising that students are not a bit flippant about this. Last year, some people were calling for the cancellation of the exams. It was necessary the previous year but it was not necessary last year. I did not support that call and students did not support that call because

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many of them wanted to sit the exam. They wanted the opportunity to test themselves. In every subject, a majority sat the exams. It was up to 70% in the English paper. Students want that opportunity, but they need the fail-safe because while there are some subjects they have fully covered and want to sit the exam, they know they are way behind in other subjects and they are just not able to cover the course. As different teachers cover the course in different ways, additional choice on papers will not quite cut it. The circumstances of each school and each student will be different in that regard.

We know this can be done. It was delivered last year. People last year said it was unrealistic. However, it was realistic. It was delivered. It happened. Credit is due to the Minister, the Department and most of all the teachers, staff and students for that. There is no reason it cannot be done this year and the only question is whether it is warranted. I believe that question is clearly answered. It is absolutely warranted. I urge the Minister to take the same approach and give the students the choice. She should give the students that clarity, put this issue to rest and provide them with reassurance.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 26 January 2022.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Rental Sector

62. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the action he plans to take to slow down the disorderly exit of accidental and semi-professional landlords from the private rented sector and its impact on rising levels of homelessness. [3576/22]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister knows, since 2017 there has been a net loss of 20,000 rental tenancies from the private rental sector. That equates to about 7,000 a year up to 2020. We do not have data from the Residential Tenancies Board for last year but the expectation is that the rate will continue. Given this loss of rental properties is one of the many factors contributing to the crisis in the private rental sector and is driving the recent upsurge in homelessness, will the Minister outline his plan to stop this disorderly exit of accidental and semi-professional landlords from the market?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Deputy has rightly highlighted the ongoing issue of the exiting of many mom-and-pop landlords from the housing market. It is not a recent event but has continued for the past number of years. As he will know, the property rights of owners are protected under the Constitution and landlords need to be in a position to manage their property to suit their financial needs as they change with their particular life circumstances. Covid-19 has badly affected some landlords, and financial pressures may have forced them to sell a rental property. Some of the evidence we have indicates that this is the case, particularly with the rising values of house prices.

The exiting of landlords from the private rental sector is a consequence of multiple factors. A changing regulatory environment, which has been necessary to ensure a fair and effective residential rental sector that balances tenants' rights and landlords' responsibilities, has resulted in a challenging compliance framework for some. Covid-related protections were also necessary but they may have contributed to the decision of some to leave the sector. In other cases, the recent rise in house prices has enabled some landlords to take the opportunity to exit negative equity. As a consequence, many have taken the opportunity to unwind their investment.

The most effective way to assist renters in the medium to long term is to increase supply and accelerate delivery of housing for the private and social rental sectors. Our housing plan, *Housing for All*, sets out the Government's plan to increase supply and to deliver an average of 33,000 homes per year over the next decade. As the Deputy will know, the plan also brought forward the introduction of a new cost-rental sector, which we intend to expand this year and into the next and beyond, the legislative framework for which was set out in the *Affordable Housing Act*. I will address a couple of other issues in a supplementary response.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: None of what the Minister said addressed the core question I asked. What is the plan to deal with the disorderly exit of semi-professional and accidental landlords from the market, something that has been in train for three years and will more than likely continue for four years? The argument that supply will tackle the problem simply does not add up. The Government's housing plan promises 6,500 new private rental homes, a target that will probably be reached around 2025 or 2026. However, we are losing 7,000 units a year. Therefore, it would take the Government three years to catch up the current loss and it would still be behind. If the Government reaches these targets, and the loss of properties to the market continues, the situation will continue to get worse. Sherry FitzGerald made it clear today that there are three times more exits from the private rental sector than there are entries to it. There are a range of strategies and actions that I and others have been urging the Minister to take but, like his predecessor, he has ignored them. What specifically will he do to slow the exit of these landlords from the private rental sector and tackle rising levels of family homelessness?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I struggle to find the range of measures the Deputy says he has proposed to assist landlords. In the 12-page document, which includes five pages of pictures, that the Deputy submitted on *Housing for All* the only mention of landlords is his proposal to commission the Housing Agency to do a report. The only other measure the Deputy has ever brought forward in relation to landlords was in his pre-budget submission. Sinn Féin wanted to impose a €400 tax on the mom-and-pop landlords, yet the Deputy now bemoans their loss to the sector. Let us be straight with people. The changes the Government bring forward must be calibrated to balance the rights of the property owner and the tenant. Throwaway comments and the demonisation of mom-and-pop landlords that the Deputy and others have engaged in have an effect. Proposals he has brought forward from time to time on extended three-year rent freezes and other measures scare the market. We need to build supply and cost-rental housing. I repeat to the Deputy that the only measure he suggested is for a report to be done on what is happening. The only other real measure he has proposed for landlords is to add a €400 tax on top of all the other bills they have.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: What that shows is that the Minister has no plan and landlords will continue to sell up.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have stated a fact though.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I have repeatedly called for four key policies. The Minister knows them but I will repeat them again. The first is to end the prohibition on local authorities buying properties with housing assistance payment, HAP, or rental accommodation scheme, RAS, tenants *in situ* when the landlord is selling. Many landlords who are leaving the market would be delighted for the local authority to purchase the property but the Government will not allow local authorities to purchase them with a sitting tenant. That is driving family homelessness and making the situation worse.

The second key policy is to allow buy-to-let landlords who availed of tax reliefs from the State at an earlier stage to sell the tenant with the tenant *in situ*. They got a break from the State and the return should be to sell to other landlords. Third, we have repeatedly called for tax reform for landlords. It is not acceptable that real estate investment trusts and large institutional landlords pay no tax, whereas many accidental and semi-permanent landlords pay very high rates.

We have not called for the commission of a report. What we have called for is much more specific. We want the Residential Tenancies Board and the Housing Agency to bring their expertise to bear on Government, which is clearly lacking, to produce a strategy, with the Government and Opposition, to stop the disorderly exit.

We have outlined our proposals. Does the Government have any proposals? What is its plan to stop this crisis?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Ó Broin's proposals are fairly threadbare - let us be straight about it. In the Deputy's submission, he proposes to commission "the Housing Agency to undertake research into the disorderly exit of landlords". That is it. The other measure is a €400 tax. What we are doing is delivering 300,000 new homes between now and 2030, including private rental properties, and rolling out cost rental at scale, for which we already have cost-rental affordable tenants in place. Last week, more tenants moved into their homes in Kildare in what was the second tranche of cost rental provision. We will deliver more than 1,750 new cost-rental homes in 2022 and more in each subsequent year. That is what we intend to do.

8 o'clock

We must also increase supply across the board. We produced a plan, Housing for All, that invests €4 billion in new housing while the Deputy's submission suggests a €2.8 billion investment from Sinn Féin. Let us be honest with people. All Deputy Ó Broin has been doing is demonising landlords and now he is bemoaning the effect that has had. We need a stable rental market as well as affordable homes for working people, and that is what this Government is about to deliver.

Derelict Sites

63. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to review the Derelict Sites Act 1990 and its operations; if so, the status of those plans; if his attention has been drawn to the Geo Directory Residential Buildings Report for Q4 of 2021 which has identified approximately 90,000 vacant residential properties and 20,000 derelict residential properties across the country; if his Department is considering or has plans to bring these properties back into active use; the steps taken by his Department to ensure the

collection of outstanding derelict sites levies by each local authority; the guidance and or circulars that have been issued by his Department to each local authority in relation to the collection of the derelict sites levy and the manner in which this should be pursued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3277/22]

66. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if, given his role in overseeing the vacant homes strategy, his attention has been drawn to the discrepancy between derelict units recorded in the GeoDirectory residential buildings report and those on the derelict sites register nationally; if his attention has been further drawn to the lack of implementation and collection of the derelict sites levy; and the action being taken to combat same. [3578/22]

Deputy Ged Nash: As I hope the Minister of State would agree, the Derelict Sites Act 1990 is in very bad need of reform. The provisions of the Act are very worthy in theory but experience has shown that it is rarely used to good effect by local authorities. Derelict properties and, separately, housing that is vacant for some time needs to be the focus with regard to turning around properties in town and city centres and bringing them back into use for housing purposes. Are there plans to reform the Act to improve its utility for those purposes?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 63 and 66 together.

Local authorities have been provided with a number of powers and measures to deal with the issue of derelict properties both in larger urban settings and in smaller rural towns and villages. There also exists a framework of overarching policy and capital funding which provides support to development, including urban regeneration.

The Derelict Sites Act 1990 imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the land does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. Local authority powers include requiring owners or occupiers to take appropriate measures on derelict sites, acquiring derelict sites by agreement or compulsorily, and applying a derelict sites levy on derelict sites. It is a matter for local authorities to determine the most appropriate use of the legislation within their respective functional areas.

Since 2018, my Department has requested local authorities to submit an annual return regarding the implementation of the Derelict Sites Act in respect of their functional areas and details of any new urban areas which it is proposed to prescribe for the purposes of the Act under section 21. These requests were conveyed by Circulars PL 08/2018, PL 08/2019, PL 10/2020 and PL 09/2021.

There are many reasons the number of properties on derelict sites registers may differ from the number identified on the GeoDirectory residential and commercial buildings database, including the fact that the Derelict Sites Act only applies to urban areas prescribed under section 21 of the Act. My Department continues to liaise with local authorities on the implementation of the Derelict Sites Act with a view to improving its effectiveness and continues to keep the relevant provisions under review. In this regard, in November 2021, my Department initiated a review of the Derelict Sites Act by requesting local authorities to identify issues and challenges

that have arisen in the operation of the provisions of the Act and the derelict sites levy to date. The submissions received are now being examined with a view to further engagement with local authorities and to concluding the review in the current year.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Minister of State. I have some comments. Can he say when the review will be complete? This is really urgent. There is a mismatch between the register and the directory. There is no doubt about that. Nobody can say that the Derelict Sites Act is working. We know from looking around us in our own home areas that dereliction is creating significant social and economic scars in our town centres. Looking at the figures, my own home town of Drogheda accounts for approximately 1% of all vacant homes in the entire country. Dereliction is a massive problem. I give credit to groups such as Derelict Drogheda that are sequentially cataloguing some of these problems and issues. It shames us all that we do not have a defined route and plan to bring properties of this kind back into use and to prioritise them for housing. I know the Minister of State is working on his town centres first initiative. I am interested to see what his plans are and how the Derelict Sites Act can be changed to ensure that it has some utility in bringing homes into use. We must ensure that local authorities use that Act in a better fashion than at present.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Ó Broin. The Department was before the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage today and its officials enlightened me, telling me that our cities have dereliction rates that are below average. I found that an astounding comment to make. I have asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and I now ask the Minister of State, to come to Cork and walk around the city with me. I will show the Minister of State the dereliction and he can then tell me whether the rate is below average. Just to let him know, Cork City Council is trying to get things done. It is trying to get lighting for the Fairfield area, bollards removed from John F. Connolly Road and a disabilities officer but I am told that we do not have the funding. However, there is €3 million outstanding in uncollected derelict sites levies in Cork alone. There is €12.5 million outstanding across the State. The fact I got from the officials today was absolutely astounding. All three Ministers have to answer this question. There is not one official in the Department who is dedicated full-time to vacancy and dereliction. There should be a section dealing with it. There is not one person dealing with it full-time. There are 100,000 houses derelict or vacant but no one in the Department is looking after the matter. It is shocking.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputies for their questions. To respond to Deputy Nash, the review began in November 2021. We have received a number of submissions from right around the country. There is a workshop this Thursday that will examine the content of those submissions. I hope to make progress early this year.

I will also outline that there are a number of funding streams in place to tackle dereliction. That is important. These provide a carrot for owners of such properties to encourage them to develop them into residential units. There is a very significant project under way which aims to bring 2,500 units into use by 2025 through a local authority programme. There is also the urban regeneration and development fund, which is targeted and to which funding has been committed. It is very important that capital is committed early in the cycle, which we have done. There is also the repair and lease scheme, to which additional funding has been committed. This has been reformed. Record numbers have been brought in through that scheme in areas such as Waterford city, eliminating almost all emergency homelessness accommodation in bed and breakfast providers. We also have the buy and renew scheme under the Croí Cónaithe fund. We are also working on new regulations which I hope will be ready for next week. These will bring

in planning exemptions for pubs and other properties being brought back into use as residential accommodation. The Department of Finance is also considering the vacant property tax.

It is worth noting that, between 2016 and 2019, of the 70,000 units delivered in the State, approximately 13,800 were reconnections or unfinished estates being completed. That shows the legacy challenge we are trying to meet. A large proportion of these units have come from the vacant and derelict sector. There is a great amount of work going on. We continue to engage with local authorities to ensure they are resourced to bring properties back into use as they are best placed to do so. I hope the towns first policy will enable them and support them in that work.

Deputy Ged Nash: There is much talk of carrots but very little talk of sticks. We have waited far too long for a vacant sites tax and some form of “use it or lose it” levy that would be applied to derelict sites. I said earlier that the dereliction we see all around us shames us. It has significant societal, social and economic impacts. The derelict sites that are available to us present a great opportunity for renovation, refurbishment and being brought into use for housing. We speak a lot about developing new sites and even infill sites in towns and city centres. However, we do not focus as much as we ought to on derelict sites. I know the Minister has spoken publicly about the provision of grants of up to €30,000. Is the idea that this would be a grant to purchase a property or a grant to refurbish a property? Is it significant and substantial enough to enable us to tackle this issue comprehensively?

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am not sure if the Minister of State will remember but last May I asked him for an increase in funding for full-time vacant home officers in every local authority. At that time, he said that it would be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in local authority staffing. However, in November, the Department said that every local authority should have a full-time vacant homes officer. In other words, it took six months for the Minister of State to make up his mind on what I said last May. I appreciate him listening to me but he only increased the funding from €50,000 to €60,000. I suppose this speaks to how Sinn Féin brings forward solutions only for it to take months for the Government to listen. It sometimes takes years for it to listen to poor Deputy Ó Broin. However, when it does listen to us, that shows that we have the solutions. Here we are now. The Minister of State accused me of speaking out of both sides of my mouth. Then he went away and implemented the policy that we asked him to. What I am saying now is that we are looking for full-time vacant home officers and full-time derelict home officers. We are seeking to end the scourge of dereliction because it is destroying communities like the one I represent right across the country. Does the Minister of State realise how difficult it is when people who do not have homes are passing empty homes?

Deputy Peter Burke: I reiterate that a huge effort is being made right across the Government through the numerous schemes I have mentioned to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use. The State is serious about employing both a carrot and stick approach in that regard. Regarding the Croí Cónaithe cities fund to which the Deputy referred, it is aimed to have regulations issued shortly for a first-time buyer’s grant to enable the purchasing of derelict properties. That scheme will be an asset to the State. Therefore, we have a great deal of work under way in that regard. There is, however, a great deal of hypocrisy going on with Deputy Gould. It is almost like a comic stand-up when he comes up laughing and joking

Deputy Thomas Gould: Check the minutes of the meeting.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy is the only one laughing here as far as I can see.

25 January 2022

Deputy Thomas Gould: What do they say? The Minister of State said he could not do it and then he did it.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy is the only one laughing here, as far as I can see. In the first instance-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Some of us are correct.

Deputy Peter Burke: I ask the Deputy to let me continue without interruption, please. I did not interrupt the Deputy once. That is his problem. He keeps interrupting and is unable to listen. For someone talking about listening to vulnerable people in his constituency office, which I do every week, the Deputy finds it difficult to listen to people here. That surprises me. I see vulnerable people every week looking for the housing solutions we are working so hard to deliver, while I also see the Deputy's party engaging in the blocking of housing developments. That is happening right across the country, whether involving public housing on public land being blocked by the Deputy's party or numerous developments-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fianna Fáil voted down social housing in Cork in 2018.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am referring to the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The brother of the Taoiseach, the leader of the Fianna Fáil party, was one of the people who voted it down.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy's party is voting against numerous developments-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Check the records of the council.

Deputy Peter Burke: -----week after week.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fianna Fáil voted down social housing in Cork.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy's party has one common thread on housing. It is oppose, oppose and oppose again.

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, that is not true.

Deputy Peter Burke: That can be seen right across the city councils and our network of 31 local authorities. As I said about public houses on public land, Sinn Féin voted that down in Wicklow. That is a fact. The Deputy can dress it up anyway he likes and talk out of both sides of his mouth in this Chamber, but those are the facts.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Hear, hear.

Housing Policy

64. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether the increased reliance on turnkeys by local authorities, approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency and the Housing Agency for the delivery of social and affordable housing as outlined in the Government's new housing plan will inflate the cost of social and affordable housing and will put those public agencies in direct competition with private purchasers for the limited supply of private homes. [3577/22]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister is aware, his housing plan has a range of new measures and specifically for the delivery of social and affordable housing. One concern many of us have is that, certainly in the early years of this plan, there will be an increased reliance on turnkey affordable purchases of private sector developments. Does the Minister share this concern? If not, can he give us the reasons why he does not believe this is going to be a feature, especially this year and next year?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for his question. As he rightly said, under the Housing for All strategy, we confirm both the need and the intention to increase the supply, on average, to about 33,000 units per year. The strategy is, however, clearly based on increasing new supply across social, affordable and private housing from State-owned and private land. Our policy is to bring forward delivery in the shorter term by enabling supply that would not otherwise have been built. It is not about hoovering up things that have already been built but about enabling new supply. We are targeting the additional supply from unactivated sites, which otherwise may not have progressed. That ensures that we will not be competing with private purchasers for the limited, but thankfully increasing, supply that is currently on the market. We will instead increase supply across the board. That is our absolute focus.

The Housing for All policy is backed by an historically-high level of investment of €20 billion over five years, or €4 billion plus per annum. We have set a target in that period to deliver 47,600 new-build social homes over the next five years, as well as providing nearly 29,000 affordable purchase and cost rental homes. As part of a much wider range of measures to achieve these objectives, including the development of a strong new-build pipeline from local authorities, several initiatives to ensure the delivery of affordable homes in the near term have been developed by me and my colleagues. These are targeted at bringing forward houses that would not have been built yet and at activating uncommenced planning permissions, thereby bringing forward new supply in the areas where the need for affordable housing is most acute. My Department and delivery partners constantly carry out monitoring to ensure that value for money is also achieved. Supported by this strategy, indications of increased construction activity are becoming evident. Some 30,724 residential units commenced in 2021, and that is a year-on-year increase of 42%. This overall increase in the supply, together with the measures in the Housing for All policy, is key to ensuring that home ownership is supported for both affordable and private purchase.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I understand the theory. The problem is that it is going to run into some significant problems in practice, particularly when we look at the pipeline. As the Minister is aware, 2020 is the last year for which we have figures, and half of all new-build social homes were turnkey units delivered by local authorities and approved housing bodies. The other half was partly Part Vs and partly direct builds. Given the pipeline in the social housing sector, it is difficult to see how that is going to ramp up in respect of direct delivery this year and next year. It may happen by the end of the plan, but not in its first years. The Minister has also added the affordable housing fund, the cost-rental equity loan, Project Tosaigh for the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the Croí Cónaithe cities fund, including forward purchase agreements for the Housing Agency for apartments in the cities.

Given the limited targets in the Minister's plan, it is hard to see how new-build activity developed by those agencies is going to deliver those targets. The pipeline is not there for this year and next year and probably not even into the year after. That means turnkey units and forward purchases are going to be required and those mechanisms often activate supply. While we may disagree with how this process may pan out, the question is, what are the Minister, his

Department and those agencies going to do to ensure that there is not increased competition for turnkey units and forward purchases, thus pushing up prices for public housing delivery and squeezing out owner-occupier purchasers?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I assure the Deputy the last thing we want to do is to squeeze out owner-occupier first-time buyers. That is why every measure we put in place in the Housing for All policy, such as those mentioned by the Deputy, including the first home shared equity scheme, which will kick in at the end of quarter 2 and be able to help people to bridge the gap between the finance they have and what they need through the State taking an equity share, is a supply-side measure. We are advertising advanced purchasing arrangements now among all the local authorities to activate planning permissions that would not have been brought forward otherwise. We have had a decent response to Project Tosaigh operating through the LDA. Again, that is concerned with compact growth in areas in our cities, but not exclusively so, where we have issues with affordability.

Those are short-term supply measures as well. I assure the Deputy that the pipeline we have in social housing for the next several years is actually very strong. That is why we need local authorities and local authority members to continue to support the delivery of social housing. We approved at Cabinet only today the start of the construction phase to provide 1,047 homes at O'Devaney Gardens. That involves an investment by the State of just short of €135 million. I remind the Deputy that his party opposed this project in Dublin City Council, DCC. These are 1,047 new homes for working people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Based on what the Cabinet announced today, unfortunately, not only will half those homes be unaffordable private units but, equally, the 22% of homes that are so-called affordable will also be way beyond the reach of ordinary people. What we want are affordable public homes on public land. In fact, the all-in cost of the affordable purchase in this regard, based on Cabinet information provided today, when the purchase cost and the affordable housing fund repayment is added in, is between €344,000 for one-bed units and €404,000 for three-bed units. That is not affordable housing for working people.

To return to the issue at hand, the difficulty is that if I were a developer with planning permission for 100 apartments in Dublin, I now have a wonderful opportunity because I can go to a local authority for a mixed social-affordable scheme, to an approved housing body for a cost rental equity loan, CREL, scheme and the LDA for a Project Tosaigh scheme. The LDA can, of course, pay more than the local authorities can because it does not have the same departmental cap ceilings. I could also go to the Housing Agency or any of the several funds which exist. Therefore, it is a sellers' market and that is going to push up the price developers will seek for those turnkey units, particularly this year and next year, as well as squeezing out owner-occupiers. Nothing the Minister has said has convinced me that he has a plan to deal with that prospect, if, as I suspect, it happens. I hope it does not but I would like to know that the Minister has a contingency plan to ensure that is the case.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We must increase supply across the board. I gave the example of the O'Devaney Gardens development, which will provide 1,047 homes. There is also Ballymestone in Donabate, which was also opposed, where there will be more than 1,000 homes. Then there is the Oscar Traynor Road project. Thankfully, because of this Government's affordable housing fund, we at last have agreement on that project in Dublin City Council to proceed with real homes for real people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not affordable.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I want to assure the Deputy-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: They are not affordable. The Minister should be honest with people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What we need to do is raise supply and bring about affordable homes. That is what this Government is doing. I know that will not suit the Deputy. It does not suit his political narrative.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Not at O'Devaney Gardens and Oscar Traynor Road it is not, with the greatest of respect.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Ó Broin and his party were happy for 41 years to see Oscar Traynor Road lie idle.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Fianna Fáil was in government during all of that period and refused to fund it. It sat on its hands, starved our local authorities of resources and would not fund the building.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Sinn Féin Members just cannot take the truth this evening.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is giving us a shocking distortion of the truth.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They are continually interrupting. Any Minister who tries to answer any questions, they just try to shout us down. What will not happen on this side of the House, is that we will not be bullied. We are focused on delivering homes for people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Just not affordable homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: During the last oral questions just before Christmas, Deputy Ó Broin actually asked in respect of Oscar Traynor Road to set aside the public spending code that governs value for money in this country. He said to set it aside.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There is no value for money when we are paying Bartra €400,000 for a social house. That is not value for money.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am just being honest with people. The Deputy is being found out.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is responsible for a breach of the public spending code.

Housing Provision

65. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of affordable purchase homes that were delivered in 2021; the target for 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3555/22]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On the very subject of delivery of affordable purchase homes, how many affordable purchase homes were delivered in 2021? What was the target? How many affordable purchase homes will be delivered in 2022? Is the Minister confident that we will meet that target?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have a challenge. I thank the Deputy for the question. The Affordable Housing Act 2021, which I commenced in August 2021, laid the provisions for the introduction of two new affordable purchase schemes. This will see new homes made available via local authorities, the Land Development Agency and a new national first home scheme. The measures will primarily assist first-time buyers or those under the fresh start principle trying to purchase homes but unable to secure sufficient finance to do so. These will be very important for delivery of housing this year.

I have confirmed that 36,000 affordable purchase homes will be delivered in the period to 2030 and have put in place an unprecedented level of funding to do so. While Ó Cualann Co-housing Alliance, with county council support, delivered some affordable purchase schemes in 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on construction sites had a significant impact on anticipated delivery of homes.

Fortunately, significant progress has been made that will see very many more affordable homes made available in 2022. The first of these homes will be made available next month in Boherboy, County Cork. The advancement of these schemes with the funding we are providing has allowed us in 2022 to set a target to deliver approximately 2,500 affordable homes for purchase this year. That does not include the cost rental and affordable rental homes. That figure will increase incrementally over the years to come.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Minister might clarify the following. He said that Ó Cualann delivered affordable purchase homes in 2021. How many of those were occupied in 2021? As the Minister knows, according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, home ownership among adults of prime working age has collapsed since 2012. House prices grew by a staggering 77% up to 2020, while during the same period wages only grew by 23%. The Parliamentary Budget Office says that on an international scale, housing affordability in Ireland is rated as severely unaffordable. People struggling to pay unaffordable rents and struggling to buy a home want to know what the Government is doing to make housing affordable. In the 2020 general election, the Minister promised 10,000 affordable homes each year. In the two years since then, the Government has not delivered in terms of affordable purchase homes. How many affordable purchase homes were occupied last year?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have delivered the most comprehensive affordable housing legislation that any Government has ever brought forward. That affordable housing legislation was supported by all in this House with the exception of eight Deputies. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan was one of those eight Deputies who voted against affordable housing for working people. He voted against cost rental, against affordable purchase delivered by local authorities and against the Home First shared equity scheme. Let us put that on record.

We are not going to turn ten years of undersupply around overnight. We need to put the building blocks in place like the Affordable Housing Act to deliver affordable housing for working people. We are going to do that this year. On top of that, we want to develop State-owned land, some of which we have mentioned here, some of the unfortunately infamous sites. We brought forward the Land Development Agency Act, revised the Land Development Agency and capitalised it to be able to deliver public homes on State-owned land. I remind the Deputy that in Cork and Dublin, it is 100% social and affordable. Again that is legislation that he and his party opposed. It is his absolute right to do so should he wish. However, without the policies in place backed by the money we have put in place through Housing for All, we are not going to deliver any affordable homes. We are delivering them. This year will see a significant

number of affordable homes delivered from a base of zero.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I will ask the Minister for a third time how many affordable purchase homes were actually occupied in 2021. He has not answered that question. He might give me an answer. The Minister knows well why I did not support the Affordable Housing Bill. I do not support the Government’s definition of affordability as not being related to incomes but instead being based on market prices. For the record, the Minister’s party on Dublin City Council voted against zoning to provide affordable homes. His party, Fine Gael and nearly all the Green Party councillors with one notable exception voted against it. The facts are that according to Dublin City Council over the next number of years almost 70% of new households will not be able to afford to buy or rent a home in Dublin city. Almost 70% are going to be reliant on social or affordable homes. That is absolutely shocking. Policies that continue to inflate rents and house prices are causing that problem. We know from the Ó Cualann model that affordable homes can be delivered, three-bed semi-detached, at the rate of about €260,000 as is happening in the Minister’s constituency. That needs to be rolled out across the country at scale. For the last time, how many affordable purchase homes were actually occupied last year?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Dun Emer in Lusk, to which the Deputy referred, with this Government’s support through the affordable housing fund, will be delivering homes for between €166,000 and €266,000. In Ballymastone in north County Dublin, there will be over 1,000 homes. I remind the Deputy that will include 258 social homes and 258 affordable purchase homes. The Deputy’s colleagues in Fingal County Council actually voted against that.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: They should all be affordable and social.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Deputy and his colleagues will always find a reason to oppose it. Regarding Oscar Traynor Road, they opposed the deal again there for effectively 40% social, 40% cost rental and 20% affordable purchase.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There is no cost rental in Oscar Traynor Road. That is not true.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: They are some of the biggest land hoarders in the country.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Social Democrats opposed it. The Deputies opposite cannot contain themselves this evening.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister just will not stick to the facts.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Unfortunately people have found them out on this because they are not going to be able to deliver affordable housing for working people without the Government supporting it, which we are doing through Housing for All.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: The Minister has not answered my question.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: We are going to deliver a significant number of affordable purchase homes this year which I have outlined to the Deputy in my answer.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: How many last year?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: On top of that we are going to deliver cost rental, which the Deputy opposed by voting against the Affordable Housing Bill.

Deputy Thomas Gould: How many?

Ceisteanna Eile – Other Questions

Housing Policy

67. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has reviewed or plans to review staffing levels in the local authorities in view of the changes to the strategic housing development and large-scale residential developments legislation; if he will sanction extra posts to ensure that staff increases needed in the planning sections of the local authorities will not pull away from other sections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2455/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Talk about being found out. Fianna Fáil is in combative mood tonight. Here is a Fianna Fáil hoax, that it got rid of strategic housing developments, SHDs, before Christmas. As we warned, there was a flood of SHD applications for build-to-rent developments by greedy developers trying to get in on the gold rush in our area as soon as that legislation went through. The Minister said it would not happen. Among other things, as well as a whole load of unwanted private development, it is going to cause major staff problems for our local authorities, which are not equipped to deal with the new regime and the old regime at the same time.

Deputy Peter Burke: My Department is working with the County and City Management Association, CCMA, in seeking to define more closely the resourcing needs of the local authority planning sector, and following on from the commitment on the adequate resourcing of planning authorities in Housing for All. This review will examine a range of factors and is advancing in parallel with actions on learning and development and digitalisation of planning which are also important components of delivering an effective service. Most immediately, recent legislative changes have returned large-scale residential developments, LRDs, to local authorities, which will also involve an appropriate fee structure to ensure that local authorities can resource this function appropriately.

Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each chief executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, the assignment of local authority staff to a particular function, such as planning, is a matter for the chief executive. The Minister approved more than 200 new staff for local authority housing delivery teams in December 2021. These posts will increase the capacity of local authorities to initiate, manage and deliver new build housing schemes across the sector.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Since the Minister of State said the Government had abolished SHDs, there have been seven new applications for SHDs just on the Dún Laoghaire side of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. That is because the Government essentially allowed an extension for these build-to-rent developer-led developments. Ironically, some of the Government's local representatives are now running around saying that they are terrible developments. The only

reason the applications were allowed to be made was because the Government voted down our amendments that would have closed down the SHD system completely. There would have been none of the outrageous developments that are now being proposed and are all about expensive built-to-rent apartments. Communities are overrun with them, as are local authorities. Local authorities have to deal with SHDs. The planning department in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is telling us that it will be dealing with new SHD applications until well into the end of this year at the same time as having to deal with LRD proposals under the new regime.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It does not have the staff and the money being provided is going into general funds, not into creating new posts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I have a working stop watch.

Deputy Peter Burke: In the first instance, we have been clear that, under the new LRD arrangements, the relevant fees payable will be retained in full by the planning authority. This will give authorities increased funding to manage their staff and resources. The two-stage process is being restored and the local authority will give the decision closest to the local functional area, which is a positive move.

In the second instance, the Deputy used the term “gold rush”. In December 2020, there were 21 applications at pre-consultation stage. There were 23 in 2021. I would not call that a gold rush when one looks at the facts. Of 350 applications that were made since the inception of the SHD process on 3 July 2017, 249 were granted.

We have made positive moves. In theory, one learns from past issues. The two-stage process will create value for local citizens by involving them in the decision making.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: SHDs were a scandal. They did nothing to address the housing crisis. They delivered overpriced rents to make money for developers. Since the announcement that this process would go, though, we had seven applications in December. There is murder in Sallynoggin over a nine-story construction. It is a working-class area where there are only two-storey houses but this will be a nine-storey building on a tiny site. It is developer led. In another case, there was planning permission for an SHD of 150 apartments but the developer lashed in 300 apartments onto the application just before Christmas. It is a scandal. The local authority is going to have to pick up the pieces, but it does not have the people to do so because they will be dealing with SHDs and LRDs. The money will go into general funds. We need people in the planning departments who can deal with these applications, but we are dealing with SHDs, which bypass the system. Even though the council still has to do all the work, the board makes the decision and the public have no right of appeal. It is a disgrace.

Deputy Peter Burke: The negativity towards constructing new homes continues. In the first instance-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government said that it was getting rid of SHDs.

Deputy Peter Burke: Let me respond. In the first instance, I clearly articulated the resource base that a local authority would have. Heretofore under the SHD process, the resource base was shared 50-50 with the board but the local authority will now retain 100% of an application fee, which is significant. This will provide resourcing to ensure that the local authority

has a robust planning department.

In tandem with that, a working group has been established with the County and City Management Association, CCMA - its first meeting is pencilled in for February - to examine and review local authorities' staffing arrangements in general, given the increased workload they will have. They will have resources to match that coming from the applications to them.

Many of the mandatory timelines in the SHD process are being adhered to within the local authority sector, which will lead to improvements by reducing further information requests and having in place a system that is more stress tested and slimmed down, which I hope will provide more valuable homes for our citizens.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are moving on to the next question in the name of Deputy Durkan, who, I am sure, will keep to time.

Housing Provision

68. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the extent to which his Department is in dialogue with the various local authorities with a view to ensuring a precise number of housing scheme starts in the current and subsequent years in order to enhance the supply of housing at an early date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3251/22]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to encourage the dialogue between the Minister of State's office and the various local authorities with a view to maximising the latter's ability to deliver as anticipated under Housing for All.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The recently published Housing for All strategy is the Government's plan to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 units per year over the next decade, including an average of 10,000 social homes per annum from 2022 to 2030. Housing for All is supported by an investment package of over €4 billion per annum through an overall combination of €12 billion in direct Exchequer funding, €3.5 billion in funding through the Land Development Agency and €5 billion in funding through the Housing Finance Agency over a five-year period.

Increasing the overall supply of housing is at the centre of the Housing for All plan. This includes direct investment in social and affordable housing, reforms to ensure availability of land, measures to support the viability of development and ensuring sufficient investment and capacity to support housing construction. There has been extensive engagement between our Department and local authorities on the preparation of Housing for All and its implementation. The Minister held two summits with local authority chief executives in 2021 in addition to bilateral engagements with most local authorities. He will be holding another summit with local authority chief executives in February that will focus on the implementation of the Housing for All measures.

A key action under Housing for All required each local authority to prepare a housing delivery action plan that set out details of social and affordable housing delivery over the next five years. All local authorities submitted their plans to the Minister in December and our Depart-

ment is engaging with local authorities on them, in particular their alignment with the targets and policy objectives set out in Housing for All. The plans will be published in quarter 2. There will be ongoing engagement with our Department to support their implementation.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. To what extent will there be an increased demand for housing arising from economic recovery in the wake of Covid? Such housing may need to be delivered in a shorter space of time. Might it be possible to provide the necessary wherewithal to ensure that, in anticipation of the increased demand, the number of houses can be increased beyond what is already envisaged on an annual basis? If so, is the Minister of State able to tell local authorities at this stage that a quick and efficient turnaround is necessary? There needs to be a rapid acceleration of the administration of local authority housing loans and all the other processes relating to the provision of houses for people who are crying out for homes now and may be in a much more serious situation in two years' time.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The increased activity in the construction sector has been significant, with the latest commencement notice data showing a total of 30,724 residential dwellings commenced in 2021, which was a 42% increase on 2020. The 2021 total was almost equal to the combined total of 2016 and 2017.

The Deputy is correct, in that there will be increased demand. With a full opening up of the economy and lifting of all Covid restrictions, there will be increased activity and demand, but there are also many constraints and pressures on our delivery, for example, water and waste water infrastructure, inflation and other elements.

Regarding institutional capacity within local authorities, the Minister has been proactive in addressing these issues by working with local authorities through the CCMA and various other structures to identify capacity constraints and the additional staffing resources that are required to deliver the social housing targets set out in Housing for All. Added to that, the Minister approved more than 200 new posts for local authorities to help deliver on the ambition in Housing for All.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Further, and arising from the Minister of State's reply, to what extent does his Department continue to monitor the performance of each local authority to ensure that those areas most seriously affected by a shortage of housing receive an early and rapid response from the local authorities in order to address the issues to which the Minister of State referred and of which everybody is aware?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: In specific response to that, the housing delivery plan is working in tandem with local authorities to ensure that the targets set for local authorities will be met county by county. I will give the specific example of my county, Kilkenny. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and I have visited a number of projects that have opened there in recent months. The local authority there is extremely proactive, will exceed the targets in its housing delivery plan and is very ambitious in trying to use infill development sites and sites within town centres. The local authority is very innovative in the design and the quality of the housing being delivered.

Vacant Properties

69. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the work under way to ensure that each local authority has a dedicated officer or officers to work on reducing housing vacancy rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3050/22]

Deputy Alan Dillon: Counties in the west are disproportionately suffering from high rates of residential vacancy. We need to ensure that our local authorities are prioritising resources to target vacancy and boost existing housing supply where it is lying idle. What is being done within the Department to ensure that full-time staff are in place in local authority vacant housing offices?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Dillon for his question. I know he is a great advocate in this area as I have been to Mayo and have seen at first hand the work Mayo County Council has carried out and the lobbying Deputy Dillon has been doing.

I am happy to confirm that a circular has been issued in the past 24 hours to increase by 20% the funding that has been attached to the vacant homes office. We also now have a plan to transition all vacant homes officer posts into full-time positions. Heretofore, as Members will be aware, only three counties in the 31-strong local authority network had a full-time vacant homes officer. We expect by quarter 2 of 2022 to complete the transition and have that as a full-time service throughout the 31-strong local authority network.

It is also very important to note that we will have a training workshop this week, on Thursday, to try to expedite this because it is such an urgent issue and to stitch into the key funding that is available. We have seen the significant funding Castlebar has got under the urban regeneration and development fund and the huge opportunities there will now be for places in Mayo through Croí Cónaithe and the funding that will flow through that to enhance the potential of derelict properties and vacant homes and to get them back into residential use. There are also the new regulations we will update in the coming week. They will mean that old commercial properties like pubs and derelict properties will not need planning permission to transition into residential units.

We, therefore, have a significant amount of work ongoing, on which I am happy to update Deputy Dillon.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the positive news of the increased departmental funding for supports for vacant homes officers. Having those positions on a full-time basis will strengthen local authorities in combating vacant properties. The latest GeoDirectory residential building report for quarter 4 of 2021 showed that Mayo has the second highest residential vacancy rate in the country, standing at 11.9%. For many it can be disheartening to feel locked out of purchasing a home in the area of their choice while walking around their local area and seeing examples of empty or vacant dwellings that have the potential to make the perfect home with some work. I ask again that the Government and local authorities continue to encourage property owners to bring houses back into use by registering vacant properties and by helping identify their owners, particularly in areas where there is housing need. I know that the Minister of State is very much working towards that.

Deputy Peter Burke: Mayo has done huge work in highlighting *vacanthomes.ie* to identify vacancy and areas in which properties can be brought back into use. It is very important that

local authorities have full-time vacant homes officers in place to take advantage of these key funding streams now being put forward by the Government with record levels of funding to try to bring these properties back into use. In addition, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is working on the first-time buyer's grant to bring derelict properties back into use. That will be a very significant intervention as well. All these schemes will provide people with a sustainable outcome for living in rural areas and provincial towns, like we have in County Mayo. I look forward to working with Deputy Dillon to expand further these schemes. I am sure we have the best possible suite of armoury to respond to this huge challenge.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Solving the current housing crisis will certainly require the most innovative solutions. The Minister of State made reference to the *vacanthomes.ie* website, which was developed by Mayo County Council. That provides a starting point of contact for each local authority. I acknowledge Tom Gilligan, the website's founder, and his work in this area. Maybe it would also be useful to develop a website into a one-stop-shop model highlighting the various grants and incentives in place to alleviate the vacancy crisis. The Department should prioritise this and expand the *vacanthomes.ie* website.

Finally, extending the first-time buyer's initiatives to vacant and derelict homes will significantly help young people across the country, especially in County Mayo, looking to buy and renovate their own homes. I welcome that initiative.

Deputy David Stanton: I congratulate the Minister of State on the work he is doing in this area. Until recently, in County Cork, from Castletownbere to Youghal to Mitchelstown to Newmarket, there was one part-time vacant homes officer, and that was the tenth job he had. Would the Minister of State agree with me that County Cork should have three full-time vacant homes officers to cover such a huge area and in order to deliver what the Minister of State wants to deliver?

Deputy Peter Burke: To Deputy Dillon I will say that we will launch our Town Centre First initiative very shortly, in the coming weeks. That will be an enabling strategy to tie together a lot of the funding streams to which he referred in order to unlock the potential of our rural towns and villages right across the country. That will be a significant intervention by the Government.

Deputy Stanton is fully correct. There has been a huge problem in respect of full-time vacant homes officers. We are now increasing the funding significantly, by 20%. With additional funding coming into local authorities, we hope they will make the best decisions with the resources they have. Staffing is a matter for the chief executive, but there is a huge open goal to be scored here in bringing derelict or vacant sites back into residential use because the demand for them is definitely there. It just needs additional work to try to unlock that potential.

Housing Provision

70. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress made by his Department to date in increasing the supply of affordable housing with reference to the key objective of the Housing for All plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3083/22]

Deputy David Stanton: This question is about affordable housing. I am particularly interested in what the Minister is doing to unblock the blockages that are there, in particular for

people who cannot get a mortgage at the one end but who are earning too much to avail of social housing at the other end, that is, people in the middle.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Housing for All commits to delivering 36,000 affordable purchase and 18,000 cost-rental homes by 2030. The Affordable Housing Act 2021 established two separate affordable purchase schemes and a new form of tenure in cost-rental, which saw the first 65 homes tenanted in 2021. The target delivery for affordable homes in 2022 is 4,100. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, recently approved a further round of cost-rental equity loan applications to allow approved housing bodies, AHBs, to deliver over 700 new homes this year. This will be further supported by the LDA provision of cost-rental homes under Project Tosaigh. The First Home affordable purchase scheme will operate for the period 2022 to 2026, utilising funding of about €400 million. It will support first-time buyers on moderate incomes to buy a new-build home and will be available for applications in quarter 2.

Despite the impacts of Covid-19 on the construction sector, the first local authority affordable purchase homes will be available in Cork shortly. In addition, and to scale up the delivery of affordable homes and kick-start stalled private developments, expressions of interest have been issued by local authorities and the LDA to enter advance purchase agreements.

Finally, a new local authority home loan scheme commenced on 4 January of this year as a successor to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan. This scheme incorporates a lower interest rate, higher income eligibility and more flexible home size requirements than previously applied.

Deputy David Stanton: I ask the Minister of State whether he agrees with me when I quote the new housing plan for Ireland, Housing for All, which states: "Housing cannot be delivered unless we have the supporting critical infrastructure, including transport.." That includes affordable housing. Is the Minister of State aware that Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has recently decided not to proceed with an N25 road in County Cork, which was vital to support in the delivery of 2,500 houses, including many affordable houses? I wrote to the Minister about this matter. Because TII has decided to withdraw its support for this critical road project, the construction of 2,500 houses, including affordable housing units, may not go ahead. I ask the Minister of State to comment on that issue. Will the Minister of State be contacting TII to ensure that this decision is reversed?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I will make a general point, rather than one on specific road projects. Critically, one thing that Housing for All is clear on is that housing delivery has to be connected to lots of infrastructure, including public transport and sustainable modes of transport. On the issue the Deputy raised, namely, that housing may not be delivered because a specific road project may not proceed, the ambition around public transport across the country, both urban and rural, is going to help the delivery and unlocking of land. It is critical that all housing delivery is connected to good public transport routes. While not commenting specifically on that particular project, I think it is critically important for housing delivery to be connected to sustainable modes of transport.

Deputy David Stanton: I agree with the Minister of State fully on this. There is a rail link at one end of this development and a motorway at the other. There is public transport between Midleton and Carrigtohill. The Government has now decided to ruin this project. The Department has funded the project to the tune of €4.13 million already. That is now going west. Some €1.3 million has been spent on the road network. That is also going west. It is critically important that the project is delivered. I ask the Minister and the Minister of State to look at

this project and talk to the Minister for Transport to ensure that this stupid decision is reversed as soon as possible.

Deputy Thomas Gould: On the question of affordable housing, in April 2018, the Boherboy Road affordable housing project was announced. In 2019, the then Taoiseach, now Tánaiste, opened the project. It is now 2022 and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is saying that it will be launched. Is it wrong that Deputies, Ministers and the Tánaiste go and open up affordable housing projects only for them not to be started or delivered?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: To answer the specific question asked by Deputy Stanton, he is correct in stating that the issue around rail links and public transport is critically important. This is something that we are clearly committed to under Housing for All. I am not privy to the decision of TII in respect of that specific road project. However, looking at the sustainable delivery of housing units and building sustainable communities, there has to be a connection with sustainable transport. We will get back to the Deputy on the specific project he mentioned. I cannot comment on the other question that was asked by Deputy Gould.

Local Government Reform

71. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the legislation for the establishment of the first directly elected mayor in the country. [3305/22]

120. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the legislation on a directly elected mayor in Limerick; the timeframe for the passage of same through Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3195/22]

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The legislation for the establishment of the first directly elected mayor in Limerick city and county went through as a plebiscite in May 2019. I see that legislation is on the priority list. When does the Minister of State expect it to progress? What is the timeframe involved? Pre-legislative scrutiny took place and was signed off on 11 November 2021. When does the Minister of State expect the election to take place? The people of Limerick voted and want to see it being delivered.

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 120 together.

At its meeting of 20 April 2021, the Government approved the general scheme of a Bill providing for a directly elected mayor for Limerick. The Government also approved the publication of the general scheme, as well as its referral both to the Oireachtas for pre-legislative scrutiny and to the Office of the Attorney General for priority drafting of a Bill. The general scheme is in line with the 2019 Government policy proposals for a directly elected Mayor with executive functions, and also reflects recommendations of the report of the implementation advisory group established to consider a directly elected Mayor with executive functions in Limerick, published in January 2021. In addition, the general scheme contains provisions necessary to allow a local authority to hold a plebiscite on the topic of a directly elected mayor with executive functions for their administrative area alongside the 2024 local elections.

On 11 November 2021, the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage published its report on pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme. The committee's re-

port contained a number of important recommendations relating to the directly elected mayor, including the functions of the role, governance arrangements in the local authority and the budgetary process of the local authority, among other matters. The recommendations of the committee's report are under consideration with a view to their incorporation in the Bill in such a way that it will build on the work of the implementation advisory group.

In parallel, I continue to engage with colleagues right across Government to identify further functions and funding for assignment to the mayor and-or Limerick City and County Council. Drafting of this complex Bill is progressing steadily. Publication of the Bill has been identified as a priority for the Department as soon as possible. The timeframe for its passage through the legislative process will be a matter for the Oireachtas when it gets to that stage. It should be noted that the timing of elections for a mayor in Limerick will be decided by the Government once the legislation is enacted.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have a few follow-up questions. When does the Minister of State expect the Bill to be published and come before the Houses of the Oireachtas? Obviously, Second Stage will be taken in the Dáil in the first instance. When does the Minister of State expect the election of the first directly elected mayor for the capital of the mid-west, and the third largest city and county in Ireland, to take place?

Deputy Brian Leddin: As the Minister of State is aware, almost three years ago, the people of Limerick voted in a plebiscite to have a directly elected mayor for Limerick city and county. Indeed, it was the people of Limerick who took this brave step when other cities and counties in Ireland chose not to. I am glad to see the Minister of State's predecessor, Deputy Phelan, here. He was the driving force behind this legislation. Deputy Phelan is on record as saying that this will be the most significant reform of local government in Ireland since the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898. There is an urgency to it now. We must honour the decision made by the people of Limerick in the plebiscite. We need to put in place a directly elected mayor for Limerick to let him or her drive his or her vision for Limerick. Does the Minister of State expect that the legislation will go through the Houses and we will have a directly elected mayor in place this year?

Deputy Peter Burke: I concur with the sentiments of the former Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, that it is the most progressive and the biggest reform of local government since the foundation of the State. In the first instance, looking at the timeline, on 24 May 2019 the plebiscite was held. Subsequently, we established the implementation advisory group in January 2021. Following that, there was a general election and programme for Government negotiations took place. Mr. Tim O'Connor and his advisory group had to go through their process online, which was very impressive. The group received over 1,000 submissions through an online process, which included all stakeholders in Limerick city and county. The general scheme was approved on 20 April 2021 and we received the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage in November 2021. It is a priority, this term, to get the legislation through the Oireachtas. It is up to the Government to set a date for the election. I see my specific role as ensuring that the office of mayor - including the structure and governance aspects - is put in place so that the Government can make its decision on the timing of the election. I assure all Deputies that we are working very hard on the matter. We have it on the priority legislation schedule. Hopefully, we will make significant progress on it this term.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have one question. When will the legislation be published? We cannot make progress until the legislation is published. When, in this term, does the Min-

ister of State expect it to be published?

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I was a member of the implementation advisory group before I found myself in this particular role.

9 o'clock

I know quite a bit about this. It is critical the office has meaningful powers. The new directly elected mayor of Limerick, who I hope will be elected this year, should have the power to select staff and directors of services. He or she should be able to set the priorities of the council, have power over the budget and the spending of the council and have the power to raise revenue. I firmly believe we should build into the legislation a review mechanism to make it better. We need to honour the plebiscite we had in Limerick city and county three years ago. If the Government takes its role seriously in drafting the legislation the people of Limerick will take the election of the directly elected mayor seriously also.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputies. I have seen a first draft of the legislation. We are trying to build in the report on pre-legislative scrutiny from the Oireachtas joint committee and the bilateral engagement I have had with other Departments. This is significant. I encourage Deputies to encourage Ministers in various Departments to give a significant amount of power to the mayor. A big challenge is getting power from Dublin devolved to Limerick. We can see the benefits this can bring in other jurisdictions. I would appreciate any help colleagues can give me in this regard.

Housing Provision

72. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress between his Department, Dublin City Council and approved housing bodies to deliver social and affordable public housing in north-west Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3355/22]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Last year the Oireachtas housing committee spent our time ensuring the Affordable Housing Bill and the Land Development Agency Bill were passed. This year we will focus on the delivery, particularly the role of local authorities, approved housing bodies and the Department in ensuring the legislation all of the Deputies on this side of the House passed starts to turn into action. Will the Minister outline the progress he has made working with approved housing bodies and local authorities to deliver affordable and social housing in my constituency of Dublin North-West?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for the work he continues to do on the housing committee with colleagues in government on delivering very important legislation such as the Affordable Housing Act and the Land Development Agency Act that enables us to ensure 2022 is a year of delivery. As the Deputy knows, under our housing strategy we aim to deliver 300,000 new homes between now and the end of the decade. This includes 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes, while tackling the issues of vacancy and putting our existing stock back into use.

Under Housing for All each local authority is required to prepare a housing delivery action plan setting out details of social and affordable housing delivery in the period from 2022 to

2026. This includes information on the location where the housing will be delivered, in addition to information on planned delivery streams and delivery in the preceding years. In September 2021, I issued social housing targets to each local authority setting out building targets over the next five years, while exiting out of leasing and reducing the amount of acquisition. The main focus under Housing for All is delivering new homes through new build.

In developing these housing delivery plans, each local authority was required to assess the demand in its area for affordable and social housing under the housing needs demand assessment and to plan provision accordingly. In December I received a plan from Dublin City Council, including Deputy McAuliffe's area. The Department is working through it with the housing delivery co-ordination office and reviewing the plan to make sure it will hit the targets we need, having regard to the policy objectives we have set out with the Deputy's assistance in Housing for All.

The review will require further engagement in the short term with the city council and this will be done in the coming weeks. The Department worked closely with Dublin City Council to increase the supply of housing in the constituency of Dublin North-West and throughout the area of Dublin City Council. We expect to have the work concluded on Dublin City Council's housing delivery plan in the coming weeks.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister. Until we passed the legislation last year local authorities were not in a position to deliver mixed tenure and mixed income housing and this will assist Dublin City Council in bringing forward projects. We all know the importance of this. Having represented Finglas and Ballymun for more than a decade I know the importance of it. It is very clear that local authorities have all the tools on the table. They have a multi-annual budget, partners in the approved housing bodies sector with which they can work and the Land Development Agency with which they can work on master plans.

If the Minister walked across my constituency he could start with social and affordable housing in Kildonan and senior citizens' housing on the site of the Church of the Annunciation. There are proposals for affordable purchase homes in Silloge and Balbutcher. There is more senior citizens' housing in Coultry. There are also other sites throughout the constituency. The timeline and the ability of the local authority to deliver is crucial. We want to see it happening. The biggest project we will have is on the border of the constituency on the Oscar Traynor Road site. It is interesting the Minister and Deputy Ó Broin mentioned Oscar Traynor Road and O'Devaney Gardens because they are different sites. They are different because of the policies and legislation we passed in the House.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. It is crucial that we use the land we have. The Deputy referenced Oscar Traynor Road. It is correct to say that because of the actions taken by the Government through increasing the affordable housing fund and allowing flexibility in it, Dublin City Council was able to rework the proposals, which were supported by 38 of the 60 councillors, to deliver 341 social homes, 341 cost rental homes and 171 affordable purchase homes. This is what Sinn Féin, far left and Social Democrat representatives in Dublin voted against. This was on top of O'Devaney Gardens and other sites such as Ballymastone.

Our focus must be on delivering these homes and ensuring local authorities get the support to do so and that pressure will be applied by Government to make sure delivery happens. We have a cohort of people who want to see there is something for them and that they will be able to own their own homes. With Housing for All and the Government's plans and actions they

will be able to do so.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister. I emphasise the importance of ensuring we put pressure on local authorities and approved housing bodies to deliver. They have been out of practice for some time. We are back in the business now of local authorities leading. I get the impression from the Opposition, particularly Sinn Féin as it criticises us, that it no longer criticises us on policy but on the inability to deliver a house overnight. We all know this is not possible. It is caricaturing the Government as being uncaring knowing we pass policies that support public housing. We had the lowest of the low tonight with the Opposition spokesperson trying to caricature the Taoiseach as some sort of cartoon villain on social media when his party objected to his leader being caricatured as a witch. It was wrong then and it is wrong against the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach is a decent man and Deputy Ó Broin should apologise and delete the tweet. We should focus on delivery. This is what the people in my constituency want. We want the Minister to build houses with all of those people who have the responsibility and to do it in an affordable way.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When they are losing, they play the person not the ball and that is the fact. We have a plan that will deliver for people and we are determined to do so. In the Deputy's constituency there are opportunities in Ballymun, and I have walked those sites with him, to deliver good quality affordable housing at scale for working people because we have put the funding in place. We passed the Affordable Housing Act. We have an affordable housing fund. We are now giving funding to our local authorities on a multi-annual basis. There is €1.2 billion more a year going into capital in the Government's plan than in that of the Members opposite-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Not true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----but we will not hear them say this.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is simply not true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They will interrupt consistently-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Misleading the House again.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Again with regard to Oscar Traynor Road, O'Devaney Gardens, Ballymastone and I could go on and on, with any proposal that comes forward from any local authority the people to the forefront of objections and voting against it are the people opposite-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: In Clonburris 11,000 homes were opposed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----and Deputy Ó Broin knows it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Moving on.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Misleading the House again. That is what the Minister is good for.

Derelict Sites

73. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way his Department can help first-time buyers bring derelict houses back into use as homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3249/22]

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I want to ask about the issue of derelict housing. It is an issue I have raised time and again over the years. There is an opportunity to bring thousands of units throughout the country in every community back into use as homes for people and to do so in a relatively short period of time. What action is being taken? It is something that is very urgent.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Deputy Griffin has raised this on numerous occasions, particularly with regard to County Kerry. Housing for All published in September 2021 provides a new housing plan for Ireland to 2030 with the overall objective that every citizen in the State should have access to good quality homes through a steady supply of housing in the right locations with economic, social and environmental sustainability built into the system. This strategy provides for a broad suite of measures, including for first-time buyers. In particular, in the context of addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock, the strategy provides the Croí Cónaithe towns fund which will be delivered by local authorities for the provision of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, thus enabling people to live in the small towns and villages in a sustainable way. This pertains, in particular, to counties such as Kerry.

In addition, Housing for All provides for the launching of a programme of compulsory purchase orders to bring vacant units to the market for sale as well as activating unused State-owned properties for that purpose.

Housing for All also recognises the potential to utilise relevant heritage building stock for residential purposes. It is also anticipated that funding will be made available under the new round of the European Regional Development Fund to tackle vacancy and dereliction in towns. This is an issue that pertains, in particular, to rural Ireland where there are significant challenges of depopulation in certain parts of the country.

Again, I commend Kerry County Council on being one of only three local authorities to have availed of the full-time role of a vacancy officer. Having that role within the local authority will be a significant benefit in trying to unlock the potential the Government is trying to develop by way of our policy on vacancy and delivering for first-time buyers.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. This is an area in which I have a great interest. It is very frustrating to see in my community and while travelling in County Kerry and throughout the country so many vacant units in the middle of a housing crisis. It is critical that we provide incentives to get these derelict properties on to the market, as is the stick which is coming in the vacant property tax. It is vital that we are imaginative in the types of incentives we can provide to people who are currently holding these types of properties in order to make them available on the market with first-time buyers having an advantage. In that respect, there should be a holiday or brief window during which owners selling to a first-time buyer would have a capital gains tax holiday. We must also provide grant aid for doing up these properties as it is expensive to do so, both for materials and labour.

Extending the help-to-buy scheme to these properties is also critically important. They will

become new units because they are currently not occupied. It is important, therefore, that the scheme is extended to such properties throughout the countryside, and not just in towns and villages.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta arís. Deputy Griffin is making an important point and his suggestion is worthy of consideration. As I said, a suite of measures is already in place and we are pursuing them. The Croí Cónaithe initiative will deliver. It is an important measure to support local authorities in providing serviced sites for housing, to attract people to build their own homes and for the refurbishment of vacant properties. The town centres first policy, which the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, has been leading, will be an enabling force, particularly for smaller towns, in dealing with the barriers people face in doing up vacant properties, particularly heritage and older properties in towns, such as 19th century and early 20th century properties that could be put back to use for first-time buyers. Once launched, this policy should be of great assistance. Local authorities also need to be proactive in delivering.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: As I have been getting different figures, I would be grateful if the Minister of State could provide me with definitive figures on how many derelict properties there are in my County Kerry. I am sure he does not have them with him now.

I also emphasise that in our messaging we should not refer only to towns and villages but also to the thousands of derelict cottages and old farmhouses throughout the countryside. That is critically important. People who grew up in the countryside sometimes cannot get planning permission, yet these derelict houses are available and could be transformed. We have to include those buildings, embrace them and bring them back into use to keep our countryside communities alive, including the one I am from.

The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, will visit my constituency next week. It is very important that he see the former St. Finan's Hospital in Killarney, which has the potential to deliver a large number of housing units. The senior Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, was there during the summer. This has been done in Waterford and it can be done in Killarney.

Deputy David Stanton: I support Deputy Griffin's comments on incentives. In one particular small town in my constituency, and there are many others like it, there are at least ten vacant properties on the main street. One man owns them all and when I asked him about these properties he replied that he was under no pressure to do anything with them.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Yes.

Deputy David Stanton: They need a small amount of work but he said he was under no pressure whatsoever. He also said that if he did them up and rented them out, the tax would make them unviable. What kind of incentives and supports are available? The man in question stated the properties could not be taken off him because he owned them and they were his property. What incentives can we give this man, and others like him, to develop and open up these properties so that people can live in them?

Deputy John Paul Phelan: In some villages, one, two or three property owners may own a number of derelict sites and are just sitting on them. That is replicated across the country. Compulsory purchase order, CPO, powers in cases where a building is derelict would allow local authorities to purchase these properties.

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On the specific point raised by Deputy Griffin about the new scheme the Minister flagged over the weekend to grant-aid people who are buying derelict homes, will that apply to one-off derelict homes in rural areas as well as derelict buildings on main streets?

Deputy Richard Bruton: There are approximately 70,000 vacant homes which could be the target of public policy. Remarkably, 12.5% of those homes in Waterford have been put back into use. In most counties, the figure is around 1%. Good practice in local authorities makes a difference. Can the Minister give momentum to that? Will he extend, for example, the repair and leasing scheme to cost-rental homes, in other words, affordable homes, as well as social homes? That is a real target of public policy now and we should allow those schemes to have that flexibility.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The Deputies asked quite a number of questions. On the last point made by Deputy Bruton, between 2017 and 2021, the repair and leasing scheme brought 273 units into use.

On the point made by Deputy Phelan and other Deputies on one-off houses, the Department launched a vernacular strategy a number of weeks ago. These houses are important from a rural perspective and the pattern of rural Ireland. Rather than knocking these properties we need to put them back into productive use, with supports for doing so. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is looking at tax incentives for individual owners of properties. We have not fully developed that yet but there are important points to consider on this issue.

In respect of grants from our own Department, the historic towns Initiative, the historic structures fund and the built heritage investment scheme are good schemes which address some of the issues the Deputies raised. They are available for small repairs to properties such as roof structures, windows, etc., that can get these properties back into productive use and on to the market for sale. A range of measures are in place. All the Deputies have raised important points that we will also take on board from this debate.

Housing Policy

74. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress of the review into rural housing guidelines. [3047/22]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As we are running out of time, I ask the Deputy to skip his introduction and allow the Minister to reply.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I will do so.

Deputy Peter Burke: The guidelines for planning authorities and sustainable rural housing 2005 were issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 and require planning authorities to frame the planning policies in their development plans in a balanced and measured way. Since 2018 the national planning framework, NPF, is the national policy document providing the overall strategy for the future development of Ireland. National policy objective, NPO, 19 aims to ensure that policy distinction is made between areas experiencing significant overspill development pressure from urban areas. Updated rural housing planning guidelines are being prepared by my Department to ensure consistency with current requirements and legislation at national and EU level in respect of areas related to rural housing such

as environmental protection, the Gaeltacht and climate action. The new guidelines will ensure a more consistent approach between counties and alignment with good planning policy. A draft should be ready by the first quarter of 2022.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I wish to reiterate, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and his colleagues, the importance of rural housing guidelines for much of the country. There are many communities around the country that are dispersed in nature, as the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, mentioned. It is possible to live in a community that is not in an urban setting. There is always an ongoing review of city and county development plans. Many of them are taking place at present. Each county council provides its own guidelines in respect of the development of rural housing, but there has been a more than ten-year gap since there were renewed guidelines from central Government. It is important for people and for the aims of the national planning framework on ensuring that there is a dispersal of the increase in population into rural areas that new rural housing guidelines would be published as soon as possible.

Deputy Peter Burke: I concur with the Deputy. It is important that, as a society, we acknowledge and understand the demand for rural housing. That is critical to providing a policy to allow for it in a sustainable way. It is important that we have good planning practices and that we call out the misinformation that is currently circulating on WhatsApp groups and in society that one-off rural housing is going to be banned. That is entirely not going to be the case.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Road Projects

Deputy Jackie Cahill: First, I must say I am extremely disappointed that I must raise this issue in the Dáil tonight. As a Government Member, I am disappointed with the Minister's decision to withdraw funding for the N24 from Waterford to Cahir. This is a massively important infrastructure project for the south of the country and, indeed, the west of Ireland. Its importance has grown even greater with Brexit and the importance of the Rosslare Europort for getting produce out of this country.

The selection of the route for the N24 has been ongoing for a number of years. The fact that the Minister has decided to cease giving funding at this time means that consultants that have been employed on the selection of the route will now have to have their contracts suspended. County council representatives and employees have told me that the money that has already been spent on surveys, traffic management and all the different aspects of the selection of this route could now be wasted because if this project is suspended for a number of years, it will be necessary to go back to basics and start from scratch as regards route selection again.

However, I wish to make a point about the families and the development along the three corridors that are proposed for this route. There are three wide corridors being sterilised. They have been in this situation for a number of years. Industrial infrastructure projects, agrifood

infrastructure projects, farm development projects and young people who want to build houses in this area find that the land is sterilised and there is no possibility of getting planning permission. I am working with a number of constituents who have spent money trying to get planning permission. Money is spent on having various surveys done. One man who wants to develop a farming enterprise has spent a lot of money on getting surveys done to confirm that the site was suitable, getting noise and pollution surveys carried out and so forth. Now he is told it could be up to seven years before he will be in a position to apply for planning permission.

This is just not good enough. I urge the Minister to reverse his decision to withdraw the funding from the county councils in respect of the ongoing consultancy work that was being done in order to advance the route selection. Some €2 million in 2022 would allow this work to continue. It is absolutely imperative that the county councils are allowed to keep their consultants employed and get the route selection finalised once and for all. When the route is picked we can argue about getting the funding to get the road in place, which is obviously very necessary for the economic development of the southern and western parts of the country. However, tonight I wish to make the point for the families and for the people with land with industrial potential who are on the three corridors. Their land has been sterilised for a number of years. With this decision by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, it can continue to be sterilised for up to seven years. This is just not good enough. It is not right to put people in this position. I have raised this issue with the Taoiseach and I hope the Cabinet will revisit it. As I said, €2 million will allow the work to continue to get the route selected. It is imperative that there is a route selection in 2022 and that we can release land that is sterilised at present so it can be used for building houses or for whatever industrial or commercial development people want to take place on that land.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to clarify and explain the situation on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. He sends his apologies that he could not be present tonight. First, I acknowledge the situation Deputy Cahill has represented with regard to landowners and families who want to progress their plans for building a house for their family, starting a local enterprise or developing a farm enterprise, as well as the job creation involved. Having been involved with a number of areas where roads have been developed, I know that the route selection and preferred route options can be a cumbersome process and can delay things a great deal. It has a knock-on effect on families. I will certainly bring that main message the Deputy has raised to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, with regard to trying to move it on this year and to bring it to a certain stage whereby it will affect fewer people in the context of the sterilisation of land. I know the Deputy's key priority is to see the road developed given all the benefits it will bring. On top of that, however, it is important that we do not put people's lives on hold unnecessarily for too long. That is the Deputy's key point.

To give the background of the project, the Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding for the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 and in line with the national development plan, NDP, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the NDP.

In the new NDP launched in October 2021, approximately €5.1 billion is earmarked for

new national roads projects to 2030. That is a positive that will enable many projects to progress. This funding will enable improved regional accessibility across the country as well as compact growth, which are key national strategic outcomes. The funding will provide for the development of numerous national road projects, including the completion of projects which are already at construction stage and those close to it, as well as the development of a number of others. The N24 project is included in the list of projects to be evaluated for progression and potential prioritisation during the period covered by the NDP. We know the importance of this as it will improve connectivity and accessibility between Limerick and Waterford. In addition, the project would provide improved access to international markets, as the N24 connects to the Port of Waterford and Rosslare Europort. The project could also improve the quality of life of commuters and local residents through improved journey times and the provision of new cycling and walking facilities. It is key that the N24 project could also enable connection to the Waterford greenway which will in turn connect to the south-east greenway running from Waterford city to New Ross.

With regard to progressing it this year and the funding allocated for this year, the fact that the greater portion of NDP funding for road projects becomes available in the second half of the decade means there is a constraint on the funding available for new projects or to bring projects such as the N24 forward this year. However, most national road projects in the NDP will continue to be progressed in 2022 and across 2023. Projects such as the N24 from Cahir to Waterford, which do not have the required funding to progress this year, remain part of projects for consideration in the NDP and will be considered for funding next year. Kilkenny County Council, as the lead authority in partnership with Tipperary County Council, has appointed Arup Engineering Consultants as technical advisers to progress the appraisal and early planning and design of this project. The route options selection stage has commenced, as the Deputy said. A virtual public consultation dealing with constraints was held in May and June 2021.

Given funding constraints for 2022, as referred to earlier, TII is unable to provide an allocation for this project in 2022. The delivery programme for this project will be kept under review for next year and considered in terms of the overall funding envelope available to TII. Again, I will bring back the Deputy's main point to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, which is that if the project is delayed at this stage, it will affect people's livelihoods and plans for their land, farms and enterprises. It is the key part of what the Deputy is asking. I will ask the Minister to have that discussion with TII on the Deputy's behalf to see if we can get through this stage and on to the next.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I appreciate the Minister of State's reply but the bottom line is that for 2022, funding is not available for this route selection. The whole road from Limerick Junction to Waterford is of major economic importance for my county. On the section from Waterford to Cahir, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir urgently need the bypasses this road would provide.

As I stated, this concerns the people who have been affected by the delay in route selection. Their land has been sterilised for a long number of years at this stage and it is just not acceptable that they would have to wait at least another 12 months. The Minister of State has held out the olive branch of it being in the national development plan, with funding to be provided in 2023. That is not much good to me when a person comes into my constituency clinic who has been working hard on getting planning permission for the past number of years but has been told to wait again to see what happens with route selection.

A sum of €2 million would keep the consultancy process on the route going. That is not a

huge request. As I said, I raised this matter with an Taoiseach. I urge the Minister of State to revert to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. For the sake of €2 million and in the interest of fairness, he should let the selection of the route proceed. That is a fair and reasonable request. If we spoke about commencing the road project, we would be talking about far greater sums. This is about route selection and it has been an ongoing process for a long number of years. I urge the Minister of State to revert to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and say that the area has been sterilised for a long period. It is in a very strategically important part of the country. This delay is sterilising the potential of the towns along the route, including Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. I urge the Minister of State to go back to the Minister and get the €2 million fund required for the consultancy process to proceed and allow selection of the route to happen in 2022.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this matter and firmly putting across the main concern he has for this year. Again, I will bring this back to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I am at pains to indicate on his behalf that he is not personally involved with every decision on each project being brought forward. His main aim was to increase the budget allocation to the national development plan for road projects like the one mentioned here, the N24. He wants to ensure that through the work of the national development plan, such projects are completed. I will ask him to raise the matter outlined by the Deputy, which is that stopping the process now will cause undue delays and hassle for families that want to get on with plans for their livelihoods. I will make that point to him very clearly. Perhaps he could use his influence with TII on this project but I should be clear that he does not make a personal decision on each individual road project. He must allocate the money and ensure we are making progress overall as well.

The Deputy has made the case well and I am very familiar with it. When land is sterilised this way, it can really affect individual families. As communities, we all want to see projects and bypasses happening because of their associated benefits but it can be a difficult time as the route selection process is gone through. I undertake to bring the Deputy's concerns back to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I will ask him to correspond directly with the Deputy. It is important to point out that this N24 project is still included in the overall plan and its progression is paused for this year. The €616 million in capital funds is required for other projects that are near completion and so on. It is important to realise that this project is continuing, although I hear the Deputy's argument that he wants to ensure this decision on route selection can be completed in 2022. I will bring it back to the Minister to see if there is any way it can be done with the available funds.

Emergency Services

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for including this Topical Issue. Emergency services response times are a constant concern in rural areas and County Cork is one of the areas seriously affected by significant ambulance delays. Despite the best efforts of paramedics and other staff, over a third of calls had response times in excess of an hour in the first half of 2021. The distances involved have been cited by the National Ambulance Service as one of the reasons for delays. This is a massive source of worry for rural residents, particularly households on the peninsulas in Cork South-West.

The resourcing of the National Ambulance Service remains a crucial matter, as is the inad-

equate number of ambulances and paramedics. However, recent changes in Kerry and Donegal are working on allowing fire and rescue personnel to act as first responders in health emergencies. This is a very practical and potentially life-saving measure that should be adopted in all counties as soon as possible. We have excellent fire and rescue services in Cork staffed with personnel trained as first responders. It makes sense they would be deployed in cases where ambulances are delayed or immediate attention is required, such as instances of cardiac arrest.

Towns and villages in Cork South-West, including Schull, Castletownbere, Bantry and Dunmanway have fire stations with staff who, by the nature of the work, are in the area and available to respond. This matter has been brought to my attention by such staff, who are eager to assist those in need in their locality. They are motivated to save lives and the Government should respond accordingly. I am seeking that the Government pursues this as a national policy. I appreciate it is a complicated matter across Departments, local authorities and public and voluntary bodies. However, given the potential benefit of this policy, it should be rolled out in every county. Furthermore, it is a common-sense approach that effectively uses resources that are already available.

This move would not only potentially save lives but it would also provide comfort to the people of west Cork and other rural areas. It is not about replacing the ambulance service but rather supplementing it with trained professionals already in the area. These people may provide backup when it becomes clear an ambulance will be delayed. This is about getting first responders to people in need while an ambulance is on its way.

The Ministers for Health and Housing, Local Government and Heritage should take leadership on this matter. Kerry and Donegal are ahead of the curve on this and have shown it is possible. Similar changes are also being proposed in Northern Ireland after a pilot scheme in 2016. Instead of the National Ambulance Service having to engage with all relevant bodies and local authorities on an individual basis, could the Government not step in here, with the line Ministers providing a forum or mechanism for a co-ordinated approach? In doing so, they could bring all the stakeholders together and make this happen.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The Deputy has certainly put forward a very strong case for this type of co-operation. It is important, particularly as we have come through the Covid-19 crisis, which has highlighted significant challenges in rural areas. I am very familiar with that part of the country.

To begin, I should clarify that the provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003. My Department supports fire authorities by establishing policy, setting national standards for fire safety and fire service provision, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects.

Fire services are provided in Ireland by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003. Under this legislation, there are 31 local authorities that provide fire prevention and fire protection services for communities through 27 service delivery structures. Local authority fire services are delivered by approximately 3,300 local authority staff engaged at 217 fire stations nationwide, with 16 of these stations being staffed

by full-time firefighters. A further four are mixed full-time and retained and 197 are staffed by retained firefighters.

Responsibility for the provision of emergency medical services, including pre-hospital emergency care, rests with the HSE, which operates the National Ambulance Service and emergency departments in hospitals in accordance with health sector legislation and national policy. Fire authorities created under section 10 of the Fire Services Act 1981 and 2003 are empowered under section 25 of that legislation to carry out or assist in any operation of an emergency nature.

As the Minister of State with policy and legislative responsibility for fire safety and the provision of fire services by local authorities, a primary concern must remain, in accordance with the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003, that local authority-provided fire services are meeting their statutory obligations in respect of their primary role in the provision of fire services and fire safety. These responsibilities include the important activity of community and other fire safety initiatives as well as response to fire and emergency calls such as road traffic accidents, river rescues, chemical or hazardous spills for example. Fire services generally respond to calls for assistance from external bodies in accordance with protocols operated within the three fire services regional communications centres.

The feasibility of fire services, outside the Dublin Fire Brigade area of operations, being commissioned by the HSE to provide a response service in support of the NAS in responding to life-threatening emergency calls was discussed at national level at the fire services national oversight and implementation group, which consists of fire services management and staff representatives, and it produced a discussion document as the basis to underpin discussions with the health sector. The document was discussed at the management board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management in July 2018 where a number of issues including the transfer of risk and mechanisms for funding were raised, and these remain as items of discussion with the Department of Health.

Any proposal for formalising this assistance would need to be subject to appropriate governance and cost reimbursement arrangements and to be set in the context of a service agreement with the HSE and the National Ambulance Service, which would not impact on or adversely affect fire services' primary roles.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister of State for his reply and for his overview of the situation. This is a sensible policy with the potential to save lives and make a real difference in dispersed communities in rural areas. The National Ambulance Service is pursuing this approach and many fire and rescue personnel support this idea. Also, the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council priority dispatch standard allows for the use of appropriately trained fire and rescue staff to respond to certain categories of emergencies as first responders. We now need the Government to fit the pieces together and make it happen, and to bring together all the stakeholders at national and local levels with the common goal of deploying all available resources to save lives. This is about the practical and responsible use of available personnel and resources. I absolutely realise that it would require negotiation and new agreements, but given the prospect of saving lives and offering assurances to vulnerable groups in rural areas, I believe it will be worth it.

It is important to note that the ongoing issues with the ambulance service remain. We require more ambulances based around the country and staff who work reasonable hours to be

able to respond safely and effectively to emergencies. We must also have a service that reaches all communities in a timely manner. This policy is about fire and rescue service staff serving as first responders, which is a stopgap measure until an ambulance arrives. We still need more ambulances and we still need more paramedics.

I urge the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, to bring this matter up with the relevant Ministers at Cabinet and to please push this policy as a very practical intervention for rural communities, and surely all communities.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I absolutely will. It is very important that we do. Another important point is related to Covid-19. The pandemic has presented challenges to the fire services in the delivery of services. Our Department has monitored regular reports from the fire services on the impact of the pandemic on staffing levels and business continuity. In recent weeks, in line with trends among the general population, fire services have experienced heightened disruptions due to the transmissibility of Covid-19, the Omicron variant, and close contact-related staff absences. This will be temporary of course. The fire services' management have employed a range of tools to limit the disruption to the service. Following a Government mandate in late December 2021 authorising the use of voluntary derogation exemption, exempting fire services staff from Covid-19 close contact isolation requirements under strict conditions, our Department built the derogation into a broader suite of updated guidance and contingency measures for fire service management. This was to ensure the ongoing provision of fire services amid the highest rates of pandemic infection since the onset of the pandemic.

Fire services would also look to assist other emergency services when called upon. However, there currently exists no formal arrangements between the fire services, the HSE, and the National Ambulance Service to provide a first response served nationally, and fire services under no statutory responsibility to provide those services on behalf of another service.

Deputy Cairns has, nonetheless, raised an important issue. As the Deputy has outlined, the examples in Kerry and Donegal should be given consideration. The HSE and the National Ambulance Service were in correspondence with the Chief Fire Officers Association to explore the willingness and the ability of the retained firefighters service to offer support to the National Ambulance Service during November 2021, so there is a precedent there. The Deputy has raised an important issue that I will take back to the relevant Ministers.

Animal Culls

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am very grateful to the office of the Ceann Comhairle for allowing this very important issue to be aired in the Chamber tonight. I am grateful to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan for taking the debate.

The issue is that the deer population in County Kerry has exploded beyond what we can put up with. That is the way I will put it. I will let the House know what is happening on a daily basis. If one was to leave Killarney and head out on the Killarney-Cork road from Poulagower down to Kilgarvan and into Sneem, with people going to Glencar, all emanating from the Killarney National Park and from all over, the most common sight one will see on the road is deer. Previously, this used to be very late at night or during the middle of the night when it is quiet but now we can actually have them at any time. We have had young people crashing, and I am sure we have had deaths where people's cars have left the road. The evidence of the

deer is not there because it might not have been struck. We have had tragedies over the years that could have been put down to deer coming out onto the road. There is an amount of damage and a monetary cost to people. I will give an example. A fine respectable person was going to work very early in the morning and crashed his car into a deer. The following morning, his fine hard-working son hit a deer. They are neighbours of my own. These are people who were going about their work and who lost two cars out of the one house in two days. It is a daily occurrence now if one is going over Moll's Gap or on any of these roads I have just mentioned. The people in Glencar are haunted with deer. Only last weekend a lady was attacked by a stag and was airlifted to hospital. This is no longer tolerable. This is no longer something we can put up with.

In the past, we had an excellent forester, who I very much compliment because he was a desperately hard-working man. Mr. P.J. Bruton was our forester-in-charge in the Killarney area for many years. When he was in charge, every week he culled 200 deer out of the Killarney National Park. There was an export arrangement for them, they were not being wasted and they were put to good use. This kept our deer figures in check. What happened, however, when he was retired and gone and not in that role anymore? Nobody was doing this. Nobody was organising it. Since then, we have got to the stage where it is not popular to say that we should have a deer cull. If I was looking to be popular I would not be saying what I am telling the Minister of State now. I am saying now that it has gone beyond a cull; at this stage we require an eradication programme because the deer population has increased so much.

I have not even touched yet on what this means for our farming community. I will now give an example of a farmer, who came to me in recent days. I know the Minister of State will appreciate the story. The farmer went into his field in the morning and what was inside in the field? It was 26 deer. That is the same as a herd of cattle from your neighbour being on your grass in the morning and eating all that you had. The Minister of State is aware of the cost of fertiliser, and we have all heard what the cost of fertiliser will be this year. People will be growing grass but could have 60% of it being eaten, in many cases, by roaming deer. Whatever else a farmer can afford to do, he cannot afford to feed the deer in the national park. I have not even touched on what that means for our fences. The fences farmers are putting up are very expensive. The Minister of State knows how difficult it is to string and put tension on wire surrounding grounds. When deer jump they hit, break, get caught in and destroy fences.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Like the Deputy, I wholeheartedly support the sustainable management of the deer population in this country. It is critically important and we have made significant strides in that regard in recent years with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, in terms of resources and approving the licensing regime for the hunting of deer.

I assume the Deputy's Topical Issue was prompted by the unfortunate incident in Kerry over the weekend where a woman was injured by a stag. I want to extend my sincere sympathy to the woman and wish her a speedy recovery. Attempts have been made to domesticate and hand feed the deer involved in this case. I want to remind people that these are wild animals and should remain as such. With deer, it is important that people stay alert and maintain a reasonable distance of at least 50 m between themselves and a deer. It is also inadvisable to attempt to domesticate or feed a deer or any other wild animal. This practice is not only dangerous, but may be damaging to the ability of the animal to survive and thrive in the wild.

Culling is already a regular and ongoing management operation within our national parks. The NPWS and my Department is committed to the active management of deer species within

the State, our State-owned national parks and our nature reserves. As part of its regular ongoing management operations, the NPWS carries out regular census reports on deer on our sites.

Where appropriate, and depending on annual counts or whether it is evident that damage has been caused by deer to habitats, especially woodland, culls may need to be carried out to ensure that deer populations do not reach levels that would be negative to the ecology of the park. Since 2016, more than 2,000 deer have been culled in our national parks, with culls in Killarney National Park accounting for almost 900 of this number. During the 2021 season, 436 deer were culled in Wicklow, 44 in Glenveagh and 234 in Killarney National Park. All of this happened during Covid.

It should be noted that while the NPWS actively manages deer on its properties, it does not own the deer population and is not responsible for the control of deer on private lands. Similarly, it is not responsible for cordoning them off to any specific areas of land. Deer populations are, by their nature, mobile and have a home range that is not constrained by land ownership boundaries. These home ranges are normally defined by physical landscape features such as mountains, lakes, rivers, built-up areas and the availability of a suitable habitat within their home range.

The control of deer on private property is a matter for the relevant landowner. Landowners may apply to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for permission under section 42 of the Wildlife Acts to cull deer, where necessary, outside of the annual open season. These permissions offer a facility whereby a person can obtain a permit on a case-by-case basis in order to prevent serious damage caused by individual deer on specific lands, something the Deputy highlighted regarding damage to farmlands and forestry. These permissions are only issued where there is evidence of such damage. I will come back with a final response.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State. I want to thank the people in County Kerry who are in charge of section 42 licences for always being proactive and diligent about issuing licences. They are not failing in their duty. In his response the Minister of State let the genie out of the bottle because he identified the problem. We should look at the statistics. I am not being critical of the Minister of State, but he boasted that there were 234 deer taken out of Killarney National Park during the season. We were doing that every week in the 1980s. Does the Minister of State understand the problem?

Some 2,000 deer have been culled in national parks throughout the country since 2016. At one time, 200 deer a week were culled when the population was not half of what it is now. The cull is tokenism; it is not a real cull. We need to reduce the number of deer in this country by 70%. That would mean that the remaining deer will go to where they want to be, that is, up in the mountains away from roads and people.

I want to be clear. I have not raised this issue because of the incident to which the Minister of State referred, where a lady was injured by a stag, which I am sorry about. I have called for this cull for the past ten years. The record of the Dáil will show that I have called for this. The only reason there is a token cull is that I have been calling for it so strongly and over such a sustained period of time.

I ask the Minister of State to ensure there is a realistic cull. In County Kerry alone, we have to take out 500 deer per week for the foreseeable future if we are to make any attempt at sending these animals back to the habitat where they should live and want to be. They are being driven

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down to greener grass because of the numbers. As I said, they are breaking the farmers and putting people's lives in danger. I ask the Minister of State to treat this matter seriously. We are not talking about Bambi; we are talking about people's lives and their property.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: For clarity, district conservation officers make a call in terms of the management of numbers in national parks. The Deputy is talking about deer populations outside of our nature reserves and national parks. Last year, we managed to significantly improve the provision of section 42 deer hunting licences. I have met the Irish Deer Commission. We need good training for people who are hunting deer so that they can get a clear kill of an animal in the most humane manner possible.

In 2020, 35,134 deer were shot under section 42 licences. Under serious damage licences, 4,684 deer were shot. The Irish Deer Commission had figures for Kerry, where 8,000 deer were culled over a five-year period. The numbers are quite significant when one considers them in conjunction with what we are managing in our national parks and nature reserves, coupled with our licensing regime which has been significantly improved. We aim to move that online in order to further streamline the process.

I have met the Irish Deer Commission and others involved in the hunting fraternity about this. We are aware that it is a problem and it has been highlighted to us in other parts of the country. We are making significant strides in dealing with that. I note the points the Deputy has made. Landowners, farmers and those in forestry are frustrated. Road safety is also an issue. As I said, we will continue to improve the licensing element and ensure we have a sustainable deer population in this country.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the opportunity to speak. I thank the Minister for being here at this ungodly hour. She is well aware of the issue with the Carrigtohill Community College campus. I will always give credit where credit is due. The issues were not the fault of the Department. There were many issues with the planning and mistakes were made. I also want to acknowledge that a temporary campus was set up in Fota Park. In early December, children from Carrigtohill village were trying to walk and cycle to the temporary campus. Some paths were very dangerous and overgrown, and I thank Cork County Council for moving very swiftly on that. It made the area very safe.

I suspect other Deputies in east Cork have also been in contact with many worried parents and children. I ask for clarity on when the work in the community college will be finished and when students can return to it. This is not just an issue that affects east Cork, but we have struggled for the past ten years with school places and transport, disability services and SNAs. I pass the site twice a week. I have watched progress from afar and have visited it. The roads have been built and the lighting has been installed.

10 o'clock

I have been involved in construction for 22 years so I know water and sewerage services etc., need to go in first.

I am here as a representative of the people of east Cork, particularly the families in Car-

rigtohill, Midleton and surrounding areas who are hoping to get their children into the schools. They have asked me to ask the Minister to provide a step-by-step plan. We were promised that the tender would be awarded in quarter 1 of this year. Can I get definitive dates to give to the people of Carrigtohill and the surrounding areas for when it will start and when it is intended to be finished. That is all I need to know because this is putting so much stress on families.

I have had it for the last two years in particular in the summer months because we do not take a break in the summer months when we need to deal with school places, school transport, disability services and obviously special needs assistants in schools in east Cork. It is very difficult. Parents have been extremely stressed and they feel like they are pitting principals against other principals. I have spoken to principals in schools in east Cork who have been challenged in supermarkets on their day off. This should not be happening. I am not pointing the finger. It is not the Minister's fault; it is just the system.

Can we get clarity on when the whole system will be set up? When will it start? What is the definitive date when children in the east Cork area can move into the community college on Station Road? I am not here to bash people all the time. We are on the Topical Issue Debate and the purpose is to try to get answers. People sometimes forget the effort that people make. We have the temporary campus, but people are in fear that this temporary campus could be in use for ten years. I am trying to get clarity from the Minister.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it allows me to provide an update on the current position on the planned development of the new three-school campus at Carrigtohill. I know of the Deputy's ongoing interest and I also know the interest of Deputies Stanton and O'Connor, who have consistently raised the matter with me also.

Carrigtwohill Community College is a co-educational post-primary school under the patronage of Cork Education and Training Board and the Diocese of Cloyne. The school first opened its doors in August 2016 and is located in interim accommodation at Unit 2A, Fota Business Park, Carrigtohill. The brief for the project is to provide a new 1,000-pupil post-primary school with a three-classroom special educational needs unit.

Scoil Chliodhna Community National School is a co-educational primary school which opened in September 2015 and is currently in interim accommodation at Carrigtwohill GAA sports complex. The brief for the project is to provide a new 24-classroom primary school with a three-classroom special educational needs unit.

Scoil Mhuire Naofa National School is a co-educational primary school and is under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cloyne. The school is currently located on a parish-owned site consisting of ten permanent classrooms with seven classes in temporary accommodation on site. The brief for the project is to provide a new 24-classroom school with a three-classroom special educational needs unit.

It is an impressive testament to the ambitious plans that this campus will be the largest single-school building project ever undertaken by the Department and will serve a school community of 2,400 pupils. As the Deputy has outlined, there have been difficulties with planning. A planning application for the permanent accommodation for the three schools was lodged in March 2019. A request for further information was received in August 2019. A final grant of planning permission was received on 6 July 2020. In 2021, my Department engaged with a

third-party contractor regarding the road network which is required to be constructed by that party to facilitate the schools building projects. The construction of the roads is now approaching completion, which is very positive.

In 2021, the Department established a design and build contractors framework to which design and build projects are tendered. The project for the Carrigtohill campus was tendered to this framework on 14 June 2021. Since the commencement of the tender process, the Department has explicitly required potential tenderers to prioritise the completion of the community college first within the campus.

The tenders were returned on 27 October 2021 and the tender assessment report from my Department's project manager has been recently received by my Department and is currently under review. It is anticipated that the letter of intent to appoint the building contractor will issue in the coming weeks in quarter 1.

Once the successful contractor is appointed, the Department's technical team will immediately liaise with the contractor to ensure that the delivery of the community college is prioritised within the contractor's programme of works. Throughout construction, the Department's technical team will ensure that a sharp focus is maintained on delivering the finished community college as early as possible within the campus construction programme.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the Minister's reply. That this is the largest single school building project ever undertaken by the Department shows that the population of east Cork is absolutely ballooning and is also set to balloon in the next ten years. I wanted to raise the matter because we are at maximum capacity in other areas. In Middleton, St. Mary's High School has major capacity issues. There is a necessity for all of this. As I said at the outset, this is about getting clarity. I welcome the urgency on this. Despite the hiccups at the start, things are moving forward.

I would like to liaise with the Minister. We do not need to do it through Topical issues and parliamentary questions. I would like to liaise with her to keep the people of Carrigtohill and east Cork updated on it. I have seen progress. The foundations and the services are in. However, we are now at the end of January and people are getting concerned that it might be another year. It is a massive undertaking with a capacity of nearly 2,500 pupils. Demand is there and it will grow.

I would appreciate even a bimonthly statement from the Department or perhaps the Minister and I could work here in the House to outline progress, including meetings with the developers or the design team and beyond that. It is all about education - pardon the pun - and keeping the community informed of the progress. At least we are not seeing a regression. We have seen the progress of the site. We have seen the roads go in. The lamp posts have gone up. If we can be the liaison officers for the people that we represent in east Cork, I would greatly appreciate that. I again thank the Minister for her reply.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy's interest in this project. There is great unanimity among the public representatives on the matter. At the request of Deputy O'Connor, I met a number of the school leaders in the area. Deputy Buckley specifically referenced the wider area of east Cork. I am personally very familiar with the area because I spent time teaching there. I am very conscious of its needs and demands given that it is a growing area. I appreciate the high priority that is being placed on the future of this three-school campus. I thank

the Deputy for raising the matter.

It will be a significant achievement for Carrigtwohill Community College, Scoil Chliodhna Community National School and Scoil Mhuire Naofa National School. It is a very ambitious project and undertaking by the Department of Education, and will be the largest campus we have ever delivered. The Department is acutely aware of the need to provide modern permanent new school buildings for these three schools and we are acting proactively to do all that we can to deliver this as a matter of priority.

As the Deputy has indicated, it is very heartening for people to see, for example, the roads, which are very important for the delivery of the project, now nearing completion. The Deputy also highlighted the other aspects. I assure him that every possible priority is being given to the project. As I indicated, we are looking at the letter of intent being issued in quarter 1. It is progressing and I know there is great interest from everybody who will benefit from it in the locality and the wider community. We will continue to give it the priority it deserves.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.10 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 January 2022.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ag 10.10 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 26 Eanáir 2022.